

# The Care Effect

Why no child should grow up alone



SOS CHILDREN'S  
VILLAGES



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# Summary

Now more than half-way to the deadline set by governments to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, progress is disappointing. Given the combination of adverse economic, social, climate, and geo-political developments— even more children are in vulnerable circumstances and at risk of being left behind.

This paper argues that ensuring quality care for children in vulnerable circumstances is not just a moral imperative required by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, but one of the most effective investments the global community can make. Many communities throughout the world are facing downward spirals of poverty, poor health, violence, humanitarian emergencies, exploitation, and despair, placing additional strains on existing social protection systems and global development efforts. Violence against children is shown to have huge economic costs.

But ensuring that children do not grow up alone – that they have someone to care for them and support them emotionally from birth to independence – can help stop and reverse the downward spiral.

To meet the ambitious objectives in the Sustainable Development Goals (including the commitment to “leave no one behind”), and to protect the rights guaranteed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the global community really must focus efforts on ensuring that every child has access to the support and quality care they need.

## Note on this revised edition

The Care Effect was first published in 2017, soon after the Sustainable Development Goals were adopted, and before the COVID-19 pandemic. This revised edition updates many of the statistics and other research relating to the situation of children in vulnerable circumstances and puts them into the current context (2023). The revised paper also incorporates subsequent research into the social impact of programmes that seek to deliver the “Care Effect.”

# Introduction: Our promises to children

Every year, 20 November is celebrated as World Children's Day, marking the anniversary of the adoption in 1989 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The day is often met with an array of proclamations calling for the world's governments to do a better job protecting and realizing the many rights of children that the convention recognizes.

## Global promises

There are several global commitments designed to ensure children's rights and needs are prioritized at all levels of political, social and economic action. These all confirm the importance of care for children and young people.

In terms of rights, the **Convention on the Rights of the Child** recognizes the importance of care for the well-being and development of the child.

In the development arena, the **Sustainable Development Goals** address the need to ensure children grow up in a caring and supportive environment, and they recognize the importance of compensating and supporting those who provide care.

Other dedicated texts and commitments recognize the importance and impact of care for a child, including:

- the **UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children**
- **2019 UN General Assembly Resolution on the Rights of the Child**, which focuses on children without parental care
- 2023 resolution declaring [29th of October the International Day of Care and Support](#)

## UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

No other human rights treaty has so many signatures as the UNCRC (every UN member except for the USA has ratified it), reflecting the fact that little else seems to unite the world so much as the belief that children must be protected.

The convention establishes, among others, children's rights to:

- Know and live with their parents "as far as possible"
- Receive special protection and assistance when they cannot live with their parents
- Live in a safe and clean environment
- Have nutrition and healthcare
- Be educated
- Play and rest

- Choose their own friends
- Give their opinion, and for adults to listen and take it seriously

The convention also says that children have a right to grow in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.

However, we look around and we see a disconnect between those rights and the reality. We see, for example:

- Children under the radar of child protection systems, being exposed to exploitation such as trafficking, child labour, or prostitution
- Child abuse, neglect and abandonment
- Families unable to provide care because of health issues
- Inadequate support services for families to prevent child-family separation
- Child refugees who are separated from their families and are alone in dangerous environments
- Children living in institutional care without the loving support of a caregiver

In particular, children without or at risk of losing parental care are most likely to experience rights violations such as poverty and exclusion, poor physical and mental health, lack of access to education and basic services, high youth unemployment, and high levels of violence and neglect.

Ultimately, there is a financial cost for society as well. Breakdown of parental care can result in costs to government and strain on public services – burdens that are perpetuated in subsequent generations.

So it is right to ask why, given that governments have made these commitments when they signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are in such a precarious position.

## Sustainable Development Goals

With this global commitment to child rights as the backdrop, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in September 2015, set out 17 objectives to achieve by 2030 – ranging from eliminating poverty and hunger, to ensuring health and education, to reducing inequalities and harmful environmental impact. These global goals were accompanied by a pledge to “leave no one behind,” recognising that the previous development agenda (the Millennium Goals, which ran 2000-2015) failed in some instances to help the worst off.

A number of the SDGs relate to children and young people who lack or risk losing parental care. For example, achieving SDG 10, Reduced Inequalities, will require ensuring that children in vulnerable circumstances have access to health, education, nutrition, and social and life skills in order to break the cycle of inequality. Further analysis of the role that care for children plays in meeting the SDGs is in the publication, [Care for Children is Care for Development](#).

At the time of this publication (November 2023) we are now more than half-way to the deadline set by governments to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, and the progress is disappointing. The COVID-19 pandemic, major climate events, and military conflicts such as in Ukraine, the Middle East and the Horn of Africa, have distracted attention from the long-term goals, even moving the goal posts. The UN’s publication [Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet](#) concluded

that "...we are leaving more than half the world behind. Progress on more than 50 per cent of targets of the SDGs is weak and insufficient; on 30 per cent, it has stalled or gone into reverse."

The special report noted that developed countries have "largely returned to pre-pandemic growth paths. But developing countries were unable to do so." Meanwhile wealthier countries have been cutting back on development assistance, some abandoning their commitments to allocate 0.7% of Gross National Income. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres called for a "Bretton Woods moment" and a recommitment to meeting the SDGs.

