

*Submission by Chris Gardiner, International Foster Care Organisation for the CRC  
day of general discussion on "Implementation of Child Rights in Early Childhood",  
17 September 2004*

The Preamble to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says "***The family is the fundamental group of society and the natural environment of growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children....The child should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.***"

So why are so many babies and young children in institutions in all parts of the World today? Why are there such big differences in the proportion of children aged under 3 in institutional care in European countries with similar backgrounds and income levels?

For example: recent research § shows the proportion of children under 3 in institutions per 10000 to be Czech Republic 60, Romania 33, Slovak Republic 31, Hungary 24, Poland 9 and Slovenia 0.

The International Foster Care Organisation urges the CRC to press Governments hard to do more to **phase out institutions for babies and young children** and, in the short-term, to reorganise these "baby homes" so that children are cared for in smaller family-like groups with trained, sensitive staff who act as "primary caregivers" for named children. Wherever possible sibling groups should be kept together and not split because of rigid age rules imposed because several Ministries run different institutions.

The harmful effects of institutionalisation on young children's development is well-researched and documented, and yet failure to turn this research into effective policies means that countries are failing to fully implement CRC article 6.2 to ensure the development of young children by giving them the chance to grow up in a family setting. Many countries are also failing to fully implement CRC article 18 with a large percentage of children being received into out-of-home care because of a lack of adequate services and help for poor families.

The May 2003 Stockholm Declaration of the Second International Conference on Children and Residential Care says "***There is indisputable evidence that institutional care has negative consequences for both individual children and society at large.***"

There is also evidence that with a little more support and a skilled, non-judgemental approach to social work intervention many children would be able to stay with their families or could return home from institutions. If returning home is not an option then what about the alternative of supported kinship care by members of the child's family? Many countries do not consider this effective option and judgements that parents are "unfit" or "inadequate" are unfairly attached to willing and able relatives.

If parents or relatives cannot provide the child's care then skilled, supported Foster Care wherever possible with regular and meaningful contact with the child's biological parents should be preferred to institutional care. National adoption is also another option for children without parental contact or any hope of return home.

International adoption should be seen as a last resort when all other options have been fully explored and where all stages of the process are transparent and demonstrably free from corruption.

IFCO, FICE and SOS Children's Villages are working together to gather evidence of good practice and quality standards in all settings of out-of-home care across Europe - please see: [www.quality4children.info](http://www.quality4children.info)

These findings will be shared with UNICEF, ISS and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child with a view to improving child care standards for all children in care.

Some countries are making big strides in the de-institutionalisation of their child care but progress is patchy and slow. IFCO urges the UN CRC Committee to make it a priority when considering the progress in Country Reports to **place a special emphasis on family-based care alternatives for all babies and young children.**

*UNICEF : We are also coming to realise what institutional care does to societies. It perpetuates discrimination, by providing tacit approval for the idea that certain groups of children, whether orphaned, abandoned, living with disabilities, from families affected by AIDS or by poverty should live apart from society....the use of institutional care also impedes the healthy development of communities and society as a whole."*

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*§ World Health Organisation / EU Daphne Programme project "Mapping the number and characteristics of children under three in institutions across Europe" - research by Birmingham University, UK, Centre for Forensic and Family Psychology - presented at WHO Conference in Copenhagen March 19 2004.*

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