



Changing THE WAY WE careSM

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES IN INDIA

Framework and Guidance

UNDERSTANDING OF FAMILY

Family refers to those within the caring circle of a child; those providing daily emotional, physical and psychological care. This caring circle varies according to culture and circumstance; thus, the use of the term *family* recognizes that in many communities in India the care environment of a child is broader than the parents of birth or immediate family and includes the extended family, sometimes even non-biologically related. The term *family* can also include the families who are providers of family-based alternative care, such as the *foster family*. The U.N. Guidelines on the Alternative Care of Children states, recognizes this importance, stating “the family being the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth, well-being and protection of children, efforts should primarily be directed to enabling the child to remain in or return to the care of his/her parents, or when appropriate, other close family members; and should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that the family can fully assume its responsibilities recognizing that the child should grow up in a family environment of happiness, love and understanding.”¹

Children do well when their families do well, and, yet all families can benefit from support from time to time, whether to remain resilient in the face of crisis or adversity, to learn good parenting techniques, or to weather a change in family dynamics. Support can help families stay strong and intact; thus, family strengthening should be an integral part of care reform.

In India, about tens of millions of children are reported to be living outside of parental care and hundreds of thousands reside in Child Care Institutions (CCI), the majority of children having at least one living parent. In mid-2022 the IACN documented the reasons children end up in all forms of alternative care, finding that poverty and access to basics like food, clothing, adequate shelter, and education are the main reasons. The factors that lead to a family-child separation and institutionalization are often the same factors that make it hard for children to reintegrate into family and community. Without addressing these underlying factors and strengthening families the risk of re-separation remains. Families at risk of separating and/or institutionalizing children and those reintegrating most often require the very same supports and services, close to home and provided by the same qualified and competent social service workforce.

This *Strengthening Families in India: Framework and Guidance* aims to present a framework for understanding and defining components of family strengthening, which addresses the prevention and reintegration challenges and outlines guidance on key actions, approaches, and tools. It is intended to support both government and non-government social service workers and the child protection workforce at all levels to roll out high quality and coordinated family strengthening services.

National Policy Related to Family Strengthening

The **National Policy for Children** (2013) recognizes that children have the right to be raised in a family environment as the best environment for their growth and development.

The **Juvenile Justice Care & Protection of Children Act** (2015) recognizes the process of rehabilitation and social integration of children through family-based care, restoring children to parents, adoption, foster care and makes provisions for sponsorship and financial assistance to families of children to meet the basic and essential needs of children.

The **Mission Vatsalya** (2022), previously known as the Integrated Child Protection Scheme, targets children in difficult circumstances and recommends, amongst other things, equipping families to care for children and use of institutionalisation only as a last resort care option. States are urged to shift focus to family-based care.

¹ Page 2 of United Nations. (2010). *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children*. Resolution 64/142. Accessed :<https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/Guidelines%20for%20the%20Alternative%20Care%20of%20Children%20-%20English.pdf>

These services:

- Move the child protection mechanisms charged with identifying families at-risk from a reactive to proactive or preventative response, which prevents child-family separation and institutionalization before it occurs.
- Share a common framework for understanding and implementing family strengthening.
- Recognize community roles and the diversity of the Indian States, communities, and families; and
- Include mapping and access to government schemes and resources, as well as non-government services aimed targeted to families.

DEFINING FAMILY STRENGTHENING

Evidence, practice, international conventions and national policy all recognize that efforts should prioritize enabling families to stay together when it is in the best interest of the child. Therefore, family strengthening has three primary aims: 1) to prevent family separation before it occurs in vulnerable families at risk; 2) to build resilience in families who have experienced separation as they reintegrate with children (as in prevent re-separation); and 3) to strengthen families who provide family-based alternative care. The constitution, laws and policies of India set forth many schemes to help ensure family strengthen and the family's access to services and resources. The newest, government scheme, Mission Vatsalya, aims to improve the child protection and care system and promote *family-based care of children* in difficult circumstances.

Family strengthening is a **process to enhance the capacity of parents, caregivers, and children, with the goal to build positive relationships within families and to enable access to social protection services, critical to addressing the factors that lead to separation and alternative care placement; and a preventive measure whereby vulnerable families, those facing poverty, social discrimination and any other form of distress, are supported to build protective factors.** The family strengthening approach is cross-cutting and targets families at risk for family separation, families facing imminent separation, often through involvement of government protection workers or other mandated bodies, and families who are already separated and are preparing for reunification or are in the process of reintegration. With grounding in child rights, the family strengthening approach has the following core principles: best interest of the child; every family, every child, has strengths; all decisions and actions are made on an individual basis and must be child-centred; do not harm; respect for diversity; and participation of children, young people, and adult family members.

RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS IN FAMILIES

Evidence suggests that a range of drivers result in children separating from their families and ending up in alternative care. Some factors 'push' children into alternative care, for example, family economic situation or other forms of stress, or violence in the home. Some factors 'pull' children into alternative care, specifically residential care, for example, access to education or active recruitment from CCIs combined with families believing the care will be better for their children. Although poverty, abuse and neglect are the main reasons for children's entry into alternative care globally, most households in poverty and most households in which there is abuse and neglect do not separate. Most often children and families face more than one barrier, propelling them into high risk of separation.



The family strengthening framework is built around an understanding of these combination of heightened risk factors, barriers and reduced protective factors that can make some families separate from their children. Risk factors are conditions or variables associated with a lower likelihood of positive outcomes and a higher likelihood of negative or socially undesirable outcomes. On the other hand, protective factors enhance the likelihood of positive outcomes, increase resiliency and lessen the likelihood of negative consequences when a family is exposed to risks or shocks (see visual above).

