# Types of Alternative Care

Content in this handout has been drawn from:

* Interagency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children (2013) [Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit](https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/ace_toolkit_0.pdf/), published by Save the Children on behalf of the Interagency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children.
* UNHCR (2021) [Guidelines on supervised independent living for unaccompanied children](https://www.unhcr.org/media/guidelines-supervised-independent-living-unaccompanied-children)
* UN General Assembly (2009), [Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children: resolution](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/673583?ln=en)

# Residential Care

## Characteristics

A group-living arrangement in a specially designated facility where salaried staff or volunteers ensure care on a shift basis. Residential care is an umbrella term that includes:

* Short- and long-term placements in institutions,
* Small-group homes,
* Places of safety for emergency care, and
* Transit centers.

## Considerations

All residential care facilities must be registered and independently inspected by the relevant authorities.

If the quality of care is unknown, a child should not be placed in the facility until a minimum inspection has been completed. For example, large groups of children and high numbers of children per caregiver are two key indicators that the quality of care is low.

The level of care provision in all forms of alternative care should be assessed regularly against an agreed set of standards that are based on the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (United Nations) or national policy/law.

Residential care should only be used as a last resort since risk factors often outweigh protective factors. If residential care is the only option, be used only as a short-term measure until family or community-based care alternatives can be developed, or where it is specifically appropriate, necessary, and constructive for the individual child. Caseworkers should encourage families to care for their children. More specifically, residential care is not the right place for children under three due to their specific needs.

# Kinship Care

## Characteristics

Kinship care is family-based care within the child’s extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, whether formal or informal in nature.

## Considerations

Kinship care often offers the best option and should be considered first, in compliance with national legislation where relevant. However, while kinship care can provide good quality care it should never be assumed that because children are with extended family they are protected or no longer need to be reunited with birth family.

In some parts of the world kinship care is not traditionally used as a way of protecting and caring for a child who is without his or her family but is a means of exchange for the perceived benefit of the birth family, caregiver, or the child.

# Foster Care

**Characteristics**

Situations where children are cared for in a household outside their family. Fostering is usually understood to be a temporary arrangement, and in most cases the birth parents retain their parental rights and responsibilities. The care arrangement is administered by a competent authority whereby a child is placed in the domestic environment of a family who:

* Have been selected, prepared and authorized to provide such care, and
* Are supervised and may be financially and/or non-financially supported in doing so.

Foster care also refers to traditional or informal arrangements which do not involve a third party though may be endorsed or supported by the community and can involve entitlements and obligations on both sides.

## Considerations

Foster care type arrangements can arise spontaneously in emergencies where families take care of a child who is unrelated or unknown to them.

* Such arrangements should be identified in a way which does not disrupt the care arrangement in order to assess the quality of care and the need for family tracing, to register and institute follow up and monitoring where necessary;
* In some societies, it is not considered acceptable for children to live with unrelated carers; foster care may still be possible but cultural norms must be carefully taken into consideration;
* In other societies there will be a strong tradition of community responsibilities for children - this does not necessarily mean that children cared for in this way will be provided he same level of care as children born to the family.

While foster care can provide good quality care it should never be assumed that because children are with a family they are protected or no longer need to be reunited with birth family. In some parts of the world foster care is not traditionally used as a way of protecting and caring for a child who is without his or her family but is a means of exchange for the perceived benefit of the birth family, caregiver or the child.

# Supervised/Supported Independent Living

## Characteristics

Supervised/supported independent living arrangements refers to a care arrangement where an individual or group of children, who may or may not be related, live independently within a community i.e., are not cared for within a family or residential care setting, including child headed households (where younger children are cared for by an older child/ren) and peer groups (where children are of a similar age).

Children may be supported or supervised by a community member, specially appointed and trained mentor (who may be supervised by a caseworker) and/or by a caseworker. This can be an effective arrangement for children for whom it is difficult to find foster care (e.g., adolescent boys) and/or children who may find it difficult to settle in a family environment.

**Key Points:**

* The child or children live without full-time adult care.
* Suitable for children no younger than 15 years of age, except in the case of younger children living with an older sibling who is 15 years or above, where it is in their best interests.
* Arrangements can be spontaneous or organized by an external actor.

## Mentor

* A trained and trusted adult, who is assigned or assumes the responsibility of providing guidance and support to a child or groups of children *(Adapted from Guidelines on supervised independent living for unaccompanied children, UNHCR (2019))*
* A mentor is usually a more experienced or knowledgeable person from the community, perhaps a member of a community-based group, or in some cases mentors can be employed by local authorities.
* A mentor helps the child deal with day-to-day challenges, provides them with appropriate support and care, and connects them to prospects for personal growth and development, and social and economic opportunities.
* Mentors do not usually live with children, but regularly visit them and provide them with the necessary support.
* A mentor has no legal responsibility for the child/ren and is unlikely to be referred to in national laws.
* A mentor should not be confused with a guardian who is generally appointed by national jurisdictions to safeguard a child’s best interests and general well-being.
* Where there is a mentor and a guardian it is important that they are in communication, so they are giving the child/ren similar messages.

# Small Group Homes

## Characteristics

Supervised/supported independent living arrangements refers to a care arrangement where an individual or group of children, who may or may not be related, live independently within a community i.e., are not cared for within a family or residential care setting, including child headed households (where younger children are cared for by an older child/ren) and peer groups (where children are of a similar age).

Children may be supported or supervised by a community member, specially appointed and trained mentor (who may be supervised by a caseworker) and/or by a caseworker. This can be an effective arrangement for children for whom it is difficult to find foster care (e.g., adolescent boys) and/or children who may find it difficult to settle in a family environment.

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