Transition to Family Care

Why Children Need Families

Scripture and science are clear: children do best in families.

However, for those in the trenches of caring for vulnerable children in low-resource communities, this can seem like an idealistic dream - something that is only possible in other places.   They also recognize that feasible solutions — rather than idealized prescriptions — are necessary amidst the deep and complex needs they face every day.

But around the world, residential programs are freshly recognizing the importance of family for children and are transitioning their care models to family-based solutions. Program leaders are learning more about what children need most and are making changes to the care they provide. They are demonstrating that a transition to family solutions is possible for children, even in very difficult places.

The **Transitioning to Family Care: Why, What, and How?** series is made up of three separate booklets covering the high points of the process of transitioning to family-based solutions, including:

- **WHY** children need families and why residential care is only a partial solution

- **WHAT** transitioning to family care means, what is involved, and what the process entails

- **HOW** programs are transitioning care, with case studies to help others envision family care

The work of serving orphaned and vulnerable children flows from the care, compassion, and sense of calling of many programs around the world.

As we grow in our understanding of both the importance of family for all children and the essential points of transitioning to family care, we are better equipped to provide the kind of care that will best help children to thrive.

Transitioning to Family Care: **Why Children Need Families**

THE IDEAL: Children Need Families

Scripture, research, and life experience agree that children need families. Family is uniquely suited to providing the love, nurture, and security children need to thrive.

The book of Genesis tells of God creating humanity and placing us in a family, reflecting his good intention for creation. Throughout history, the fallout for children who lost their parents was devastating, affecting everything from a child's home to education to inheritance. Throughout Scripture (e.g. Deuteronomy 10:18, Isaiah 1:17, James 1:27, Exodus 22:22), orphans and widows are frequently mentioned together. While children sometimes need other options, it seems clear that God desires for his people to keep families together. From the beginning, family was God's design.

Research confirms the Scriptural truth that family is the ideal setting for raising a child. Children brought up in families tend to have much better outcomes.

- Children in families tend to have healthier attachment to their primary caregivers. Attachment is an emotional bond formed as a caregiver meets a child's needs across time, and lays the foundation for how an individual will approach relationships throughout his or her life.[1]

- Children in families demonstrate better outcomes related to biological growth, attention, brain development, and cognition. [2]

As a result, residential and institutional programs around the world are recognizing the importance of family and are transitioning their programs to support children in family care. [3]

THE REALITY: Children are Separated from Parental Care

Despite the benefits of family, millions of children around the world live separated from parental care. The brokenness of this world has led to a breakdown in family structures and support in many places, and children are often the ones left to pay the highest price.

An estimated 140,000,000 children around the world have lost one or both parents to death, and these are often the children we think about when we consider children in alternative care. However, a 2016 study [4] of globally available data reported that the vast majority of children who had lost both parents actually lived with extended family. This suggests that only a portion of children in orphanages are there due to parental death, and the rest have other reasons for placement.

Children in orphanages

Children with no living parent
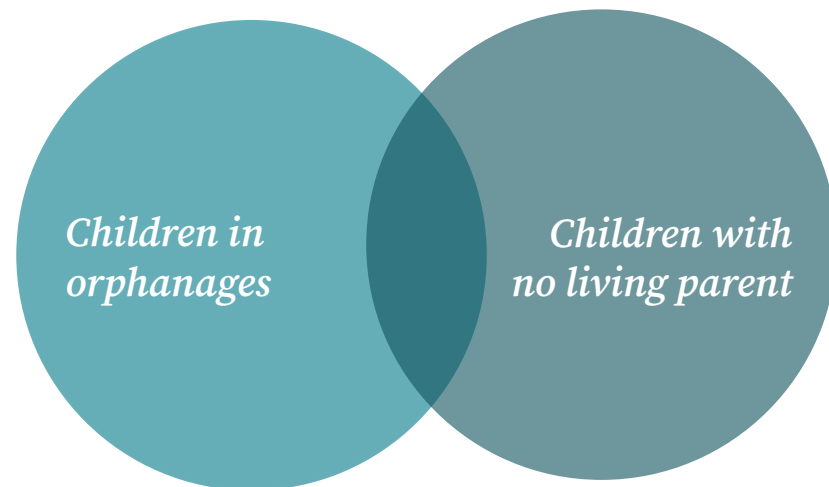
So, if most children in residential care have living family members, why aren't they living with family?

