

Child protection systems in Europe: focus on family strengthening

Taken from
*Unequal Childhoods: Rights on paper
should be rights in practice*
Eurochild 2025 flagship report on children
in need across Europe.



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On 20 November – World Children’s Day – Eurochild released its flagship report on children in need, titled Unequal Childhoods: Rights on paper should be rights in practice, which compiles information from 84 members across 36 countries in Europe. This sub-report synthesises evidence on child protection issues and the prevention of family separation.

Glossary

For ease of reference, this report begins with a glossary of key terms related to child protection systems and alternative care. These definitions clarify concepts frequently used throughout the report to support precise and consistent interpretation. Further terms can be found in the Data Care Project¹:

Institutional care

Residential care where residents are isolated from the broader community and/or compelled to live together; Residents do not have sufficient control over their lives and over decisions that affect them; and the requirements of the organisation itself tend to take precedence over the residents’ individualised needs. Size is an important factor when developing new services in the community: smaller and more personalised living arrangements are more likely to ensure opportunities for the choices and self-determination of service users and to provide a needs-led service.

Residential care

Refers to small-scale, community-based living arrangements for children who cannot live with their families. These settings aim to replicate a family-like environment.

Prevention of family separation

In the context of alternative care, prevention includes a wide range of approaches that support family life and prevent the need for the child to be placed in alternative care, in other words, to be separated from his/her immediate or extended family or other carer.

Family strengthening

Family strengthening refers to a set of policies, services, and supports designed to help families provide safe, nurturing, and stable care so children can remain safely at home. It can include financial assistance, parenting support, counselling, accessible health and social services, inclusive education, and community-based interventions that reduce stress, build resilience, and address the root causes of vulnerability.

¹ Glossary from the Data Care Project.

1. Introduction

Child protection systems are not just a collection of agencies and procedures. At their best, they are how a society fulfils its promise to keep children safe – through laws, policies, services, and cross-sector cooperation to prevent violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Crucially, they also determine what happens when a child can no longer safely live at home: whether families are supported to stay together, whether a child enters family-based alternative care, or is placed in residential care, including in institutions.

The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children are clear that children should not be separated from their parents unless necessary and in their best interests. The principles of necessity and suitability outline the measures that states must put in place to ensure that every child grows up in a family or family-based care environment.

However, in many European countries, these principles remain insufficiently implemented and require greater attention. Weak, fragmented, and under-resourced child protection systems risk:

- Children are removed because their families are poor, discriminated against, or unable to access services such as adequate housing or services for people with disabilities.
- Institutional care or punitive measures are used instead of early intervention, family strengthening and community-based support.
- Migration and asylum policies actively create or prolong family separation and undermine the right to family life.

This sub-report draws on the country profiles in *Unequal Childhoods: Rights on Paper Should Be Rights in Practice*, with a strong focus on how systems prevent – or fail to prevent – family separation.

Across Europe, legal commitments to protect family life often coexist with policy choices that undermine prevention. Some governments have adopted explicit strategies to keep children with their families and build the services needed to make this possible. Others continue enacting restrictive or punitive measures that increase the likelihood of separation.

2. Promising frameworks

In several countries, laws and national strategies explicitly aim to keep children with their families and family-based care. These commitments are backed by concrete mechanisms.

Albania has created a national Social Fund, instrumental in funding community-based services that prevent institutionalisation and strengthen family-based care. As part of a wider deinstitutionalisation agenda, Albania is transforming residential facilities into community-based services and expanding foster care and family reintegration. CSOs have

contributed to developing a Foster Care Law, training professionals in the judiciary, promoting positive parenting, and strengthening capacity.

Belgium (Flanders) has shaped its child protection system around “prevention of family separation wherever possible”. Foster care is the first option when children need to be placed in alternative care, and innovative forms like “support family foster care” help parents through crises rather than replacing them. The government has announced plans (2024-2029) to expand the integrated, family-based care where children and parents receive support together. Confidential Centres on Child Abuse play a central role in early detection and cross-sector coordination of services for children at risk.

