



Care for Children
A world of children in families

 Yerevan, Armenia

South Caucasus & Middle East Family Placement Conference

September 29 & 30, 2023

Conference Report

#BELIEVE
IN FAMILY







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Preface

This report provides an overview of the South Caucasus and Middle East Family Placement Conference co-organized and co-hosted by the *Republic of Armenia Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MLSA)* and *Care for Children* on 29-30 September 2023, in Yerevan, Armenia.



This conference built on the success of initial meetings between *MLSA* and *Care for Children* held in Armenia in January 2023, followed by a three-year Memorandum of Understanding signed in the UK in July 2023. It brought together over 200 participants including international and local experts, government officials, childcare practitioners, and NGOs, as well as government representatives from Lebanon, UAE, Syria, Iran, India, Vietnam and Cambodia.

The two days included inspiring keynote speeches, presentations, introductory workshops, and interactive Q&A sessions from foreign ministers, ambassadors, international representatives and the *Care for Children* team.



The first day of the conference focused on the global agenda and context of family placement, building consensus around the importance of family care within and between nations. The second day was aimed at practitioners, focusing in more detail on some of the elements of the family placement process, including topics such as therapeutic life story work and supporting children with disabilities.

The conference took place amidst a backdrop of heightened tensions between Armenia and neighbouring Azerbaijan, impacting the presence of certain government delegations and necessitating a last-minute change in venue. *Care for Children* wishes to express its profound appreciation for *MLSA's* unwavering dedication and strenuous efforts in ensuring the successful execution of the conference.

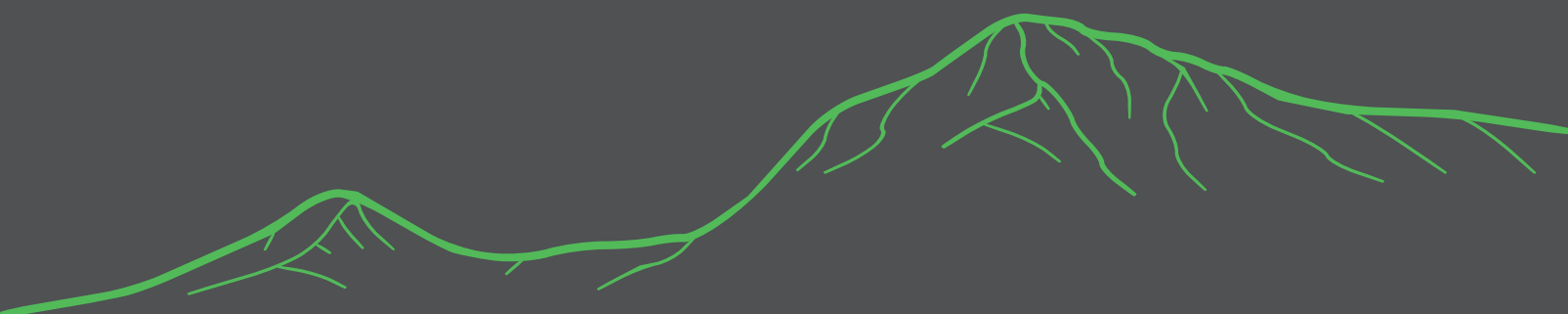
Welcome address

Narek Mkrtchyan

Minister of Labour and Social Affairs of the Republic of Armenia



Mr Mkrtchyan inaugurated the conference with a warm and gracious welcome to the delegates. He underscored the conference's significance as a prime platform for continuing the development of Armenia's family care program, while also extending the invitation to other nations to embark on similar journeys. He enthusiastically encouraged all delegates to engage in collaborative knowledge-sharing.






*We are very happy to host the first of three conferences, which **will bring international best-practice here to Armenia** and help develop our family care programme.*

Mr Narek Mkrtchyan

Minister of Labour and Social Affairs of the Republic of Armenia





*We need a different approach through family care. We're here today to learn. **Raising awareness around these subjects is a priority.***

Ms Zaruhi Batoyan

Member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia



Keynote speeches

Ms Zaruhi Batoyan

Member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia



Ms Batoyan, Member of Parliament and former Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, gave an enlightening keynote speech, which centred on the current provision of institutional care in Armenia and some of the key challenges and opportunities involved in reforming its child welfare system.



*If you decide on the same journey [as the UK], with the help of Care for Children, **we will travel together and support each other along the way.***

Lord Laming

*British social worker
and member of the
House of Lords*



Lord Laming joined the conference through an online call to share the journey that Britain had undergone in improving child welfare, moving away from institutional care. Lord Laming emphasized the importance of early childhood experiences in shaping individuals and highlighted the need for children to feel loved and secure in a family setting.

