

Social workers can help children more effectively by assessing the needs of the whole family, says study

January 13 2024, by Chris Desmond and Kathryn Watt



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What do children need most? The answer often depends on a person's relationship with the child.

When people think about [children](#) outside their [family](#) and close friends, they commonly make [basic needs](#) the priorities. Food, shelter and services such as health and education come first.

When we think of children we have a close relationship with, it's different. We see all their needs as [important, immediate and interconnected](#).

People give as much priority to the [higher-order needs](#) as the [basic needs](#) of children they're close to.

This thinking carries over into policymaking and intervention priorities in low and [middle-income countries](#). As a result, many interventions in the lives of other people's children, such as responses to a [refugee crisis](#) and alternative care for children, put basic needs first.

Our [research](#) in the fields of sociology and development economics suggests that children's needs are not hierarchical and that they are best met by—and in—families. By drawing on examples from the literature, we outline how children's various needs are equally important. Caring for them is therefore a balancing act, best done by those close to them: their families.

This way of thinking highlights the importance of supporting families to support children. Social services are critical because they have the potential to facilitate the intensive interventions required by the most vulnerable families and children. The quality of such a service will be key in meeting the needs of other people's children.

Family-centered interventions, more often than not, meet the [complex needs](#) of individual children.

It is important to note that family can take many forms, not necessarily

biological. The key characteristics are connection, proximity and responsiveness to children leading to nurturing care.

In many low- and middle-income countries, the social services workforce is [under-resourced, underqualified and overburdened](#).

The political weakness of the sector and the people they serve make [advocating for change](#) difficult. Moreover, the task of [strengthening](#) the social services workforce may be seen as overly complex and costly.

Helping families will help children

Highlighting the role of the family draws the [discussion](#) towards how best to support the family. We highlight three tiers of support:

- Universal enabling interventions: These create the supportive environment all families need. National security, civil and [human rights](#), safe communities, schooling and health care are clear examples. For well-functioning, well-resourced families, these universal interventions are all they need to support their children's development.
- Targeted family strengthening for some: These improve families' capacity to look after children by weakening or removing barriers to care. For example, social protection interventions such as cash transfers give caregivers access to a range of resources and services they would not otherwise have. For many families, these may be the only additional support they require.
- Critical family functioning interventions for the most vulnerable: These families require intensive internal intervention involving direct, skilled and sustained interaction at an individual family level by highly trained [social workers](#).

When internal family function is seriously compromised, and [social](#)

[services](#) fail to intervene, children are put at [profound](#) risk with life-long consequences.

Throughout childhood and particularly in adolescence, compromised family function can increase risks of early marriage, mental health challenges, interpersonal violence, and threats to sexual and reproductive health. These [consequences stretch](#) to the next generation when adolescents become parents with families of their own.

Don't neglect the social workers

Intensive [intervention](#) in critical family function needs to be provided by highly trained personnel. Such high-quality training is rarely done. In many countries such as South Africa, it is available but [uncommon](#).

To be effective, these social workers must be linked to families as soon as possible, have sufficient supervision and support, a manageable workload, access to necessary resources such as transportation, as well as adequate pay to enable adequate attention to the children and families concerned.

The way forward

Governments need to strengthen the social service workforce if they are to support families whose function is highly compromised and whose children are at risk.

The cost to individuals and society of allowing these struggling families to fail in their essential functions is great.

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Citation: Social workers can help children more effectively by assessing the needs of the whole family, says study (2024, January 13) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-01-social-workers-children-effectively-family.html>

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