In a world where so many children are living in vulnerable circumstances, without adequate parental care and no one to turn to, ensuring that no child is left behind is a huge challenge. Indeed, if we do not give this generation's children a decent foundation for life, the problems will be compounded for future generations. If we as a global community do not find a way to stop the cycle of self-perpetuating social problems we are encountering, then not only will we fail to meet the SDGs, but we will land future generations with ever increasing burdens. This paper proposes that such a strategy must focus on a simple, foundational, concept: care.

### What is care?

When we talk about care for children, exactly what does that mean? There are many other types of "care," and the word can elicit varied reactions depending on the context in which it is used. Care can be provided by parents, extended family members, through communities or by care professionals.

Providing care to a child goes beyond ensuring mere survival; it means ensuring that they grow up in a nurturing environment that ensures their well-being and supports their development. This means strong emotional support, and having someone to provide love, identity and a sense of belonging. Someone who will listen and support unconditionally.

At the same time, care means ensuring the survival and developmental needs of children are met. It entails ensuring that the child has nutrition, clothing and shelter. The basics to sustain life.

When a child becomes ill, care is about ensuring access to whatever medical services may be available.

Care means being able to bring up and support a child without violence and abuse. The state is responsible for establishing a system of child protection; and quality care ensures that the child can access that system.

Education is a right under the UNCRC, and care seeks to ensure access to whatever educational services may be available in the community.

# Assessing the challenge: Children in vulnerable situations

Few would deny that the global community is facing some daunting challenges, and it is often children who suffer the most. SOS Children's Villages has particular expertise and depth of experience in working with children without, or at risk of losing, parental care. These are children in some of the world's most vulnerable and marginalized situations. This effort has, over our nearly 75 years, attracted the support of numerous partners who agree that it is both a moral imperative and a logical course of action that we focus global development efforts on, and investment in, this particularly vulnerable population – those most likely to be left behind. But just how big is the challenge?

## Estimating the scale

An analysis by SOS Children's Villages has estimated that one in ten children worldwide has lost – or is at risk of losing – parental care. That is just a conservative estimate. There is not a lot of data available that tells us just how many children are growing up without the support of a caring parent.

Recent African Union research concluded that there are an estimated 35 million children without parental care in Africa, including those in child marriages, child-headed households, children on the move, and children in institutional or residential care settings. A Lancet study, [Prevalence and number of children living in institutional care: global, regional, and country estimates](#), suggested that there are between 3.18 million and 9.42 million children living in institutions today. Numerous factors may contribute to increasing the risk of child-family separation. These include, for example:



### Poor health or death of parents

By the end of 2022, over **10.7 million children** had lost a parent or caregiver due to the COVID pandemic ([Imperial College London](#))



### Poor education

**222 million children and young people** of school age **have been affected by crises** ([Education Cannot Wait](#))



### Violence

More than **2 in 3 children** are subjected to **violent discipline** by caregivers and at least **5% of young women reported experiences of sexual violence** in childhood (UNICEF)



### Poverty

Almost **600 million children** are living in "acute multidimensional poverty" ([United Nations Development Programme](#)); **365 million children** are living in **extreme poverty** (UNICEF)



### War and conflict

**450 million children** (1 in 6) are living in a conflict zone (OHCHR)



### Lack of birth registration

**1 in 4 children under 5** have not been registered (UNICEF)



### Refugee status

An estimated **43.3 million children** have been **forcibly displaced** (40% of the total); **1.9 million children** were born as refugees between 2018 and 2022 ([UNHCR](#))



### Climate crisis

Puts children and young people in danger of losing parental care, because it exacerbates the drivers of child-family separation. Approximately **1 billion children** live in "extremely high-risk countries" (UNICEF)

Being in a vulnerable situation does not necessarily mean the child will lose parental care. For example, many children of one-parent families and those who live with their extended family can thrive, if that parent has the right knowledge and skills, plus financial and material resources. So it is not possible simply to add up all the numbers and come up with a total.

However, taking numerous factors into consideration, SOS Children's Villages conservatively estimates that about 220 million children could be without parental care, or are at risk of losing it. This represents about one in ten of the more than two billion children worldwide.

## Future demographics

At the same time as we're fighting existing global problems, new ones will appear on the horizon that will place additional pressures on today's children.

Take, for example, global demographics. We know that the world's population as a whole is growing older. The UN's 2023 report, [Leaving No One Behind in an Ageing World](#), highlighted the risks of an ageing population, given that the number of persons aged 65 or older is expected to double over the next three decades, reaching 1.6 billion in 2050.

The conditions of both young and old are intertwined, as reflected in the UN report's conclusion that "Ensuring economic security and health for all in old age calls for promoting equal opportunity from birth, including through universal access to health care and education as well as opportunities for decent work."

Governments need to consider how today's children and young people can step up to support the older population when they are of working age. Simply put, if children make up a smaller percentage of the population, they will each need to shoulder a bigger burden as they enter their economically productive years. This requires, as highlighted in the UN report, states to confront questions of "intergenerational equity" and "to strengthen solidarity between younger and older people today."

It also requires a productive and stable workforce with the skills to access quality jobs of the future. A workforce made up of resilient and caring individuals – who have been cared for themselves.

But there are some worrying indications that today's youngest children – tomorrow's adults – are not receiving the opportunities to develop that they need. A 2014 UNICEF publication suggests that more than 200 million children under five years old will not reach their potential because they are growing up with a range of risk factors.



