



SOS CHILDREN'S  
VILLAGES  
INTERNATIONAL

# THE SOS CARE GUARANTEE

How SOS Children's Villages  
guarantees the best care for  
children and young people



13 July 2017

Draft Policy for SOS Children's Villages International



Photo: Bjorn Owe Holmberg



A loving home for every child



# 1. Roots and seventy years of experience in caring for children

One in ten children worldwide has already lost, or is at risk of losing, the loving care of their parents.

Hermann Gmeiner conceptualised the SOS Children's Village in 1949 as an innovative response to the situation of children post World War II in Europe. He wanted to ensure that children do not grow up alone and, particularly, belong to a family.

SOS Children's Villages have continued this journey since then. Today, we continue to ensure that the most appropriate quality care is available to children and young people in our target group. This is the SOS Children's Villages Care Guarantee.

## The care effect

Children are born innocent, they have little control over the conditions that surround them, however, they do suffer severe consequences if they grow up without love and unconditional care. This affects society as a whole. Children who face abandonment, neglect, abuse or poverty experience difficulties in becoming participating and contributing members of society. If left unsolved, these problems are often passed on and experienced by the next generation.

We want to break this vicious cycle. **We want to realise our vision that every child belongs to a family, and grows with love, respect and security.** We want children to grow up in communities where their rights are protected and promoted; where they have decent living conditions and access to quality education and healthcare. Children should be provided all the support they need to enjoy a happy and healthy childhood. Empowered to overcome life's challenges and to reach their full potential, they are able to become independent and contribute to society. Ultimately, children are a community's best investment.

**Strong children can make the world a better place; we call this 'the care effect'.**



Photo: Katerina Ilievska

## Our care principles

If there is one thing we have knowledge and expertise of, it is how to care for children, especially children facing difficult family situations. We've built up this expertise over seventy years in our SOS Children's Village programmes all over the world.

Bringing up children means giving them the tools that they need in order to develop into self-sufficient adults and contributing members of society. We succeed in doing this because we follow strong principles; these are at the heart of our work for children and young people. Our original four principles – of the mother, brothers and sisters, the house and the village – have guided us in our work with SOS families living as part of an SOS Children's Village. Our updated care principles are based on this rich experience as well as on scientific evidence (see quote below) and will guide us into the future:



### 1. Parents offer quality care with passion

Children need someone to be there for them no matter what; when they make mistakes, when they succeed, when they struggle and when they flourish. Children develop best within a loving family, with a supporting adult who cares for them unconditionally and guides them towards independence. Whether this is a mother, a father, an SOS parent or another family member, what matters is being able to offer a reliable relationship based on love, respect and security. In addition, SOS parents and other alternative care givers are true professionals who nurture children who have various backgrounds and capabilities.

### 2. Family ties are strengthened

Every child belongs to a family and preferably grows up in that family. Losing your family is losing a part of yourself. If children cannot live with their family of origin, we support them to bond and form lifelong ties with their new family. We also maintain the best possible relationship between the child and their family of origin. In all cases, we do everything in our power to keep siblings together. A child who grows with brothers and sisters in a family or family-like environment has the greatest potential to succeed in life.

### 3. Children have a family and a loving home

Every child needs a safe haven, a family, where they feel loved and accepted for who they are. It is the foundation on which they build their life, personality and relationships. It is the safety net they can always rely on, the basis from where they start discovering the world. It is a place they can call home. This home and family is theirs and lasts a lifetime.

### 4. Children grow roots in the community

We work with communities to create a safe and supportive environment for all children to grow and thrive. Communities are an important source of support, providing opportunities to interact with other individuals who can help children build up relationships, knowledge and life skills. An SOS Children's Village is an integral part of the community and supplements existing child care and protection services. From this strong base new care options grow.

### 5. Each child's potential is nurtured

We believe that every child has their own unique set of talents and strengths. We recognise their potential, listen to their dreams for the future and offer our support to make these a reality. Knowing the challenges faced by children and young people, we do not give up on them. We believe in their potential, nurture it and offer unconditional support and guidance in order to develop it.