A 2022 critical review of existing research examined the reasons that children were placed in residential care and found 14 key categories:

- ABANDONMENT
- EDUCATION
- FAMILY STRESS
- CHILD LEFT HOME
- MALTREATMENT
- PARENTAL RELATIONSHIP STATUS
- POVERTY
- DISABILITY
- EMERGENCIES
- HEALTH
- LEGAL
- PARENTAL DEATH
- PARENTING
- SUBSTANCE ABUSE

The most common reasons for separation differ by geographical region and context. However, it is important to note that, when provided with effective and sufficient support, countless families around the world are able to face these same challenges while keeping their children in the home and raising them well.

We often think the most important thing we can give children in care is the assurance that their needs will be well met by providing excellent physical, educational, emotional, and spiritual care. But over the years, what we witnessed time and again forced us to rethink this assumption. When we listen carefully to many children in residential care, we hear that what they desire more than anything is simply to be a part of a family.

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RESIDENTIAL CARE: Only a Partial Solution

Although we know the majority of children without living parents are cared for by their extended family, a 2020 study estimated three to nine million children are cared for in residential care around the world.[5] The style and quality of care provided in these residential settings vary widely but generally include higher child-to-caregiver ratios than in typical family settings, multiple paid caregivers, and a higher concentration of children who have experienced early adversity than in the general population.

Motivated by compassion and a desire to extend God's love and care to vulnerable children, many organizations have developed residential care. Children in residential care tend to suffer delays across many aspects of development [6] and exhibit poorer outcomes into adulthood. [7]

This is likely related to challenges inherent to most residential care models, such as:
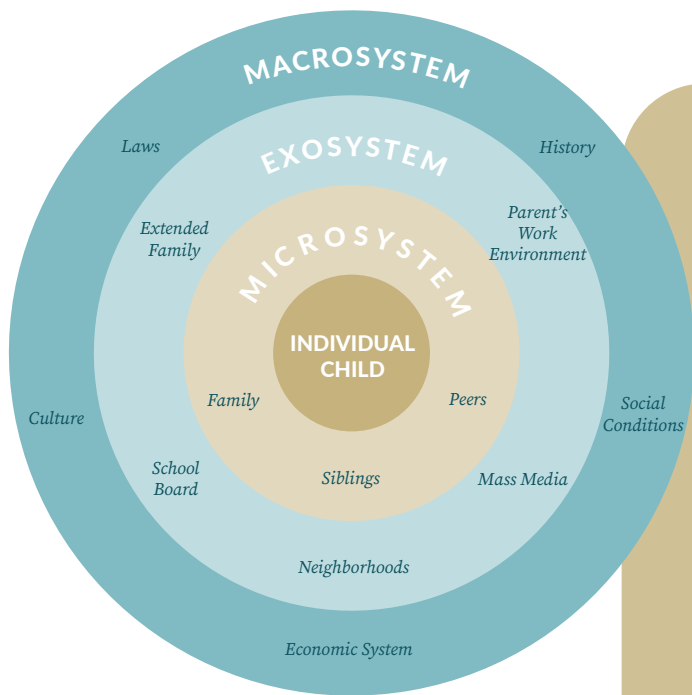
- Children in residential care are less likely than children in families to develop lasting, positive attachments with caregivers who tend to come in and out as a result of shift work, time off, and high turnover rates.

- Residential care typically offers little opportunity for personal preference or individual expression. The idea of "parenting children as individuals" breaks down in a residential setting where efficiency often becomes an essential aspect of success.

- Opportunities to build social and emotional skills are often limited - experiences such as socializing with neighbors and local families, attending community events, navigating situations like standing in line at the local market, or waiting for food to be served in a restaurant.

- Without connections to the surrounding community, children in residential care frequently grow up with a limited social network to draw support from as adults in times of adjustment (like having a baby), personal crises (such as facing illness, unemployment, or relationship problems), or even just going home for holidays.