Keynote speeches

Ms Tatevik Stepanyan

*Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Affairs
of the Republic of Armenia*

Ms Stepanyan provided a comprehensive insight into the Armenian childcare system, highlighting key ongoing changes that prioritize proactive prevention measures. She emphasized the need for inter-agency collaboration, particularly with health and education departments, to drive these improvements. Ms Stepanyan also pointed out that a significant challenge lies in expanding family care services for children with disabilities and learning difficulties.

Keynote speeches


Ms Christine Weigand

UNICEF Representative in Armenia



In her keynote speech, Ms Weigand gave an informative overview of the global agenda on childcare and a global view of the importance of family placement and foster care.





*The theme of the conference is a very critical one and it's also a very relevant one, in a very **difficult situation that we're currently living through in Armenia** with so many children and families arriving who will need all of our support.*

Ms Christine Weigand
UNICEF Representative in Armenia



*Our gathering today holds immense significance as we delve into a topic that is not only dear to our hearts but also **integral to the well-being of the future generations of the Middle East.***

Dr Robert Glover OBE

Founder and Executive Director, Care for Children

Keynote speeches

Dr Robert Glover OBE

*Founder and Executive Director,
Care for Children*



In his address to the conference delegates, Dr Glover emphasized the importance of family care over institutional care for the well-being of children. He highlighted research supporting this perspective, including Bowlby's attachment theory, which underscores the significance of parental attachments in a child's development.



Keynote speeches


Mr Edward Timpson CBE KC MP

Member of Parliament of the United Kingdom



In his keynote speech, Mr Timpson recounted his early life and how his parents fostered 90 children over 30 years. This made a big impression and impact on him and his outlook on life, influencing his move into family law and then politics, where he took on the role of Minister for Children and Families between 2015 and 2017. Mr Timpson emphasised the importance and impact on children of growing up in a loving family, and the potential consequences in later life of not growing up within this environment, using examples and statistics from the UK context.





I'm here because, like Care for Children, I'm a passionate believer in the power of family and community to help heal the vulnerable and bring stability, hope and love into children's lives.

Mr Edward Timpson CBE KC MP
Member of Parliament of the United Kingdom



International speeches

We were thrilled to welcome a number of foreign ministers, ambassadors, and international representatives to the conference. Many of them shared insights about family care practices in their respective nations and underscored the value of knowledge exchange and collaborative efforts to enhance the well-being of orphans and vulnerable children worldwide.



*This conference enables us to **learn from your knowledge and listen to your success stories** and also challenges us to adopt a path towards alternative family based-care.*



Dr Hector Hajjar
Minister of Social Affairs of Lebanon





*Let us remember that family is the cornerstone of any **society** and through collective efforts, compassion and dedication we can ensure their protection and well-being. Let us continue to work hand in hand across borders and boundaries to build a world where every family can thrive and flourish.*



H.E. Asma Al Azri

Executive Director of the Family Cases Sector of the UAE



*We believe that with joint action and the participation from different actors we could **make the changes that are needed to benefit society.***



Ms Nazi Burduladze

*Women's Economic Justice Program
Director at CARE Caucasus*



Workshops

Over the two days, the *Care for Children* team delivered a number of informative workshops, including topics such as therapeutic life story work, supporting children with disabilities, and assessing family carers.

Dr Nina Zhang: *Attachment Theory*

“Being both physically and emotionally available to children is so important.”

Dr Zhang introduced the concept of attachment theory, a psychological framework exploring how early emotional bonds between caregivers and infants shape lifelong emotional and relational development. She enlivened the discussion with compelling examples from her experience with *Care for Children* and her personal life.



Ms Chau Nguyen: *Placing Children with Disabilities*

“The topic on placing children with disabilities into family care is a very big one, but one of the biggest concerns that people have is about how to ensure that children can receive stability and permanence once they’re in family care.”

Ms Nguyen confidently delved into the topic of family placement for children with disabilities, discussing the challenges faced by families and what support they need to ensure a safe and stable placement. Ms Nguyen also emphasized the role of laws and government policies in upholding care standards for children with disabilities.

Ms Emma Zhang: *Assessment of Families*

This workshop provided an opportunity to discuss the vital importance of selecting and assessing prospective family carers; why the assessment needs to be competency-based; and which competencies are likely to predict successful placement outcomes. Ms Zhang also introduced the assessment framework that can be used as a tool to select family carers.

1 Making a good assessment



When we assess the carers, we need to be comprehensive, we need to be objective, we need to collect all the required information – there is a need to make sure children are safe and their well-being is guaranteed.

Workshops



Ms Erin Wang: *Supporting Families*

“Practical support is important, but also emotional support is important too, because fostering can be a really challenging job – it’s a group of ordinary people doing an extraordinary job.”