Photo: Joris Lugtheid

## Stable relationships matter

“Children develop within an environment of relationships that begins in the family but also involves other adults who play important roles in their lives, this can include extended family members, providers of early care and education, nurses, social workers, coaches, and neighbours. These relationships affect virtually all aspects of development – intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and behavioural – and their quality and stability in the early years lay the foundation that supports a wide range of later outcomes. These outcomes include self-confidence and sound mental health, motivation to learn, achievement in school and later in the workplace, the ability to control aggressive impulses and resolve conflicts in nonviolent ways, behaviours that affect physical health risks, and the capacity to develop and sustain friendships and close relationships and ultimately become a successful parent.”

*Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016).  
From Best Practices to Breakthrough Impacts: A Science-Based  
Approach to Building a More Promising Future  
for Young Children and Families, p8.*

## Our care spirit

### **Courage: We take action**

Our founder, Hermann Gmeiner, used to say that good things happen when people do more than they have to. Therefore let us challenge conventional thinking and practices in alternative care and family strengthening, dare to innovate and continue to be a pioneer. Let's take action and strive to make the biggest wish of many children in our care come true: to grow up in a family like other children.

### **Commitment: We stand our ground**

We want our efforts to create lasting, positive changes for children and society. In making a long-term commitment, we want to have a meaningful and sustainable impact. We will not stop until we have achieved a result which is stable and durable. We stand our ground.

### **Accountability: We take responsibility**

We take responsibility for children who do not have the loving care of a parent and give them the opportunity to grow up within a stable family, ensuring high standards of care. In doing so, we are committed to using all funds and resources wisely, with respect and accountability, and learning from our mistakes.

### **Trust: We cooperate**

Since 1949 we have built a foundation of trust with staff, donors, governments and other partners who support us in our mission. We believe in cooperation as we know this brings the best results. We work towards a shared vision where no child grows up alone, but instead with the loving care of a family.



Photo: Katerina Ilievska



## Our care solutions

Since 1949, we have been pioneers and practitioners in care; offering a unique model of family-like care, based on strong principles. The SOS Children's Village has grown permanent roots in almost 600 communities. This is our foundation and it is what we are best known for.

Our experience teaches us that children in our target group need a flexible response, tailored to their care needs. We commit to a good quality SOS Children's Village and making a range of additional care options available, together with other relevant actors, because we want children to grow up in the care setting that is in their best interests.

### **We offer alternative care**

When the family of origin is no longer the best place for a child to grow up, we offer alternative care solutions. Our core solution is family-like care in SOS families, who live as part of an SOS Children's Village. This is what we have been doing for decades, where we derive our expertise from and what we will keep doing in the future. While we keep improving our work with SOS families, we also dare to explore innovative care solutions. Together with other actors we draw on our experience to explore solutions such as foster care and small group homes, and we ensure that each option is delivered with consistent quality.

### **We strengthen families**

As long as the family of origin is still able to offer a loving home to their children, despite challenging circumstances, that family is the best place for a child to grow up. We prevent these families from breaking down by strengthening their ability to care for their children, working directly with families or empowering communities to do so. This includes kinship care to support children to stay within their extended family. In emergency situations, we focus on prevention of family separation and family reunification.

### **We aim for greatest impact on the life of the child**

Across our care solutions, we work in a way that touches all areas of a child's development, but care remains at the core of all that we do.

We know from experience that two stages of care deserve special attention: early childhood development and the preparation of young people for independent life. What happens at these stages has a significant impact on the future of children and young adults. We offer young children a caring environment which builds their resilience, inside and outside their family. We also offer tailored support to young adults as they step into independent life, enabling them to develop the skills and knowledge they need to become successful adults.



Photo: Teodor Bø

## Early childhood development pays off

“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. The best investment is in quality early childhood development from birth to five for disadvantaged children and their families.”

*James J. Heckman, December 7, 2012  
Nobel prize in Economic Sciences, 2010*

We are also aware that girls and boys are not always treated in the same way, or given the same opportunities. Girls, in particular, are frequently subject to discrimination. The social and cultural environment within their family and their community often plays a role in this. Whenever we see that children are disadvantaged, just because they are a girl or a boy, we address this form of gender-based discrimination.

As we know that there are many children we do not reach directly, we advocate for this SOS Care Guarantee to be embraced by government and others. In doing so, we strive for positive change in policy and practice for all vulnerable children and their families.