The Evolving Role of Residential Care

While family care is ideal for children, we honor the commitment and sacrifice of leaders and staff within residential care programs. Therapeutic small-group residential care settings can play an important role within the broader continuum of care options. Rapidly eliminating all residential care would create a detrimental vacuum for children currently receiving care in those settings. However, the global child welfare community is coming to recognize our over-reliance on the residential model while collectively moving toward family-based solutions.

There can be an important and appropriate place for high-quality, small residential care facilities for certain youth with certain needs at certain times. Yet, too frequently, children are placed into residential care simply because it is the easiest or only option available. Ideally, residential care should exist alongside other established family-based care options with preference always given to a solution as close as possible to the ideal of a safe, nurturing, permanent family.

A Better Way:
Supporting Children in Families

Circle diagram labels:
- MACROSYSTEM
- EXOSYSTEM
- MICROSYSTEM
- INDIVIDUAL CHILD
- Laws
- History
- Extended Family
- Parent's Work Environment
- Culture
- Family
- Peers
- Social Conditions
- School Board
- Siblings
- Mass Media
- Neighborhoods
- Economic System

There is hope for children who have been in residential care. Importantly, we vividly see the significance of family in a phenomenon referred to as "developmental catch-up." [8]

When children are moved from group care to family care, we often observe significant improvements in growth and health. In this sense, family can be viewed as a treatment for much of the development lost while in group care.

Children need families and communities, just as families and communities need children.
Children are part of a larger system that includes the families, communities, and societies around them. When one part of a system changes, the whole system is impacted. Just as all members of a family are impacted when a parent becomes critically ill, the impact spills out to the entire community when a child is separated from his or her family. The consequences are more significant for that specific child and family, but a ripple effect impacts extended families, neighbors, and communities, even if they are not initially as evident.

Communities are affected by family separation. God's intent for the community is a story of unity, support, and dignity in caring for the most vulnerable; children being removed from their community writes a story of isolation, insufficiency, and detachment. Fault lines begin to emerge in communities when vulnerable children are removed and separated from their original sources of support. Community members begin to view residential care centers as the solution. They may draw back and stop participating in care for vulnerable children, looking instead to these external solutions that seemingly meet a child's needs better than they can. Family separation impacts everyone.

Families and communities are affected by restoration. Thankfully, family restoration impacts everyone as well. Whether that comes about through strengthening families to prevent separation, supporting biological parents to care for their once-separated child, or engaging extended family or trusted community members to provide a safe and nurturing family for the child, each of these solutions bring with them a redemptive value that honors the God-given role of the families and communities around children.

The global movement towards family-based solutions represents a profound shift in the care of vulnerable children. While residential care once seemed like the best solution, there is a growing understanding of the benefits of providing children with the loving support of family and community. This shift does not negate the good intentions behind residential care, but rather reflects a growing understanding of what children need.

As we collectively prioritize family-based solutions, we have an opportunity to rewrite the narrative surrounding vulnerable children. By empowering families and communities, we can help children thrive while strengthening the social fabric around them. Though challenges will always remain, the momentum toward family-based solutions offers great hope for improving outcomes for vulnerable children around the world.

What Does Family Care Look Like?

As we embrace God's design for children to be in a healthy, loving family, cherished and protected by both biological father and mother, an opportunity develops to explore family-based solutions for children outside of ideal parental care. There are a variety of ways children can be cared for in families including:

Family Strengthening	Family Reintegration	Kinship Care	Adoption	Foster Care	Independent Living

The next booklet in this series **Transitioning to Family Care: Why, What, and How?** dives deeper into the question, **"What Does Transitioning to Family Care Mean?"** Explanations of what family care looks like, who is involved, what the process entails, and who is involved provide a clearer picture of what it actually means to transition to family care. The third document, **How Are Programs Transitioning to Family Care?** provides case studies of how program have successfully transitioned their models of care from residential to family-based solutions, allowing leaders to envision what family care might look like for their program.

Join us on the journey of moving toward family-based solutions for vulnerable children… **together.**

Sign-up to receive our latest research, learning opportunities, and free resources to support the essential work of caring well for vulnerable children and families.

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[7]Citations found in: Howard, A. H., Gwenzi, G. D., Taylor, T., & Wilke, N. G. (2023). The relationship between adverse childhood experiences, health and life satisfaction in adults with care experience: The mediating role of attachment. Child & Family Social Work, 28(3), 809-821. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13006
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