

Family based care as an alternative care option

Anuja Bansal

Abstract

The Family Based Care (FBC) program by SOS Children's Villages of India is a curative alternative care model for children who have lost parental care. The program is based on the principles of necessity and appropriateness under the UNCRC and is supported by four pillars; the mother, brothers and sisters, the home and the community. The non-biological mother is responsible for a smaller group of children, thus ensuring development and implementation of their individual care plans. Brothers and sisters create a safety net through mentoring, protecting and supporting. The family takes collective decisions which allow every child in the family to participate in the decision-making process. FBC is a time tested successful approach as it involves these multiple layers of social security along with adequate checks and balances. Under FBC, children are raised in a family/family-like environment and are better prepared to be responsible and mainstreamed adults, not only economically but also emotionally and socially. According to a UNICEF report (2003), Asia has the highest number of parentless children, at 87.6 million. Therefore, it is our individual and collective responsibility to find ways to ensure that they receive equal opportunities and a chance to realise their own potential by being raised in a raised in a family/family-like environment.

Keywords

Children, UNCIEF, UNCRC, UN, family, care, fbc, parentless, alternate care, child care, orphans

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Families and belonging to a family is a universal concept, unique not only to the human race but applicable to almost all living beings. For human beings to be complete it is imperative that their physical, emotional and social needs are met. What better way to fulfil these needs than by being part of a family. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) asserts that family is the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and wellbeing of all its members and particularly children.

While most of us take the benefits of belonging to a family for granted, not all children are as privileged. According to a UNICEF report (2003), Asia has the highest number of parentless children, at 87.6 million. There are various causes of loss of parental care and other parts of the world are no different. When a child loses parental care, they are at risk of their rights being violated. The four basic rights of all children are the right to survival, the right to protection, the right to participation, and the right to development.

Based on the principles of necessity and appropriateness under the UN guidelines (2010), for these children who have lost parental care, efforts should be made by the state and non-governmental agencies to create a family-like alternative care environment. Providing family-based care is a time tested successful approach. When children have lost natural families, creating alternative small families and deinstitutionalising child care spaces can ensure long-term wellbeing and protection. In circumstances when children cannot be reunified with biological families, creating families for these children is possible. In fact over last 67 years, SOS Children's Villages, across the world have focused on creating "A loving home for every child". In India, too, in the last 52 years we have demonstrated through our work that children brought up in

families and family-like environments are emotionally stable and socially better integrated. This helps in ensuring that the rights of these children are protected.

Family-based care at SOS Children's Villages is supported by four pillars. Every child receives love, care and affection of a parent or parents. The child develops ties with brothers and sisters. Lasting bonds are created in families. Many such families together create a community for a child. A parentless child brought up under these four pillars of having a parent, brothers and sisters, a family and community is likely to grow up to become a contributing citizen of society.

One could argue why only make these claims for family-based care and support. Institutionalisation of care has its own impediments. We must understand that every child as an individual has needs that are specific to that child. As soon as we put the child in an institutionalised environment, the individuality of the child is lost and so is individualised care. Decisions and actions taken by the institution become universally applicable to all. Voices of children can often go unheard. Participation of children in decisions pertaining to their own development, though not impossible, becomes difficult to implement. The right to survival and the right to protection can more easily be compromised in an institution. Actions of office bearers and other residents can easily be hidden and transparency and accountability can become hostage to people in positions of authority.

On the other hand in family-based care, multiple layers of social security and checks and balances are created. The parent is responsible for a smaller group of children, thus ensuring development and implementation of their individual care plans. Brothers and sisters create a safety net through mentoring,

protecting and supporting. The family takes collective decisions which allow every child in the family to participate in the decision-making process. The community within which each family exists helps to create a social norm and acceptance. Perpetrators of crime, abuse and violation of child rights can easily be isolated and punished.

Taking care of parentless children can be supported by child care tools and processes that organisations like SOS Children's villages have developed over time based on their knowledge and experiences. This can help make child care effective and efficient.

Building strong child protection policies and effective implementation of prevention and remedial tools is of highest significance. Capacity building and training of caregivers and creating awareness among children through working group sessions and cyber protection training can help keep children safe.

Implementation of resilience building trainings, emotional wellbeing, personal development plans, and encouraging use of sports and art as a method of expression can help these parentless children to grow into confident and responsible adults.

Constant training and capacity building of care givers and child care practitioners is imperative to keep them abreast of emerging needs and methods of helping children and also dealing with difficult situations and stress management.

So far I have talked about alternative care of children who have lost parental care. Poverty is an important reason, while certainly not being the only reason, for loss of parental care. A study conducted by ATD (2004) in six countries

(Guatemala, Haiti, Burkina Faso, Philippines, United Kingdom and United States of America) documents various ways in which poverty separates children from their parents. Parents are compelled to take various actions and decisions which separate the children thus making them very vulnerable. Urban migration due to poverty can also put children at risk.