**Together we create the ‘care effect’.**



Photo: © Farid Squalli

# 2. Our commitments in care

- Commitment 1: We focus on children without adequate parental care
- Commitment 2: We run an SOS Children’s Village as a hub to promote care options and family strengthening
- Commitment 3: We find the best care option for every child
- Commitment 4: We keep children safe
- Commitment 5: We promote and continuously strengthen the care profession
- Commitment 6: We enhance the integration of SOS families in community life
- Commitment 7: We support children, young people and families to achieve individual goals
- Commitment 8: We promote education and prepare children and young people for independent life
- Commitment 9: We partner for supporting services and child rights

## 1 We focus on children without adequate parental care GUARANTEED

We commit to focus our efforts on our target group: children without parental care or at risk of losing it, who are living in extremely vulnerable circumstances.

The factors which put children at risk differ from place to place. Therefore, in each programme location we identify which groups of children belong to our target group, based on a careful review of the local context. We recognise that poverty alone is never a good reason for children to be separated from their family. Most importantly, we need to consider their care situation: Who are the children living with? Are they living in a family environment? How is their relationship with their parents or other caregivers? Are their families willing and able to adequately care for them?

In emergency situations, we focus on unaccompanied and separated children and families at risk of breaking down.

Whatever the situation, we do not discriminate on the basis of gender, ethnicity, faith, health status or special needs. At the same time, we do recognise that we are not always the best organisation to work with certain groups of children, such as child soldiers, long-term street children or children with disabilities who require life-long care. Family strengthening or alternative care might not be the most appropriate response for children in these circumstances. We assist wherever possible to also find suitable care solutions for them.





# 2

## We run an SOS Children’s Village as a hub to promote care options and family strengthening



We commit to a long-term presence in a community through running an SOS Children’s Village. From this care and protection hub, we promote the availability of a range of care options and family strengthening, together with other relevant actors. We do this because we want children to grow up in the setting that best suits their care needs.

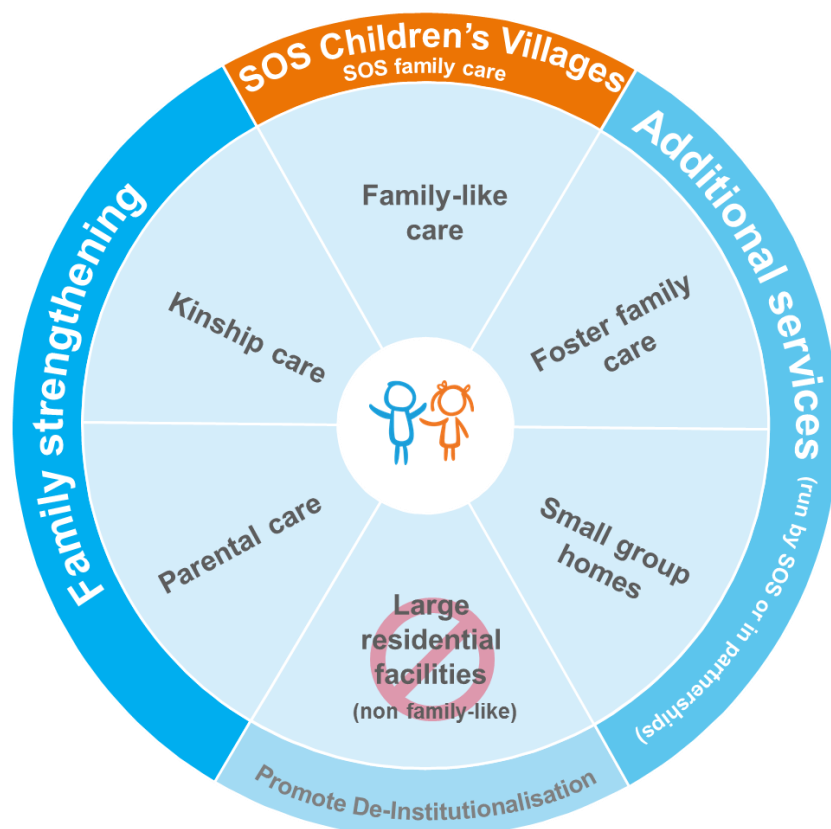
In all of the communities we work in, the SOS Children’s Village is the hub for the services we offer. This starts with family-like care in SOS families who live as part of an SOS Children’s Village. In this setting, children who have no one can find a new family and home. In addition, either directly or through partners, we make other care options available and respond to the specific care needs of each child: this includes a foster family, kinship care or a small group home, empowering their parents or connecting with extended family members. When working with partners we expect them to make a commitment to quality as outlined in the SOS Care Guarantee.