## The need for more data

It's important that we get a deeper understanding of the numbers in order to guide global development efforts. As many as 14 out of the total 17 Sustainable Development Goals directly or indirectly relate to children's needs and rights. These range from ending poverty and violence, to ensuring universal access to services such as education, health, social protection, employability, and birth registration.

These came with a pledge to "leave no one behind." But the world community is also discovering that there is a lack of data available on the portion of the population that is most likely to be left behind (those without or at risk of losing parental care) and exactly why they are left behind. Many children without adequate parental care simply are not counted by their governments, and so they are essentially "invisible."

From the perspective of developing policy and measuring performance, this is a disaster. Given the lack of data, governments do not have the necessary information to understand the extent of the problems they are responsible for solving. They are making policy decisions without data specifically on who is affected, what the nature of the problem is, and what issues need to be addressed in making the most effective response. SOS Children's Villages sounded the alarm on this situation in [\*The Care of Children in Data: Evidence, gaps and opportunities for change in the SDGs\*](#), and the problem persists.

# Ensuring quality care

The term “care” encompasses a wide range of support provided to individuals to ensure their rights are realized – whether for the elderly, those with physical and mental illnesses, or children. Efforts are taking place on a global scale – such as a [toolkit developed by UN Women](#), and a recent [resolution adopted by the UN Human Rights Council](#) – to recognize the importance of care services for communities and broader economies, and even to place an economic value on those care services, much of which is unpaid. Here we focus on care for children in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Given that governments are obliged under that convention to ensure appropriate care for children who need it, civil society plays a vital role in holding governments to account for such obligations and working in partnership to fulfil them. This includes supporting efforts to both strengthen families to prevent the loss of care and, when the family is not able to provide appropriate care, to ensure a suitable alternative response.

## Preventing child-family separation

It is usually in the best interests of children to remain in the care of their family of origin. This is a central tenet of the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, approved by UN members in 2009 – which sets forth the principle that children should be placed in alternative care only when necessary. Whenever possible, and with appropriate support to help families to provide good care, the ideal solution is for children to remain in the biological family. This may include kinship care, where children are cared for by relatives other than their parents, or maybe even by their older siblings.

Families confronted with extraordinary pressures – such as loss of employment, extreme climate events that disrupt existing access to food, water and sanitation, or forced migration – need support if caregivers are to continue providing quality care, with a nurturing and trustworthy relationship at the heart. The impact caregivers have – not just for individual children but society more broadly – is immense, but they need a range of types of support, including:

- Services to strengthen family relationships, including for example parenting workshops, addressing child care and development skills
- Psychological counselling
- Family counselling to resolve issues
- Support in accessing social & health care services
- Livelihood support, including providing parents with entrepreneurship and vocational training to help them become financially independent and create a stable home
- Access to education, including covering for school fees, uniforms, learning materials, tutoring and after-school help

The challenge is more than simply putting these services in place. They need to be coordinated and accessible, requiring a multi-sectoral approach whereby different service providers and agencies work together in partnership.

## Quality alternative care must be available

It is not always possible to prevent the loss of parental care, and the UN Guidelines establish that if a child's family is unable to provide good care for the child, even with extra support, then the care that the child requires must be *suitable* to the individual needs and demonstrably in the best of interests of the individual child.

Ensuring suitable care therefore requires a range of quality alternative care options, such as foster care, family-like care, or small group homes. Such options must allow for dedicated caregivers to engage and form caring bonds with children as they grow and develop. Large-scale residential facilities that do not provide the necessary personalized care and attention that family-like environments provide cannot be considered suitable.

There continue to be debates about the application of the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children and the parameters of what may be considered suitable alternative care. Terminology is not always used consistently – see, for example, [this review of literature on "residential" care](#). However, those who do focus on the question of what constitutes or enables "quality" in alternative care highlight the child's relationship with the caregiver as being fundamental to their growth and development.

The bottom line is that the concept of "care" is not just about providing nutrition, shelter, and access to health and education services, but **ensuring that children benefit from a strong bond with their caregiver, with affection and emotional support to build resilience**. For young children in particular, suitable alternative care provision must take full account of the need to effectively promote early childhood development. All children and young people, from birth to the point at which they become independent, need stability and the nurturing presence of a caregiver if they are to become their strongest selves.

# Breaking the cycle: Forming strong bonds

The global challenges facing children may seem overwhelming. But a key part of the solution involves ensuring that children have the care and support they need from birth until they are fully ready to live independently. Providing decent care for children who are living in vulnerable circumstances is not a “nice to do”; it’s an *imperative* if we are to meet global goals.

Despite numerous initiatives in our global development efforts – for example, in healthcare, education, employability, and maternal support, among many others – such support services could all be in vain if they are not *accessible* to those who need them the most. Care – which may be provided by a parent, relative, or other caregiver – is critical for linking children with the available support services and for ensuring that the child grows up with the fundamental capabilities to become an independent adult.

This critical role of care for children is backed by scientific evidence and respected economic insight. See our publication [The Road to Resilience](#) for more on:

- How the architecture of the brain is formed during early childhood, when the brain is at its most flexible;
- Why those children who experience consistent love and support in early childhood are more likely to grow into confident, empathetic and emotionally stable adults;
- The vital role parental mental health plays;
- The fact that the transferral of trauma from parent to child may not be limited only to behaviour, but may also be passed on through genes;
- What science tells us about the link between nurturing relationships and personal resilience.