Poland’s Act on Family Support and the Alternative Care System governs the placement of children in alternative care. It also outlines support systems for households in vulnerable situations, specifically for parents, to prevent unnecessary separation. The amendments in the Act of October 2022 were intended to increase remuneration for professional foster parents and those running family-type children’s homes. It also introduced restrictions on the opening of new institutional care facilities and the requirement to obtain the Ombudsman for Children’s opinion for any planned additional care institution, gradually pushing the system toward family strengthening and family-based care.

Ukraine is advancing significant reforms to prevent separation. Reforms to maternity and children’s homes aim to support young mothers and babies who lack safe housing, so that poverty or homelessness do not automatically lead to separation. Ukraine is implementing a better care reform (deinstitutionalisation) that explicitly shifts away from residential care toward family- and community-based services, prioritising prevention and early intervention, community social services, inclusive education, disability-responsive support, foster and kinship care, and small family-type homes (only as a last resort), supported by strengthened case management, in alignment with UNCRC and EU child-rights standards. Multi-year strategies and action plans with municipal support for the reform.

Moldova has invested in day centres that support children and parents together. One model centre by CONCORDIA Moldova focuses on preventing family separation, school drop-out, and domestic violence. The care reform, including a moratorium on placing children under three in residential institutions and an expansion of foster families, has helped reduce the number of children in institutions dramatically, from around 12,000 in 2007 to fewer than 500 in 2024.

Estonia has amended its Child Protection Act to improve early identification, data protection, and support for children with high care needs. In 2025, it strengthened professionals’ (e.g. teachers, health workers, youth leaders) duty to identify and report concerns about children in need, aligning with best practice in early detection and multi-agency responses. New regulations and funding support foster, guardianship, and adoptive families, with active recruitment of crisis and specialist foster carers to reduce institutional care. The Parenting Support Action Plan (2024–2030) aims to build parental capacity and prevent separation. Estonia is also upskilling professionals in preventing sexual abuse and

providing trauma-informed care and developing a system to gather feedback from children and families to guide improvements in child protection services.

Finland is in the process of reforming the Child Welfare Act. Despite the strengths of the Nordic welfare model, which emphasises early family support, CSOs argue that a more comprehensive overhaul is needed and demonstrate in their report how effective early preventive services can be.

Collectively, these examples show that when prevention is a deliberate policy goal, countries design funding instruments, services, and legal safeguards around family support and care in the community. Services and instruments are designed with one central question in mind: *What will it take to keep this child safely with their family or in a family-like environment?*

3. Policy decisions that undermine prevention

In other contexts, recent legal and policy choices have moved in the opposite direction – increasing the risk of separation, prolonging it, or making it harder to reunify families.

Germany has suspended family reunification for people with subsidiary protection - a status granted when neither refugee protection nor an entitlement to asylum is granted, but where return would expose a person to serious harm. For children, this means long and sometimes indefinite separation from parents and siblings, despite having a recognised protection need – in clear tension with their right to family life.

Austria has also suspended family reunification for some children with asylum status and continues to rely on a medical model that segregates children with disabilities in residential settings. This reinforces institutional, segregated care rather than investing in inclusive services in the communities.

In **Denmark**, despite a well-developed child protection system with a strong legal framework, the recent adoption of the Children's Act has reduced legal safeguards and increased professional discretion. There is limited support to prevent separation or reunification; due to this, forced adoptions are on the rise. This signals a move towards more intrusive interventions without a corresponding focus on early help and family strengthening.

England's child protection system is currently undergoing significant reform, including proposals for a new national Child Protection Authority and new local Family Help and Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams (MACPTs). Over the last 14+ years, preventative support has been significantly weakened. Spending on early intervention services has fallen steeply; over 1,000 children's centres and 750 youth centres have closed, and there is no national reunification strategy. The result is more children entering care and staying there longer because the scaffolding that keeps families together has been stripped away.

Bulgaria continues to see high rates of separation, even though legislation prioritises family-based measures; 25–30% of at-risk children are separated, and around 35% of them are placed in residential care. According to the same [national study](#), the main reasons for child–family separation are “rooted in poverty, often combined with parental ill-health, domestic violence, lack of education and employment, social isolation, and inadequate housing.”