By strengthening families who are at risk of breaking down, we prevent children from being separated from their parents or extended family. We aim to improve the family’s abilities to care for their children, working directly with families or empowering communities to do so.

In emergencies, we focus on the prevention of family separation and reunification where children have already been separated from their family. We also offer alternative care where required.

Large residential facilities without a family element are never a suitable care option for a child and children should never grow in an impersonal environment without individual care. We therefore promote de-institutionalisation.

In order to secure a suitable care option for every child in our target group, we continue to improve and innovate our services, based on sound evidence.



# 3

## We find the best care option for every child

**GUARANTEED**

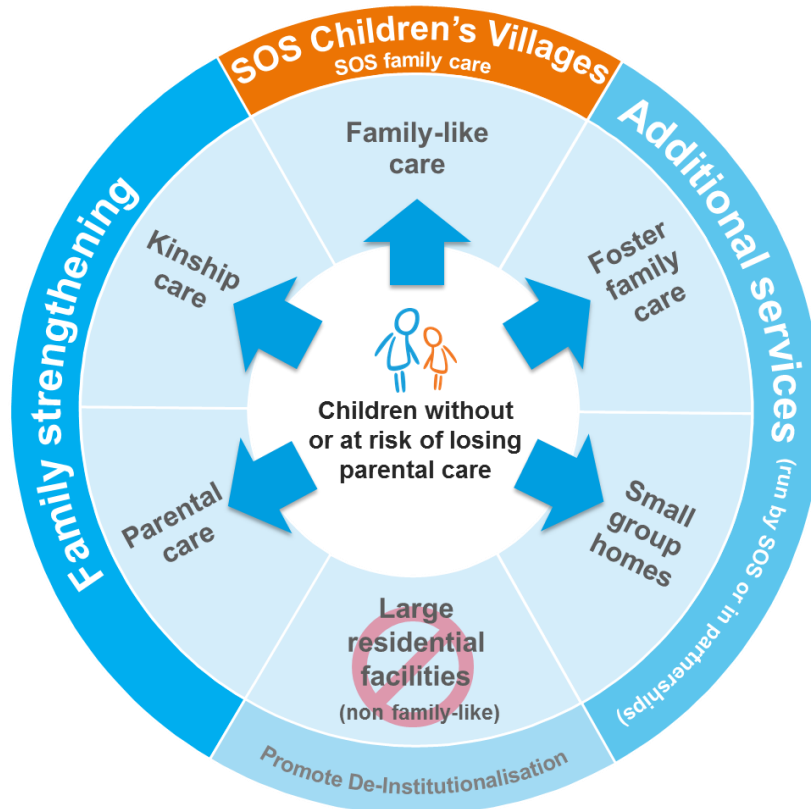
We commit to identify the most suitable care option for every child, because we want children to grow up in the care setting that is in their best interests.

If the family of origin is willing and able to offer a loving home to their children, then it is clear that the family is the best place for a child to grow up. Therefore, we only consider alternative care when options within this family are exhausted and it has become unsuitable for the child.

When considering alternative care, we work closely with social welfare authorities and other service providers. We ensure the participation of both the child and the family in the decision-making process. We look for a solution where siblings can grow up together and consider factors such as age, gender, special needs, health status, geographic location and expected duration.

Whilst a child is in alternative care, we maintain strong links between children and their family of origin (as long as it does not harm the wellbeing of the child). We review the placement on a regular basis, exploring all options including reintegration with their family of origin if existing.

### Care placement decision-making



# 4

## We keep children safe



**We commit to keep children in our programmes safe at all times by implementing child safeguarding measures and procedures in line with international standards. We also support our partners to do the same.**

The safety of children is sometimes breached by people known to them, who they are supposed to trust. Neither SOS Children's Villages, nor our partners, are immune to this risk, so we put in place tailored measures to reduce child safeguarding risks, including gender-based violence.

We analyse the safety risks that are associated with each care option and partnership, keeping in mind indirect risks occurring through fundraising or communication. If abuse occurs, we know what to do. We respond quickly and effectively through clearly defined procedures and provide support and counselling to the affected children. In such cases we also report concerns to the appropriate authorities and open up for internal and external child safeguarding audits. We expect the same from our partners and support them in these processes.