## Early intervention is key

It is never too late to help children, but research shows that the earlier the intervention, the greater the impact.

A 2016 study by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University provides a valuable overview of scientific understanding: our brains begin developing even before birth, and their very architecture is formed early. The brain’s neural connections begin developing immediately, progress over time, and form the foundation for how we learn and function – and who we are. And while it’s never too late to learn and adapt, it becomes tougher the older we get. As the Harvard Center notes, “building more advanced cognitive, social and emotional skills on a weak foundation is far more difficult and less effective than getting things right from the beginning.”

**What’s clear also is that children can’t develop *alone*.** From a very early age, babies seek interaction with the adults who care for them. They make facial expressions and other gestures; they babble. And if adults do not reciprocate, or respond in an inappropriate way, “the child’s developing brain may be disrupted, and later learning, behaviour, and health may be impaired.”



This long-term impact is because the brain needs to develop progressively, with basic functions being necessary to develop more complex ones subsequently. Essentially, the brain's architecture needs to be built from the ground up.

It's not just about intellectual development; a child's early years also have a long-term impact on emotional resilience, which is essential to coping in a difficult world. And here, parental care plays a role. As the World Health Organization states: "Warm and responsive caregiving is now known to extend some protection to children in otherwise adverse situations." In other words, merely providing warmth and interaction has great powers in helping children in vulnerable circumstances.

And as the Harvard Center explains, the benefits of a stable parental relationship include not just providing a "buffer" against adversity but also helping children build practical skills in managing it. Positive support, combined with the building of coping skills, forms the basis for this concept of resilience.

## Young people need care, too

There is growing recognition that continued support for the child throughout adolescence is critical for helping young people make the transition to independence and productive adult life. Making the transition to independence is difficult for any young person, but for those growing up in alternative care or without strong parental care – those who are likely *not* to have the family networks to support them – the challenge is multiplied.

Youth unemployment is a huge global problem. In 2022, there were more than 72 million unemployed young people worldwide according to the International Labour Organization.

SOS Children's Villages' experience has shown that young people in vulnerable circumstances need more than just education and job training, they need holistic life skills, from the basics of personal hygiene and appearance, to the social competencies of self-discipline and commitment. One research report, [When Care Ends](#), showed that these skills may be lacking when young people are not supported in the transition from care to independence.

“ *Many care leavers found themselves insufficiently prepared to cook a meal or balance a budget. In general, the respondents stressed that young people must have the opportunity to learn basic skills before leaving care. A standardization of the leaving care process would allow young people to wean themselves off the lifestyle of dependency while gradually learning skills ranging from banking and budgeting to shopping and cooking.*

Parental care is critical to helping young people understand how to prepare themselves physically and mentally for the world of work as well as life more generally. It also helps them to build social support networks that can give them a helping hand and open doors as they navigate the path to independence.

None of this is simple or so-called common sense. It is what young people learn together with caregivers, siblings, friends and family. It is **not** something that can be learned alone.

# Why care is a smart investment

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes that children have an inherent right to the conditions that allow them to grow and develop. This is a fundamental obligation of all states.

This isn't just a right; it also makes economic sense.

The concept that care from from birth to independence is a smart investment has been made well by James Heckman, a Nobel Laureate economist. Heckman argues that in order to tackle broader social problems, society must:

1. Invest in educational and developmental resources for what he calls "disadvantaged families"
2. Nurture early development of cognitive and social skills in children from birth to age five
3. Sustain development with education through to adulthood

The result, he argues, is "a more capable, productive and valuable workforce" which will benefit society for generations to come.

The logic is compelling. Consider the contrast of two scenarios: one in which children grow up without adequate parental care, and one in which they receive the benefits of the investment in early childhood development.

When children grow up without quality care, there is a risk that society may have to bear certain costs, including:

- Loss of economic productivity in their adulthood – including for example a lack of financial input into the tax system
- Welfare grants/ income subsidy
- Healthcare for preventable diseases and mental health issues
- Crime – both in terms of the cost of the crime itself and the demands on the criminal justice system

A 2014 report by the Overseas Development Institute shows that violence against children costs society \$7 trillion annually. And in the USA alone, the annual cost of child abuse, including health care, child welfare, correctional services and lost productivity and income, is \$124 billion.

On the other hand, when children receive care and attention, they can flourish and develop. And in the longer term each of those costs becomes a benefit to society.

A 2009 Harvard University study estimated that there would be a return of \$4-9 for every \$1 invested in quality early childhood programmes. And James Heckman's research specifically on early education for children under-five-years-old shows a 13% return on investment.

