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NEWSLETTER

Kinship care – an option given too little attention?

Formal¹ or informal² kinship care for a child deprived of parental care, and therefore in an alternative care placement or arrangement with a family member, belongs to the family-based care options given great emphasis in international standards. Hence, priority shall be attributed to kinship care when *a*) a child cannot be cared for by his or her birth parents³, and, *b*) considering family reintegration⁴ whether on a case-by-case basis or within the broader process of deinstitutionalisation.

Kinship care: family-based care within the child's extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, whether formal or informal in nature.

Source: para 29 c)(i) [UN Alternative Care Guidelines](#)

The priority attributed to kinship care is based on its various benefits, such as the preservation of the family unit and ties, ensuring stability and permanency⁵, the maintenance of the child's relationship with his/her siblings, as well as respect for the cultural, linguistic, and religious background of the child.

In many contexts, kinship care remains a favoured option for many children in need of care, and mostly occurs in an informal care setting. Consequently, its exact extent is frequently unknown, hence creating significant risks for the children concerned (lack of statistics/information on children's situation, heightened exposure to exploitative situations and rights violations such as child labour, sexual exploitation, etc.). There is an apparent lack of research on children in kinship care in its various forms that could give insight into the real reasons for children being placed in such arrangements in the first place, and, more specifically, their needs.

In light of this situation and its frequency in many countries all over the world, the central question becomes: should we refrain from promoting kinship care, especially in informal settings, despite its numerous advantages for children? The Alternative Care Guidelines recognise the importance of kinship care, *including* informal arrangements, and in this regard stress that any informal caregiver shall notify competent authorities to be ensured access to financial and other support forms, as any family would have (see paras. 18, 76-77 UN Alternative Care Guidelines), with the child's welfare and protection as overall objectives (see para. 79). Furthermore, the formalisation of informal care arrangements should be sought in a participatory manner, "after a suitable lapse of time" and "when proven in the best interests of the child" (see para. 56). When examining the situation in different countries with prevalence of kinship care, it becomes apparent that further work is needed in strengthening existing kinship care placements and in raising awareness of concerned families and children on existing support services (see articles in upcoming newsletters).

¹ See para. 29 b)(i) UN Alternative Care Guidelines: Informal care refers to: "any private arrangement provided in a family environment, whereby the child is looked after on an ongoing or indefinite basis by relatives or friends (informal kinship care) or by others in their individual capacity, at the initiative of the child, his/her parents or other person without this arrangement having been ordered by an administrative or judicial authority or a duly accredited body".

² See para. 29 b)(ii) UN Alternative Care Guidelines: Formal care refers to "all care provided in a family environment which has been ordered by a competent administrative body or judicial authority, and all care provided in a residential environment, including in private facilities, whether or not as a result of administrative or judicial measures".

³ See i.e. para. 27, 43 UN Alternative Care Guidelines.

⁴ See paras. 3 UN Alternative Care Guidelines.

⁵ See paras. 12, 62 UN Alternative Care Guidelines.

Despite the wide-spread recourse to kinship care at the national level, one cannot but wonder why international kinship care is given little attention. What are the reasons hereof? Is it strict immigration laws which only provide access and residence rights to children placed in formal and permanent care solutions, such as adoption? Are competent authorities aware of international kinship care placements and duly consider the latter? As is the case with any cross-border placement, international kinship care adds a layer of complexity and requires the involvement of various stakeholders in a coordinated way. Today, like for national kinship care, little research exists on international kinship care: do we really know when it does take place? Which are the children and families concerned? Are there any specific trends in these cross-border placements (from south to north, within a regional context, etc.)? What kind of support is available to the children and caregivers concerned?

In addition, many intercountry adoptees stress their desire to have the opportunity to maintain links with their birth family and/or birth country, given the dual identity lived by intercountry adoptees all around the globe. In this context, international kinship care appears to present itself as a real alternative to intercountry adoption, as it would not sever (legal) ties with the birth family and would allow for more openness in arrangements to the benefit of all concerned parties. Members of the ISS network are convinced of the value of international kinship care as a viable care option for children, and are actively working on training, advocacy, research initiatives as well as assessment reports to put kinship care at the forefront.

Based on ISS' experience, what is needed to fully make use of the benefits of kinship care when it comes to international placements?

- Pre-established/existing relationship between the child and the family member who shall become caregiver.
- A solid legal mechanism that would allow for effective cooperation and communication between concerned authorities, such as foreseen by the [1996 Hague Convention](#), that does not only ensure the decision-process but also the monitoring and follow-up post-placement.
- Informed and trained professionals, including but not limited to child protection authorities, immigration authorities, staff of diplomatic missions, to evaluate the necessity and suitability of international kinship care for a child. This is especially crucial to ensure due processes in line with the child's wishes and needs with the objective to avoid any wrongdoings or abusive practices.

However, ISS believes that what is most needed, whether in national or in cross-border contexts, is to conduct further research on the lived experiences of children and youth in order to thoroughly inform laws, policy and practice.

Useful resources on kinship care

Platform **Changemakers for Children - spearheaded by Family for Every Child** - <https://changemakersforchildren.community/home>. As a member, you will be able to access the resource library from reports, podcasts, good practice examples, participate in ongoing discussion/webinars etc.

Transforming Children's Care Global Collaborative Platform - spearheaded by BCN - (<https://transformcare4children.org/home>) – As a member, you will be able to access a massive depository where to ask for assistance, share reports/findings, policy papers etc covering all alternative care options. In addition, several task forces have been formed and developing separate thematic guidance briefs.

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