Ms Wang introduced the theme of supporting families who are caring for orphans and vulnerable children, drawing from her extensive experience with *Care for Children*. This encompassed the significance of providing emotional, financial, and psychological support to family carers and the children in their care.

Mr Tim Taylor: *Therapeutic Life Story Work*

“As I talk about a specific practice of therapeutic life story work, we really want to be thinking about what it’s really like for a child to go through a very disruptive and chaotic childhood.”



Mr Taylor initiated a discussion on therapeutic life story work, a process focused on delving into and comprehending an individual’s personal narrative, experiences, and emotions to facilitate healing and personal development. Mr Taylor illustrated this topic with compelling examples drawn from his own childhood and personal experiences, bringing it to life for the audience.



Presentations

On day two of the conference, the delegates were introduced to a number of interesting topics, including using technology to raise awareness of family care, and key learnings from *Care for Children's* 20+ year experience in China.

Mr Sun Yuan Jie: *A Change to a Child Welfare System - Learnings from China*

"I was very privileged to be part of the China project and to witness the whole progress of it."

Mr Sun shared insights into the complexities of introducing family care into an existing child welfare system. He highlighted challenges and opportunities, and demonstrated effective strategies for guiding authorities in embracing change.



Mr Matthew Gao: *Mobilizing and Motivating Families - Leveraging Innovating Technology to Promote Family Placement*

"Care for Children's vision is to see a world of children in families but the focus of the message is very simple. We want to demonstrate and share to the world the transformative power of family love."

Using the example of a national awareness campaign in Thailand, Mr Gao showcased the role of technology in inspiring and mobilizing individuals to become family carers.


Mr Thomas Abbott: *What's next? Care for Children's digital training resource called 'My Family'*

"We came up with a new vision... for a world of children in families. Can you get a bigger vision? No! But that means we have to put a strategy together to meet that vision."

Mr Abbott introduced *Care for Children's* ground-breaking 'My Family' product, a global digital training resource. In his presentation, he provided delegates with a preview of the platform, emphasizing its importance in extending *Care for Children's* training to Armenia and the broader region.



Reflections from family carers



*I've been doing it for 3 years but I still need to be encouraged and motivated. My advice is for anyone who can do it, **they should do it now, there is no better time.***

We were delighted to welcome two foster mothers who candidly shared their family care journeys with the conference delegates. They expressed their motivations for becoming family carers and delved into the challenges they've faced, as well as the numerous benefits they've experienced.

*"As well as my 32-year-old daughter, I now have two 5-year-old twin boys who I am fostering. This has changed our family significantly. It was so good for my daughter and I feel so much better in my heart. **The children have taught me to be patient.**"*



Panel discussion

An expert panel, comprising Mr Robert Glover, Ms Nina Zhang, Ms Emma Zhang, and Mr Tim Taylor, addressed a range of challenging audience questions, delving into the following topics.

- Family care for children with health problems.
- Family care for abused children.
- Kinship care.
- Transitioning from family care to adoption.
- Managing birth family contact for children in family care.





*That's why we came up with permanent foster care and permanence [in China]. That is what we believe in because it's a great combination - **a partnership between a family that takes a child in and raises that child on a day-to-day basis**, and the government whose responsibility is the medical, educational and special support services for the child.*

Mr Robert Glover



"It's a very difficult thing to take on a child with a disability, so we know we're asking a lot when we're asking families to take on these children, love them, care for them day by day.

"So we need to make sure in all of our mechanisms that we are valuing these family carers. We heard from the amazing Armenian foster carer earlier who said that she still needs encouragement even though she's achieved so much and she's worked so hard. The power of encouragement is actually amazing."

Mr Tim Taylor

Reflections from delegates

We are not alone. We feel heard and listened to. So many of our problems and challenges are shared by you and the countries you work in.



VERY SATISFIED SOMEWHAT SATISFIED NEUTRAL SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED VERY DISSATISFIED

“Today, I feel hope for Armenia.”

“I would like such conferences to be held more often in Armenia, and for Armenian specialists to actively inform the population about the institution of a ‘foster family’”.

“Tim Taylor’s speech was really emotional and interesting. It has inspired me to become a foster parent and help as many children as possible.”

“It is very important for our country to see and adopt international experience.”

“I think the panel discussion was one of the best parts. It gave an opportunity to exchange ideas and thoughts about family care differences between Armenia and other countries.”





Concluding remarks

This first of its kind conference was a platform for sharing knowledge and international best practices and highlighted the global importance of family placement and family care. Delegates expressed hope and enthusiasm for the continued development of Armenia's family care program, with this sentiment echoed by many of the international delegations. We hope this extraordinary gathering will cement existing relationships while opening doors to many exciting new opportunities across the region.

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