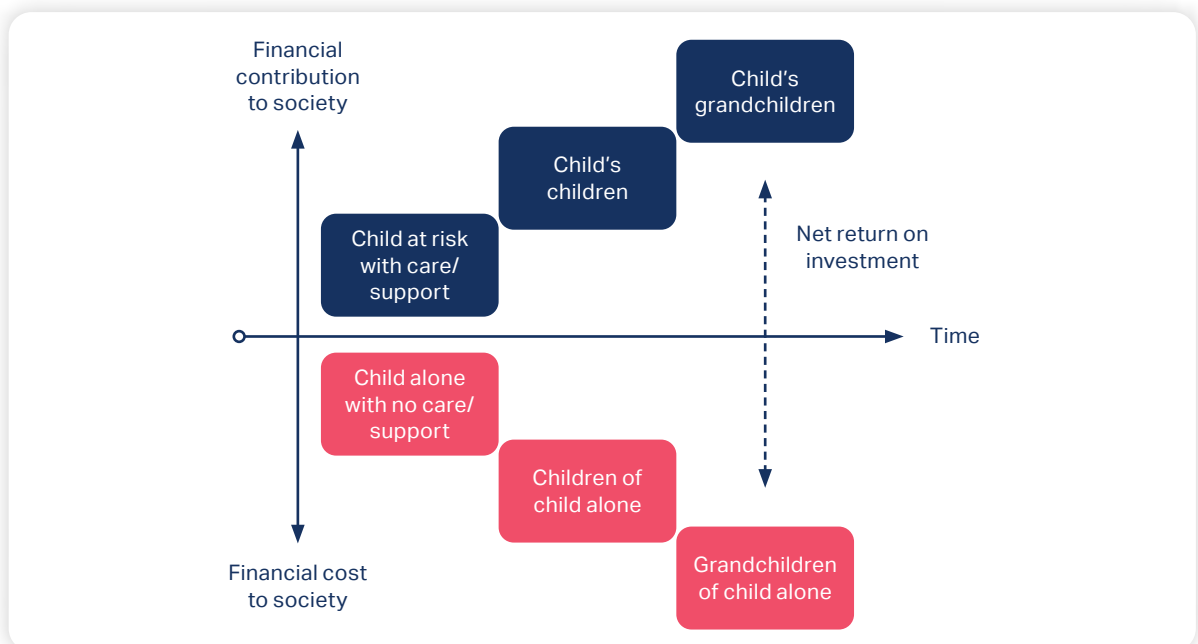
# Preventing child-family separation is particularly effective

SOS Children's Villages research published in 2019 showed that for every €1 invested into SOS Children's Villages' programmes, €5 is returned to society in benefits.

While the research cautioned against comparing social return on investment for alternative care programmes with that for programmes aiming to prevent the loss of care, it showed that every €1 invested in prevention programmes can yield €22 in benefits to society. Preventing child-family separation not only results in positive social returns for individuals, but it can also increase employment prospects and earnings of families and reduce risk-taking behaviours. In turn, this can save government expenditure on service provision such as social security, justice and health programmes.

This emphasis on the financial benefits of child and youth care may seem trivial or even demeaning when one considers that rights are inalienable, regardless of how much it may cost to deliver them. But given many competing demands for resources, it is useful to look through that financial lens and consider the longer-term impact.

So the net return looks like this:



Compare the two scenarios above, and we see two drastically different trajectories and a clear financial return to society over time.

Consider that at any given point in time, we are at the beginning of those trajectories, before any negative compound effect. Naturally, we can't go back in time and restore to yesterday's children the care that they did not receive. Nonetheless we must intervene whenever possible, even in adulthood.

Looking forward, if we invest in today's children, we can stop the downward trajectory. We can break the cycle.

# The Care Effect:

## A strategy for development

As described in previous sections, too many children are growing up without adequate parental care. They are not given the care they need to develop. They are essentially growing up alone.

This use of the word “alone” is often figurative, not literal. It is not always a case of literally being alone. To say that no child should grow up alone, we are really saying that children need a caring family or family-like environment.

According to the Harvard Center, “Severe neglect appears to be at least as great a threat to health and development as physical abuse—possibly even greater.” And with all the disadvantages that follow with it, there is little exaggeration in identifying growing up alone as the worst possible scenario for a child.

It’s not just about having people around. It’s about being listened to. It’s about having a supportive community and friends. It’s about feeling connected. It’s about knowing that you’ve got someone who cares for you. Children need these things. And children who don’t have them often struggle to succeed as adults, if indeed they grow up at all.

When children grow up “alone” – that is to say, without the love, care, and support of a caregiver – their brains do not develop properly. They may not acquire certain language or problem-solving skills that are essential building blocks for their future education.

Children who suffer from lack of sufficient care are more prone to depression and substance abuse later on. They do less well at school. They have a higher rate of attempted suicide. They struggle with focusing and developing social skills. They do not develop the resilience to cope with inevitable adversity.

They are more likely to experience health issues, and less likely to access the public support systems that are guaranteed to them under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The harmful effects include costs to society. Children who are unable to learn, mature and develop life skills have a harder time finding jobs and becoming participating and contributing members of society. If later in life they become parents, they may not know how to give their own children the stimulation and support they need to develop, so the harmful effects may be passed on to the next generation.

Subsequent generations of individuals who struggle to hold down jobs, who may be prone to substance abuse or crime, or who may experience chronic health issues, may add to the strain on state health and welfare systems.

### **But we can break that cycle.**

A key element is quality care for the child at risk of growing up alone. Here’s how it *ought* to work:

Through early interaction, affection and support from a caregiver, children’s brains develop progressively. In their early years, they develop language and basic social skills.

