The UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Region works to keep children with their families and pushes for effective child-care systems that keep families together wherever possible. UNICEF also strives to end the institutionalization of children, and campaigns for an immediate end to the institutionalization of children under the age of three.

UNICEF’s work in this area has three core elements: First, the prevention of family separation, including outreach to the most vulnerable families to catch problems before they spiral out of control; second, improve the care and protection of children who are already in care to protect them against violence, neglect and abuse, ensure they have proper access to justice; and third, support the development of community-based social services that help to keep families together and reunify children from alternative care back to their families.

Europe and Central Asia has the highest numbers of children separated from their families worldwide. The impact of child separation and institutionalization is severe and can last a lifetime. Children placed in institutions are often deprived of social, emotional and intellectual stimulation, and are vulnerable to abuse, violence and neglect.

Social norms in many countries in the region contribute to the separation of children from their families, particularly for children with disabilities. It is still common for families to be told that they are incapable of taking care of children who need special support or protection. As a result, large residential institutions are still considered acceptable places for these children.

An understanding of the harm to children of institutional care is gathering momentum among governments and civil society. After decades of evidence-based advocacy and policy dialogue, many governments have led reforms to close or transform large institutions and replace them with family based alternative care (including foster care), and family support services to prevent children from being separated from their families. While there is still a need to recall the evidence, and re-assert the principles, there is no longer a global or regional debate about the need to reform child care systems away from institutions and towards families and communities.

Europe and Central Asia has been at the forefront of this momentum, with UNICEF supporting governments in leading reform efforts. Reforms, though moving well, require continued investment and momentum. In all contexts, social norms around institutional care, especially for children with disabilities, is of particular importance. Establishing high quality family and community based care and preventive services requires a multi-sectoral approach as well as efforts at community level to overcome the stigma and discrimination associated with disability.

While de-institutionalization is an entry point for reforming the child care system, it is not an end goal in and of itself. The process of deinstitutionalization leads to diversified family-based alternative care services at community level and to the development of family support services. These services need to be maintained, improved and expanded, including through setting standards, ensuring monitoring and support, and sustaining and expanding national budgets for these services.

For UNICEF, the issue of child protection, including de-institutionalization and child care reform, is closely linked to broader social protection reform. Linkages between the two areas continue to be essential to successfully support governments in larger reform efforts that have an impact on child care.

Child care reform and family support is a key priority area for UNICEF across the region. The Europe and Central Asia Regional Office continues to lead the development of solutions and strategies for child care reform, with partnerships at the regional level being particularly important.