

Foreword

This issue of *Early Childhood Matters* can be seen as a logical sequence to our previous issue, on responses to young children in post-emergency situations. As explained in that issue, emergencies such as natural and man-made disasters often put children at an increased risk of becoming temporarily or permanently separated from their families and caregivers. Violence, the HIV/AIDS pandemic as well as poverty are other reasons why children can find themselves deprived of parental care.

A growing number of children around the world are currently orphaned or otherwise growing up without parents. These children need care and protection, but social policy, influenced by culture, history, politics and many other factors, heavily determine the type of support a child receives.

One of the three new programme priorities of the Bernard van Leer Foundation is to help strengthen the care environment of the child. It does this through a stronger focus of its grantmaking on work that (1) supports parents and caregivers who are raising children in environments of stress, (2) helps parents and caregivers in their role of assuring children's rights and development and (3) addresses the needs of children without parental care.

The importance of the family in a child's life cannot be overstated as the article on "How poverty separates children and parents" (page 23) indicates. More fundamentally, the Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasises the importance of the family in children's lives. Its preamble notes that "the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and wellbeing of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities" and "the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, and atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding."

But how can the most appropriate use of alternative care be ensured? The Convention of the Rights of the Child (art. 3) says that, in principle, responses should always take into account the best interest of the child. Reality, though, shows that this does not always happen – the frequency with which serious problems are reported regarding care for children in informal or formal fostering (such as kinship care, adoption and residential facilities) suggests that alternative care measures should be better monitored.

In the articles of this issue of *Early Childhood Matters* we point to the lack of clear guidelines for providing adequate care, and we give suggestions on how to improve existing mechanisms. The requirement for international standards is one of the many issues brought up at the "Discussion Day on Children without Parental Care", organised by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva, Switzerland, in September 2005. There is a need for international guidelines that guarantee the appropriateness of the environment in which children grow up. Recommendations arising from that meeting are scheduled for publication in early 2006.

In the following pages, guest editor Nigel Cantwell takes a look at the current state of international thinking on the issue of children without parental care. We are much indebted to him for bringing together a broad range of views from a number of specialists in this area and for his own thought-provoking article. We welcome the views of readers.

Teresa Moreno
Jan van Dongen
Editors