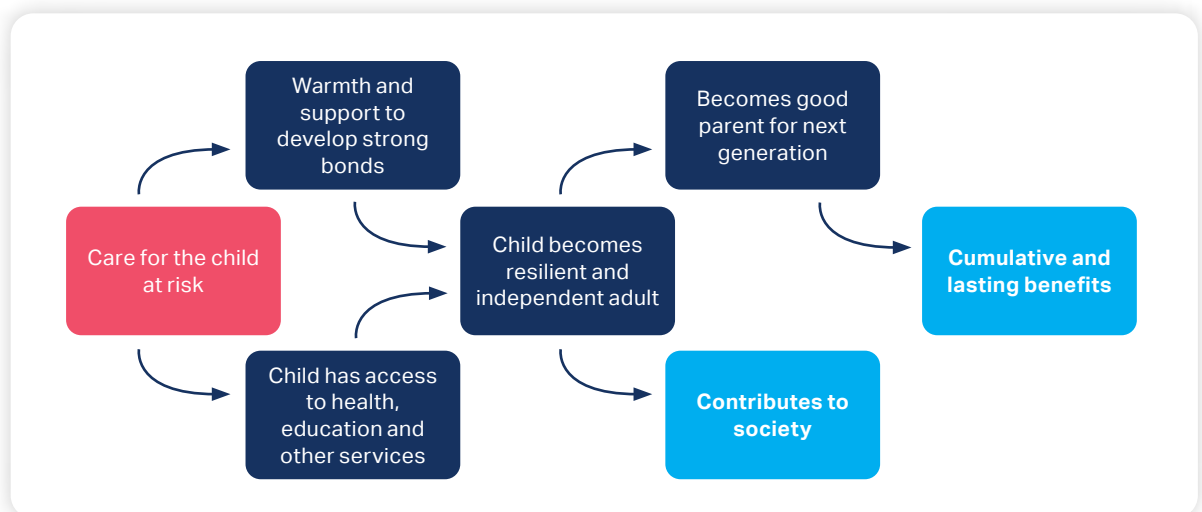


Their caregivers ensure that they go to school. They develop communication, problem-solving and other employable skills. They learn how to focus and concentrate, set personal goals, follow rules, collaborate, and control impulses. They develop determination, resilience and a growth mindset.

Their caregivers also ensure they take advantage of available healthcare services such as vaccinations and benefit from other community support. If support systems are not available, they know how to stand up for their rights.

A stable and secure family helps children develop social networks, and when they become adults they find jobs, pay taxes, and contribute in other ways to the community.

They are then in a position to become good parents and create stable homes for their own children. The investment in care has a multiplying effect. And so the cycle progresses upwards: generation after generation of individuals who, from birth, receive enriching care, flourish, and realize their potential.



SOS Children’s Villages sees this dynamic every day in the children who become successful adults and members of society, and some examples of this long-term impact are documented in the report, [70 Years of Impact](#).

It all starts from the essential attention, stimulation and sense of belonging and connection provided by a caregiver. An investment in care for the child at risk of growing up alone makes the world a better place. That is the *Care Effect*.

# Conclusion

SOS Children's Villages believes that investing in a supported childhood empowers children to develop the life skills, resilience and support networks to set personal goals and move confidently into self-reliant adulthood. Indeed, truly bonding with a child has the power to change the world.

This is not just logical and intuitive, but also backed by research which shows that investment to ensure that all children have quality care is an integral part of solving the world's larger social problems. Essentially, if we provide care for today's children in vulnerable circumstances, giving them the foundation they need for learning and developing life skills, we stand a better chance of meeting the global goals and building a better future for the world.

As a global community, we need to unite around this priority. All the money we spend on programmes to provide education, healthcare, justice, and other very worthy causes, will not have the necessary effect if children in vulnerable circumstances do not have care to make sure they can actually benefit from those other services.

How can we make this happen? SOS Children's Villages calls on the global community to:

- Increase efforts to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child for children who have lost or risk losing parental care. Governments can do this by consistently applying the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, developing, implementing and financing integrated child protection systems, and investing in social protection to prevent unnecessary child-family separation.
- Ensure development cooperation and emergency response strategies prioritize care for children without parental care or at risk of losing it, making the investment that will benefit all in future generations. This includes investment in interventions before, during and after crises to address and prevent the separation of children from their parents.
- Everyone working within child welfare systems (including governmental agencies, companies and civil society organizations) can work together to foster professionalism within the child care sector, recognizing the huge global benefits of quality care for children. This investment includes ensuring opportunities for training, adequate salaries and good working conditions.
- Support broader efforts to recognize the value that both paid and unpaid care provide.

SOS Children's Villages responds to the global challenges by focusing on applying its unique expertise in supporting children to be cared for in the most suitable care setting, whether with their families or in alternative care. We work in partnership with organizations that share our vision.

Ensuring quality care for children who have lost, or are at risk of losing, parental care is a fundamental right and need – upon which all other efforts to make the world a better place must build. The core solution is care. That is the care effect.

# References / further reading

- *All Children Count but Not All Children Are Counted: An Open Letter to the UN Statistical Commission and Inter-Agency Expert Group on SDG Indicators*. 30 March 2016.  
<https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/All%20children%20count%20but%20not%20all%20children%20are%20counted.pdf>

“Indeed, all children count, but not all children are counted. As a result, some of the world’s most vulnerable children – those without parental care or at risk of being so; in institutions or on the street; trafficked; separated from their families as a result of conflict, disaster or disability; or recruited into armed groups – have largely fallen off the UN’s statistical map. There are only limited data about how many children live in such precarious circumstances, except for scattered estimates from some specific countries.”