Furthermore, within communities we emphasise that neglect and abuse are unacceptable. We create awareness about violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect and demand that people to stand up when they witness them.

# 5

## We promote and continuously strengthen the care profession



**We commit to promote the valuable role of care professionals. We nurture both passion and dedication to the profession and skills development. We do this because children and families need a caring and trustworthy relationship with someone they can rely on, every single day.**

We start with selecting the right people through a professional recruitment process for all care professionals: SOS mothers, SOS parents, foster parents, youth care workers, family strengthening field workers. This process is also guaranteed by our child safeguarding policy.

Then we enable our caregivers to be stable and reliable sources of support. Through ongoing training, development and counselling opportunities, we make sure they have the right set of skills, attitudes and behaviours. We also encourage networking to share good practices and learnings.

As caregivers are people like anyone else, with their own aspirations and need for self-fulfilment:

- We help them balance their professional and private lives, respecting their partners and their own biological children
- We ensure fair working conditions and remuneration
- We recognise their efforts, challenges and desire to progress in their care career

The majority of our care professionals are women and we empower them to develop in their careers and further their self-esteem.



Photo: Rafif Ben Messalem

# 6

## We enhance the integration of SOS families in community life

**GUARANTEED**

We commit to enhance the integration of SOS Children's Villages and SOS families into their communities, continuously exploring new ways to do so. The aim is that children and young people are well prepared to become self-supporting, independent and participating members of society.

SOS Children's Villages open all their services to the community thus promoting social and physical integration. We promote social integration of SOS families by giving them a high degree of autonomy, so they can create a natural and nurturing family environment. We also encourage them to participate in social and cultural activities, just like any other family. In addition, we proactively connect children and young people to community activities and social networks to foster their integration into society.

Through physical integration, we make sure that SOS families can easily interact with their neighbours and have access to community services. SOS families can also live in the community, side-by-side with other families. When doing so, it is important that SOS families continue to live close to each other, so that they can form a mutual support network. Ultimately, in adapting living standards to the local context, we can ensure that SOS families blend into their community.

Wherever SOS families live, we ensure that they provide a safe and secure environment for the child.

### Social integration



Family autonomy



Natural family environment



Participation in community life



### Physical integration



Interaction with neighbours and access to community services



Open up village services to the community



Living in the community



Photo: Claire Ladavicius

# 7

## We support children, young people and families to achieve individual goals



**We commit to support children and families on their journey to self-reliance. We do this through child and family development planning, which addresses all aspects of life. We give special attention to the empowerment of girls and young women.**

For children and young people, this means addressing everything they need to become self-supporting and contributing members of society. This process begins with a special focus on early childhood development and ends with quality after care support. For families, we see self-reliance in terms of being able to protect and care for their children.

Throughout this process, we build on each child's, young person's and family's unique set of strengths, skills and knowledge. We do this with children and families, rather than on their behalf. They are at the centre of their own development. Parents play a leading role in guiding and supporting the development of children, with the children taking increasing responsibility as they grow older. In every decision and process, the participation of the child is key. As they grow to become young adults, they take increasing responsibility for the decisions in their life. They also contribute to improvements in their own family, community and programme.

We do all this through the professional structure of a development plan, initiated as soon as a child or family enters our programme. Each plan starts with a thorough assessment and is tailored to the situation of the individual child or family. We also invite other relevant stakeholders such as social workers, teachers and psychologists to participate. We monitor the implementation of the plan on an ongoing basis and update it at least annually.

The development planning process also informs us about the results we achieve for each individual child and family and enables us to continuously improve our programme and increase our impact.

### Strengthening families towards self-reliance



Commitment and capacity of caregiver to be an effective parent



Sufficient family resources



Access to essential services

### Improving a child's well-being and development in all key aspects of life



Care



Accommodation



Education & skills



Protection and social inclusion



Food security



Physical health



Livelihood



Social and emotional well-being



Photo: Danielle Pereira



## We promote education and prepare children and young people for independent life



**We commit to ensure that every young adult who leaves our care has the necessary education, skills and work ethic to find a stable job and live a decent life.**

From the moment children enter alternative care we start preparing them for an independent life. We know that the first years in a child’s life are crucial for their future development. Therefore, we pay particular attention to early childhood development. We ensure that all children in our care receive appropriate care, stimulation and support to overcome traumas from their past and build resilience.