PRIMARY, SECONDARY & TERTIARY FAMILY STRENGTHENING

Family strengthening can target all families in the community, families at risk for family separation, specifically, families facing imminent separation, and families who are already separated and are preparing for reunification or are in the process of reintegration. Individual household conditions and resources are important to understanding what a family needs to become stronger in the face of adversity. Family strengthening interventions need to understand existing family resources and conditions and have clear objectives around what needs to be changed. Family strengthening can be tiered by primary or universal, secondary, and tertiary.

Primary or universal means policies and interventions with general application for all community members to address societal factors that can lead to separation (e.g. strategies to combat poverty, discrimination, and stigmatization, change attitudes towards disability and single parenthood, reduce family dysfunction and isolation, and to adopt social policies promoting family empowerment and parenting skills). These can be understood as broad-based approaches, programs or services targeting a rather large group of people who are at risk.

Secondary refers to those services and/or supports to families where there is a specific risk for separation. This could be, for example, linking children or families to social networks and to reduce isolation within the community, individualized counselling, parenting education and in some instances, case management.

Tertiary family strengthening are approaches where separation is likely imminent. For example, a gatekeeping commission has determined the child should be separated or where a child and family are being reunified after having been separated. Efforts at this stage focus on securing conditions that enable a positive re-start, a successful reunification and reintegration, and prevent a return to alternative care. This is typically coupled with case management.

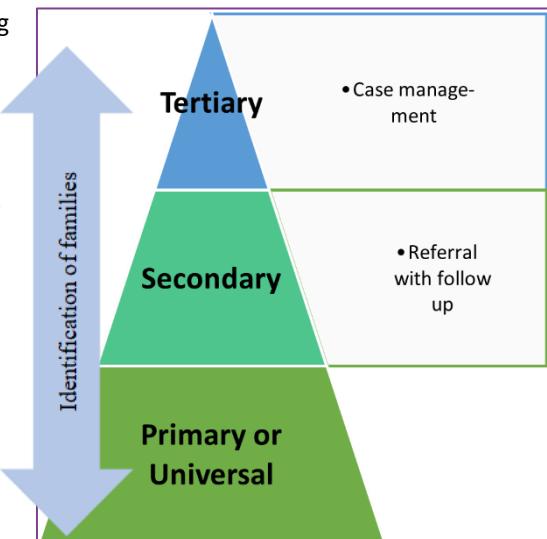
ENTRY POINTS FOR FAMILIES

Family strengthening services reach families through one or more of the following four routes:

- Through the village/panchayat level child welfare and protection committees, who already support identification of children and families at-risk of breakdown, including separation, and who act as gatekeepers to prevent children from being sent into CCIs.
- Through District Child Protection Units (DCPU) and their District Action Plans, which will include raising awareness on positive parenting within their target communities, preventing family and child separation, reintegration of children from CCIs, and building strong systems of family-based alternative care.
- Children currently in CCIs who are going to reunify with their family of origin, extended family or into family-based alternative care. Family strengthening will be built into the case plan with goals to strengthen the family's protective factors and address risks before and during the reunification and as the child and family reintegrate.
- Families identified by and enrolled into family strengthening activities by non-governmental organizations, or families identifying themselves, particularly for primary prevention or family strengthening activities targeted to a primary audience.

DETERMINING WHICH TIER, A FAMILY IS IN

While all families can benefit from support and strengthening from time-to-time, some need more direct mentoring, intervention and services. This can mean helping families in the secondary category with referrals to services that target their particular risks, such as to a referral to mental health services, and one-time follow ups to ensure the service was accessed. For families in the tertiary category, case management inclusive of an in-depth assessment and individual case plan, is required and coupled with the family strengthening approaches. Job aids, included in the framework guidance, help identify families with particular risks and can be helpful to determine families who fall into the secondary and tertiary categories and may need to be specifically targeted with services, referrals or other interventions, including case management. Risk identification tools, completed with children and families' participation, help to give a more in-depth view of both risks and existent family strengths, while prioritization criteria can also help to determine if a family gets assessed for and enrolled in secondary or tertiary services/interventions. Formal assessments are not needed for universal or secondary approaches, which typically are more broad reaching to a community or at-risk group.



FAMILY STRENGTHENING SERVICES

There is no one size fits all and the services will depend on not only what is inside the household, but what is available around the family – social supports are as important in addressing the context as external interventions or services. The package of support appropriate for each family will depend on their unique set of risks and protective factors in order to ensure that the family has strengths across all areas of protective factors (parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete support in times of need, and social and emotional competence of children). Services can include cash transfers, referrals to economic schemes, disability services, early childhood education, parenting skills training, and others.

PROVIDERS OF FAMILY STRENGTHENING SERVICES

Both government agencies and non-government organizations provide family strengthening supports and services. These may vary from state-to-state, district-to-district, or local community-to-local community. Collectively, government, non-government and community can empower families and promote positive outcomes for children. Not every intervention is necessary for every family, because each family faces unique challenges and, therefore, family strengthening approaches should include a range of interventions that aim to mitigate or reduce the risk of family separation and strengthen protective factors of children and families. They may be provided by a variety of workforce, such as village volunteers, panchayat members, DCPU officers or case workers/case managers, or through referral to other service providers. Interventions can be delivered at the household level on an individual or family basis or within the community through community groups or at community center.

Need to know more? Contact *Changing the Way We Care* at, info@ctwwc.org
or visit changingthewaywecare.org

The Changing *The Way We Care*SM (CTWWC) consortium of Catholic Relief Services and Maestral International have partnered with other organizations to change the way we care for children around the world.

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