- *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 20 November 1989. *United Nations Treaty Series*, vol. 1577.  
<https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201577/v1577.pdf>

- Harvard Center on the Developing Child. *From Best Practices to Breakthrough Impacts; A Science-Based Approach to Building a More Promising Future for Young Children and Families*. 2016.

This provides a valuable overview of scientific understanding of how children’s brains develop and how support programmes can be tailored accordingly.

“No matter what form of hardship or threats may have been experienced, the single most common research finding is that children who end up doing well have had at least one stable and responsive relationship with a parent, caregiver, or other adult. These relationships provide the support, scaffolding, and protection that both buffer children from developmental disruptions and help build key capabilities – such as the ability to plan, regulate behaviour, and adapt to changing circumstances – that enable them to respond to adversity and thrive. In other words, positive experiences, supportive relationships and adaptive skills build the foundation of what is commonly known as *resilience*.”

- Harvard Center on the Developing Child. *Five Numbers to Remember about Early Childhood Development*. 2009.  
[https://hhs.iowa.gov/sites/default/files/portals/1/files/1stfive/early\\_childhood\\_development.pdf](https://hhs.iowa.gov/sites/default/files/portals/1/files/1stfive/early_childhood_development.pdf)

“Providing young children with a healthy environment in which to learn and grow is not only good for their development—economists have also shown that high-quality early childhood programs bring impressive returns on investment to the public. Three of the most rigorous long-term studies found a range of returns between \$4 and \$9 for every dollar invested in early learning programs for low-income children. Program participants followed into adulthood benefited from increased earnings while the public saw returns in the form of reduced special education, welfare, and crime costs, and increased tax revenues from program participants later in life.”

- Huebner, G., N. Boothby, J. L. Aber, G. L. Darmstadt, A. Diaz, A. S. Masten, H. Yoshikawa, I. Redlener, A. Emmel, M. Pitt, et al. “Beyond Survival: The Case for Investing in Young Children Globally.” *NAM Perspectives*. Discussion Paper. Washington, DC: National Academy of Medicine, 2016.  
<https://doi.org/10.31478/201606b>

This article makes the case that investing in early childhood development is critical for meeting not just the SDGs relating to education but to those relating to poverty, nutrition, equality for girls, and reducing violence.

- International Labour Organization. *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2022; Investing in Transforming Futures for Young People*. 2022.  
[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_853321.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_853321.pdf)

“Young people have been disproportionately affected by the economic and employment consequences of the pandemic....”

- James Heckman website. “Invest in Early Childhood Development: Reduce Deficits, Strengthen the Economy.” Accessed October 2023.  
<https://heckmanequation.org/resource/invest-in-early-childhood-development-reduce-deficits-strengthen-the-economy/>

“The highest rate of return in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible, from birth through age five, in disadvantaged families. Starting at age three or four is too little too late, as it fails to recognize that skills beget skills in a complementary and dynamic way. Efforts should focus on the first years for the greatest efficiency and effectiveness.”

- Martin, Florence S., and Garazi Zulaika. “Who Cares for Children? A Descriptive Study of Care-Related Data Available Through Global Household Surveys and How These Could Be Better Mined to Inform Policies and Services to Strengthen Family Care.” *Global Social Welfare* 3 (2016): 51-74.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40609-016-0060-6>

The authors have determined that one in ten of the world’s children does not live with his or her biological parents (and that for nearly three quarters of them, both parents are still alive).

- Overseas Development Institute. *The Costs and Economic Impact of Violence against Children*. 2014.  
<https://odi.org/en/publications/the-costs-and-economic-impact-of-violence-against-children/>

“All children have the right to live and thrive in a safe and caring family environment, free from all forms of violence. However, millions of children throughout the world face abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence every day of their lives, and in different settings such as their homes, schools, communities and work environments.”



- SOS Children’s Villages International. *70 Years of Impact; Improving the Lives of Children Without Adequate Parental Care*. 2019.

[SOS\\_70\\_years\\_of\\_impact\\_report\\_SPREADS-WEB.pdf \(sos-childrensvillages.org\)](https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/getmedia/460cd5c3-887e-4e54-87f5-734f5370b927/Folder-Ageingoutofcare-RZ-screen.pdf)

- SOS Children’s Villages International. *Ageing Out of Care*. 2010.

<https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/getmedia/460cd5c3-887e-4e54-87f5-734f5370b927/Folder-Ageingoutofcare-RZ-screen.pdf>

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<https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/getmedia/db45016e-a5df-4995-819e-af02d6634347/Preparation-for-Independent-Living,-Briefing-paper-3-web.pdf>

SOS Children’s Villages International. *When Care Ends: Lessons from Peer Research*. 2012.

<https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/getmedia/80a754d9-8832-4a16-9e7e-11ece55b23e0/PeerResearch-European-Report-WEB.pdf>

Research on the conditions of young people leaving alternative care and their developmental needs.

- SOS Children’s Villages International. *The Care of Children in Data; Evidence, Gaps and Opportunities for Change in the SDGs*. 2017.