We also ensure that children and young people have access to quality education and support them to acquire a wide variety of skills throughout the care process. In doing so, we promote equal access, with particular attention to children at risk of being discriminated, including girls and children with disabilities.

Education is not limited to academic studies, and we also empower care givers to support the educational development of their children. This support includes encouraging them to develop life skills and values so that they can increasingly take control of their lives. We also promote the employability of young people by engaging with public authorities, decision-makers and partners. We make sure that they can benefit from a range of support measures such as career coaching or internships.

In order to make the transition to independent life as smooth as possible, we implement a tailored and participatory leaving care process. Whether a young person moves to youth accommodation or stays within an SOS family, the decision is made by the SOS parent and the young person. The choice is considered from every angle and based on the maturity, aspirations and best interests of the young person.

Once a young person has left our care, we offer clearly defined after care support for relevant areas of their life. We also recognise that not all young people need after care support and that we cannot support young people forever. Thus, after care support will be limited to specific areas of need and will decrease over time. We also make sure that young people can maintain life-long family ties and seek support from their SOS families after they have left care.

Support areas for an independent life	
Early Childhood development	Provide quality support for early childhood development
	Offer stable relationships starting from a young age
Education	Ensure access to quality education
	Empower care-givers to promote early childhood development and education
Employability	Ensure availability of support services (career coaching, internships,...)
	Ensure life skills development
Leaving care	Provide intensive and holistic preparation for an independent life
	Ensure ongoing participation of young people
After care	Focus on specific areas of need and gradually decrease support
	Enable maintaining life-long ties with SOS families

# 9

## We partner for supporting services and child rights

**GUARANTEED**

**We commit to focus on our care expertise and partner for supporting services such as education, health and economic empowerment. In doing so, we work together to meet development needs and secure child rights.**

Children and their families need access to various essential services to support their healthy development. We focus on what we do best – care – and we partner with specialised organisations to provide supporting services.

We demand from governments to assume their responsibility to promote the rights of our target group and to assure access to essential services. We work towards achieving this long-term goal, actively engaging with them and enhancing what they are already doing.

In exceptional situations where neither the government nor other partners can provide essential services but we are able to do so, we step in to fill the gap. We do so for a defined period only and continuously engage with the government and specialised organisations so that they can take over.

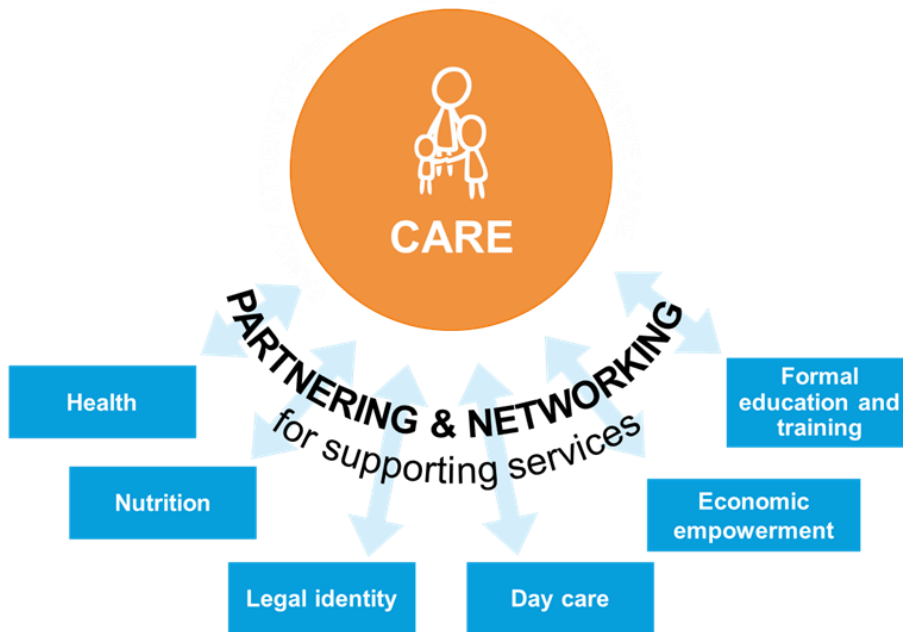


Photo: Katerina Ilievska



Photo: Sylvain Cherkaoui