Bosnia and Herzegovina has some institutional mechanisms in place to support child protection; however, since the expiry of the last national action plan on children’s rights in 2018, no new strategy has been adopted to guide and coordinate child protection efforts. Institutional care still dominates over community-based services, and measures to prevent family separation remain underdeveloped.

Greece reports that institutional care still dominates and that measures to prevent family separation remain underdeveloped. Family separation is the preferred option in many cases of child abuse or neglect, with insufficient attention to preventing separation and supporting vulnerable families. Lack of coordination and communication between ministries and public authorities leads to delays or non-implementation of legal provisions.

Hungary has shifted toward law enforcement and sanctions following a scandal. Newborn babies can spend months in the hospital waiting for placements because care options and preventive services are so limited, and there have been no meaningful steps to avoid unnecessary separations at birth.

France faces significant strain across its child protection system: staff shortages, children waiting for placements or placed in hotels, and insufficient early intervention and support undermine the principle of family unity.

Czechia lacks strong national coordination, and despite the closure of baby institutions, preventive services remain limited and inconsistently applied. Legislative gaps, including the absence of a ban on corporal punishment, further weaken protection.

Cyprus reports limited preventive capacity, with unaccompanied children often placed in institutional settings due to inadequate housing and community-based services.

Across Europe, an apparent inconsistency persists: some systems have the right laws but limited implementation; others have adopted policies that directly increase separation.

4. Recommendations

Behind every decision to remove a child is a complex family story. Yet across countries, three powerful structural drivers repeatedly emerge: poverty and social exclusion, discrimination and marginalisation, and migration and asylum policies that fail to safeguard children and families.

The following recommendations aim to address these structural challenges, building on the Eurochild flagship recommendations and the specific evidence from the country profiles:

1. Make prevention of unnecessary family separation an explicit policy objective

- Embed the right not to be separated from parents unless it is in the child's best interest (CRC Articles 9 & 20) across all national child protection and social protection strategies.
- Require that all decisions to remove a child document why family support options were insufficient or unavailable.

2. Invest in comprehensive family support and early intervention

- Scale up community-based social services, day centres, parenting support, mental health services, home-visiting programmes (including pre-natal), and social work outreach, especially in poor, rural and marginalised communities.
- Provide holistic support - financial assistance, counselling, and psychosocial services - to address the full spectrum of family needs.

3. Address structural drivers of separation, including poverty, discrimination and migration policies

- Prohibit removal of children solely on the grounds of family poverty, inadequate housing or parental disability in line with the EC recommendation on integrated child protection systems
- Expand income support, housing assistance and employment schemes targeted to families most at risk, to ensure that economic hardship does not result in care entries.
- Ensure migration and asylum policies prioritise family unity, restore family reunification procedures, and avoid child or family detention, with child protection standards guiding all decisions.

4. Strengthen family-based alternative care and reunification support

- Prioritise foster and kinship care as the default options when children cannot remain at home, ensuring adequate recruitment, training, and professional and financial support – including for children with disabilities.
- Reinforce reunification efforts and invest into family support and post-placement services.

5. Develop Integrated, Accountable, and Participatory Child Protection Systems aligned with the EC Recommendation

- Link social protection, health, education, justice and migration services through joint protocols and joint case management.
- Collect and publish disaggregated data on reasons for separation, types of placements, duration in care, reunification rates and outcomes, with specific attention to Roma, migrant, and disabled children.

- Include children with lived experience of care, and families who have received preventive support, as equal partners in the co-design of services, monitoring frameworks, and complaint mechanisms.

6. Conclusion

Child protection systems across the countries show a persistent gap between commitments on paper and what families experience in practice. Many policies now say children should grow up in families and in the community, yet too often separation still happens because preventive support is missing, late, or too weak. Poverty, discrimination, and restrictive migration policies continue to push families into crisis, and systems still respond more easily with removal than with sustained help at home. Moreover, thousands of children are still growing up in harmful institutions across Europe, which has a detrimental effect on their future lives.

To close the gap between rights and practice, countries must shift from reacting to crises to strengthening families early. By implementing the recommendations from this report, child protection systems can move closer to their core purpose: prevent and respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation, and family separation by ensuring children grow up safe, supported, and in environments that promote their best interests. Separation should be used only as a measure of last resort, and every child must have access to adequate family-based care.

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