Therefore, working towards prevention of loss of parental care can be an important tool to make long term sustained impact. Actions can vary from geographies and needs of children. Providing direct nutritional, health care and educational support to children at risk will help tackle immediate problems. Strengthening families and parents or care givers can help build sustainable families and communities.

Sustained support for capacity building to caregivers to develop skills or generate self-employment can augment family incomes. This builds greater resilience and self-reliance of economically weaker families. Group income generation programs, creation of self-help groups, awareness building through trainings, access to government support and schemes, adult literacy and financial literacy are some methods of strengthening and building sustainable communities.

The responsibility to take care of these children who have lost parental care or are at risk of losing parental care is universal. While child care practitioners and civil society play their role, we must understand the primary responsibility rests with the state. The state must ensure that rights of children are protected no matter what the circumstances. States should develop and implement consistent

and mutually reinforcing family-oriented policies designed to promote and strengthen parents' abilities to care for their children.

Are people at large also responsible for the state of children in our society? I am often asked, "What can I do? I am only an individual. Why should I be responsible for children who are not in my care and protection?"

It is every world citizen's responsibility to help and support children, particularly those who are less privileged or in distress. Children are extremely vulnerable and can often be controlled by others. And therefore it is our individual and collective responsibility to find ways to ensure that they receive equal opportunities and a chance to realise their own potential.

Civil society and child care practitioners can play a very important role in ensuring family-based alternative care for children through advocacy and creating a people's movement.

Evidence-based advocacy is a very strong tool to influence the government. It is universally acknowledged that children brought up in a family and family-like environment are better prepared to be responsible mainstream adults, not only economically but also emotionally and socially. This information can be leveraged in dialogue with government and to influence policies and practices.

Building technical partnerships with government and widespread sharing of knowledge and expertise can also help influence government policies and practices.

Citizen action or creating a citizens' movement has long lasting impact with multiple dimensions. Firstly, it is important that people should be made aware of

the apathy towards and need of less privileged children. People must realise that there is urgency and need for action. Supported by facts and data, it can generate momentum. Then, people must be made aware of what they can do. Often people are empathetic but are not aware of means to help. Making specific requests would bring focus to their action. It could range from citizens' reporting when they see children in distress, to actually deciding to provide long term financial or volunteering support. In today's digital age, data indicates that using online spaces is the fastest and cheapest way of reaching and influencing society. Penetration into far flung and rural areas may require use of community radios and other on the ground initiatives. Of course there are many other ways of influencing people.

Therefore it would be fair to conclude that while the challenge is looming large of many million children having lost parental care and even larger number of children at risk of losing parental care, there are opportunities to make a sustained, widespread impact. The best way of doing this is to create spaces for family care and family-like care.

About the author

Anuja Bansal is a social sector professional committed to securing the rights of vulnerable children and women and has a vast repertoire of expertise on related issues. Having been qualified as a Chartered Accountant in 1989, she devoted herself to social development early in her career and has been working in this sector for over 15 years. Her diverse and expansive career includes leadership positions in international and national not for-profit organisations like Child

Rights and You (CRY), ACCESS Development Services, Bharti Foundation, Oxfam India and now SOS Children's Villages of India.

At a time when greater accountability and transparency is demanded of the NGO sector, Anuja's expertise and work in the areas of strategic planning, strengthening governance, compliance systems, internal processes sound financial management, has helped enhance organisational credibility and capability. She has also built competence in the sector with her ability to recognise, hire, nurture and mentor talent leading to the capacity building of human resources.

Anuja has been leading SOS Children's Villages of India as its Secretary General since January 2015. This large self-implementing organisation has over 1700 employees with pan India presence at 32 locations in 22 states. Over 25,000 children are receiving holistic care, love and protection through two of its flagship programmes; Family Based Care and Family Strengthening Programme. The education Programme of SOS India is providing quality education and vocational training to over 7000 children and youths.

As head of SOS India, Anuja leads by example and she has been able to steer quite a few innovations resulting in strengthening the organisation. She has been instrumental in initiating technical partnerships with Government Stakeholders to expand the outreach of the organisation to larger number of children in need of care and protection. She is dedicated to ensuring safety and protection of all children under the care of the organisation, while safeguarding their mental and physical wellbeing. She continues to apply her knowledge gained by education and her prior international and national work experiences

into leading the strategy, implementation of programmes and the functioning of the India chapter of SOS Children's Villages with utmost zeal and passion.

Anuja was awarded the Exceptional Women of Excellence 2017 Award in India by Women Economic Forum (WEF) in September, 2017.

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