[http://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/getmedia/881d3ec2-92a9-4a3b-9425-6d074be04c27/SOS-Children-s-Villages\\_The-care-of-children-in-data.pdf](http://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/getmedia/881d3ec2-92a9-4a3b-9425-6d074be04c27/SOS-Children-s-Villages_The-care-of-children-in-data.pdf)

“A lesson learnt from the expired Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is that implementation efforts are likely to bring no gains for marginalised groups if the specific challenges that they face are not recognized and addressed – the poorest 5% made no progress at all between 1999 and 2008. Therefore, the identification of children in vulnerable situations and understanding of the determinants of their vulnerability through disaggregated data is critical to know who is missing on progress and prevent short fallings towards the SDGs. However, data and statistics available in national and international statistical systems are still limited or poor for over half of the child-related SDG global monitoring indicators, leaving governments without the necessary information to tackle the obstacles of vulnerable and marginalised children.”

- SOS Children’s Villages International. *Child at Risk – The Most Vulnerable Children: Who They Are and Why They Are at Risk*. 2016.

<https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/getmedia/dcd5b23b-76ee-4c03-95a8-474a77f39024/Child-at-Risk-Report-2016-ECOM-FINAL.pdf>

Analysis of risk factors and available data.

- SOS Children’s Villages Norway. *In the Blind Spot*. 2016.

<https://www.sos-barnebyer.no/om-oss/policies/rapport-in-the-blind-spot>

This paper draws on a number of sources in describing the risk factors that often lead to children losing parental care and in demonstrating the costs to society.

- UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. *General Comment No. 7 (2005): Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood*. 1 November 2005. CRC/C/GC/7.  
<https://www.refworld.org/docid/460bc5a62.html>

This document confirms that the Convention on the Rights of the Child should be interpreted so that the conditions for early childhood are guaranteed as a right.

“Babies and infants are entirely dependent on others, but they are not passive recipients of care, direction and guidance. They are active social agents, who seek protection, nurturance and understanding from parents or other caregivers, which they require for their survival, growth and well-being. ... Under normal circumstances, young children form strong mutual attachments with their parents or primary caregivers. These relationships offer children physical and emotional security, as well as consistent care and attention. Through these relationships children construct a personal identity and acquire culturally valued skills, knowledge and behaviours. In these ways, parents (and other caregivers) are normally the major conduit through which young children are able to realize their rights.”

- UNICEF. “Early Childhood Development.” Accessed October 2023.  
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[http://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ECD\\_Brochure\\_2014\\_197.pdf](http://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ECD_Brochure_2014_197.pdf)

“Over 200 million children under 5 years of age in low- and middle-income countries – and increasing numbers in OECD countries and emerging economies – will face inequalities and fail to reach their full developmental potential because they grow up with a broad range of risk factors. These include, most notably, poverty; poor health, including malnutrition and infection with HIV; high levels of family and environmental stress and exposure to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation; and inadequate care and learning opportunities.”

- UNICEF Innocenti. *Prospects for Children in the Polycrisis: A 2023 Global Outlook*. January 2023.  
<https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/reports/prospects-children-polycrisis-2023-global-outlook>

An overview of developments and trends impacting children and young people in 2023 and beyond.

- United Nations. *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition; Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet*. 2023.  
<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf>

“Halfway to the deadline for the 2030 Agenda, the SDG Progress Report; Special Edition shows we are leaving more than half the world behind. Progress on more than 50 per cent of targets of the SDGs is weak and insufficient; on 30 per cent, it has stalled or gone into reverse. These include

key targets on poverty, hunger and climate. Unless we act now, the 2030 Agenda could become an epitaph for a world that might have been.”

- United Nations. *Toward a World Free from Violence: Global Survey on Violence against Children*. 2013. <https://doi.org/10.18356/2442f8ad-en>

A good source of statistics about children at risk.

- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Leaving No One Behind in an Ageing World: World Social Report 2023*. 2023. [https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/undesa\\_pd\\_2023\\_wsr-fullreport.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/undesa_pd_2023_wsr-fullreport.pdf)

“Ensuring economic security and health for all in old age calls for promoting equal opportunity from birth, including through universal access to health care and education as well as opportunities for decent work.”

- UN Women. *A Toolkit on Paid and Unpaid Care Work: From 3Rs to 5Rs*. June 2022. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/A-toolkit-on-paid-and-unpaid-care-work-en.pdf>
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- World Health Organization. *The Importance of Caregiver-Child Interactions for the Survival and Healthy Development of Young Children: A Review*. 2004. <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/42878/924159134X.pdf>

“Children whose care is disturbed or distorted in some way, are at risk of not receiving sufficient nutrition, being subjected to stress, not growing well, not being psychologically stimulated and of developing malnutrition. Warm and responsive caregiving is now known to extend some protection to children in otherwise adverse situations.”

Founded in 1949, SOS Children's Villages is the world's largest non-governmental organization focused on supporting children and young people without parental care or at risk of losing it.

Child neglect, abuse and abandonment is everywhere. Families are at risk of separation. Locally led, we work in more than 130 countries and territories to strengthen families who are under pressure so they can stay together. When this is not in a child or young person's best interests, we provide quality care according to their unique needs.

Together with partners, donors, communities, children, young people and families, we enable children to grow up with the bonds they need to develop and become their strongest selves. We speak up for each child's rights and advocate for change so all children can grow up in a supportive environment.

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