

## **PLACEMENT DISRUPTION IN FOSTER CARE**

### **Abstract**

*This article presents the findings on factors associated with disruption in foster care in the state of Chhattisgarh. The child protection literature suggests that placing vulnerable children in a stable family environment can mitigate the adverse impacts on children's mental health and overall well-being.*

*The study included 24 children aged 6-17 years in foster care in the state. It reviews the incidence and contributing factors for discontinuity and disruptions in foster care and also discusses the related topics, such as the effects of discontinuity and disruptions on children and foster family. As India embraces the caring culture, there is a need to ensure stability in foster families through structured strategies and social innovations.*

### **1. Background**

This article presents findings from the study on factors associated with disruption in foster care. Foster care means, providing a family-based care to a child who is unable to live with biological parents. Article 20 of UNCRC provides protection to children who are deprived of their family life.<sup>1</sup> The States are required to provide non-institutional alternative forms of care, such as foster care or kinship care. Section 2(29) of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 (JJ Act) defines foster care as “*placement of a child by the Committee for the purpose of alternate care in the domestic environment of a family, other than the child's biological family, that has been selected, qualified, approved and supervised for providing such care*”.<sup>2</sup> The underlying goal of foster care is ‘stability’ or ‘permanency’. Stability refers to placement and length of placement, whereas permanency refers to re-unification with biological parents or adoption. The care and protection of children are guided by the fundamental principles of best interest of child<sup>3</sup>, family responsibility<sup>4</sup> and institutionalization as a measure of last resort.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the vision of Mission Vatsalya is to secure a healthy and happy childhood, ensure opportunities to enable

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<sup>1</sup> The UN Commission on Human Rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child., 7 March 1990, E/CN.4/RES/1990/74, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f03d30.html> (last visited on May 09, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 (Act 2 of 2016), s.2(29).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., s.3(iv)

<sup>4</sup> Supra note 2, s.3(v)

<sup>5</sup> Supra note 2, s.3 (xii)

children to discover their full potential and promote family-based non-institutional care with emphasizes on stability.<sup>6</sup>

Centre of Excellence in Alternative Care (CEAC),<sup>7</sup> is engaged in implementing foster care with the support of UNICEF and Department of Women and Child Development in 10 districts of the state of Chhattisgarh since 2022. The process of placement of children with approved foster families takes months and with every new placement, there is a new experience and challenges.

According to Bowlby's attachment theory, the child loses his/her attachment with whom he was attached and this aspect can be brought back by providing alternate family based care in kinship care or foster care.<sup>8</sup> The evidence suggests that placement in a stable family can heal the negative impact of ill-treatment on children's mental health and their well-being.<sup>9</sup> However, there are situations when there is breakdown and disruption become inevitable.

The rate of foster care disruption varies from country to country, but most research indicates that majorly, fostering to adoption are stable placements. According to the Department of Health & Human Services, US the national disruption is 16% where the child has stayed in foster care for less than 12 months. Another longitudinal study states that, between 25% and 50% of foster children experience a disruption in placement and are shifted to new families while in custody of state department.<sup>10</sup> Also, the highest risk of disruption is during the first six months of placement.<sup>11</sup>

A significant challenge in discussing disruptions is the lack of data on foster care and absence of any detailed study across the country. CARA does have a data tracking system

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<sup>6</sup> Mission Vatsalya, 2022, p.1.

<sup>7</sup> Centre of Excellence in Alternative Care, India is working towards promoting and implementing non-institutional family-based care in India, Sri Lanka and Mauritius. Enhancing the knowledge of stakeholders, Strengthening the systems and development of resources to support family-based care is the main

<sup>8</sup> John Bowlby, II Attachment and Loss: Separation Anxiety and Anger, *Basic Books*, New York, (1973).

<sup>9</sup> Berger, L. M., Bruch, S. K., Johnson, E. I., James, S., & Rubin, D, Estimating the "impact" of out-of-home placement on child well-being: Approaching the problem of selection bias. *Child Development*, 80, 1856–1876. (2009)

<sup>10</sup> Connell CM, Katz KH, Saunders L, & Tebes JK (2006). Leaving foster care-The influence of child and case characteristics on foster care exit rates. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 28 780–298.

<sup>11</sup> Oosterman, M., Schuengel, C., Wim Slot, N., Bullens, R. A. R., & Doreleijers, T. A. H. (2007).

Disruptions in foster care: A review and meta-analysis. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 29, 53–76

for all types of adoptions, including domestic and international adoptions, but being implemented in a few states, foster care is yet to take off in the country.<sup>12</sup>

The studies on foster care disruptions differ according to sample attributes, geographic background and methodology, still several core factors that are identified are common across the world.<sup>13</sup> Findings from this study are not meant to suggest that these factors will ultimately end in disruption, but to help social workers and policymakers to address the challenges that increase risk of foster care disruption.

It is important to note that terminology and definitions of placement disruptions differ throughout the research literature, e.g. breakdown, disruption, instability, change in placement.

For the purpose of this study disruption is defined as the phenomenon when a foster placement is terminated and the child returns to Child Care Institution (CCI) or placed with another foster family

## **2. Potential benefits of foster care**

Childhood is a time of evolving capabilities, a critical time for survival and developmental needs. But unfortunately, at the same time, their vulnerability to abuse and exploitation is also high.<sup>14</sup> Foster care is a way of providing family life to a child who is without parental care. Section 44 of JJ Act stipulates placement of children who are in need of care and protection in foster care after following the procedures as prescribed in Rules and Guidelines.<sup>15</sup> The Supreme Court of India in *Temple of Healing Vs. Union of India*<sup>16</sup> instructed CARA to place children in foster care falling in the category of *children with no/less visitation* (1 year and more) and *unfit guardian*. The primary goal is to ensure safety, well-being and stability in a foster family while addressing their emotional, physical, and developmental needs.

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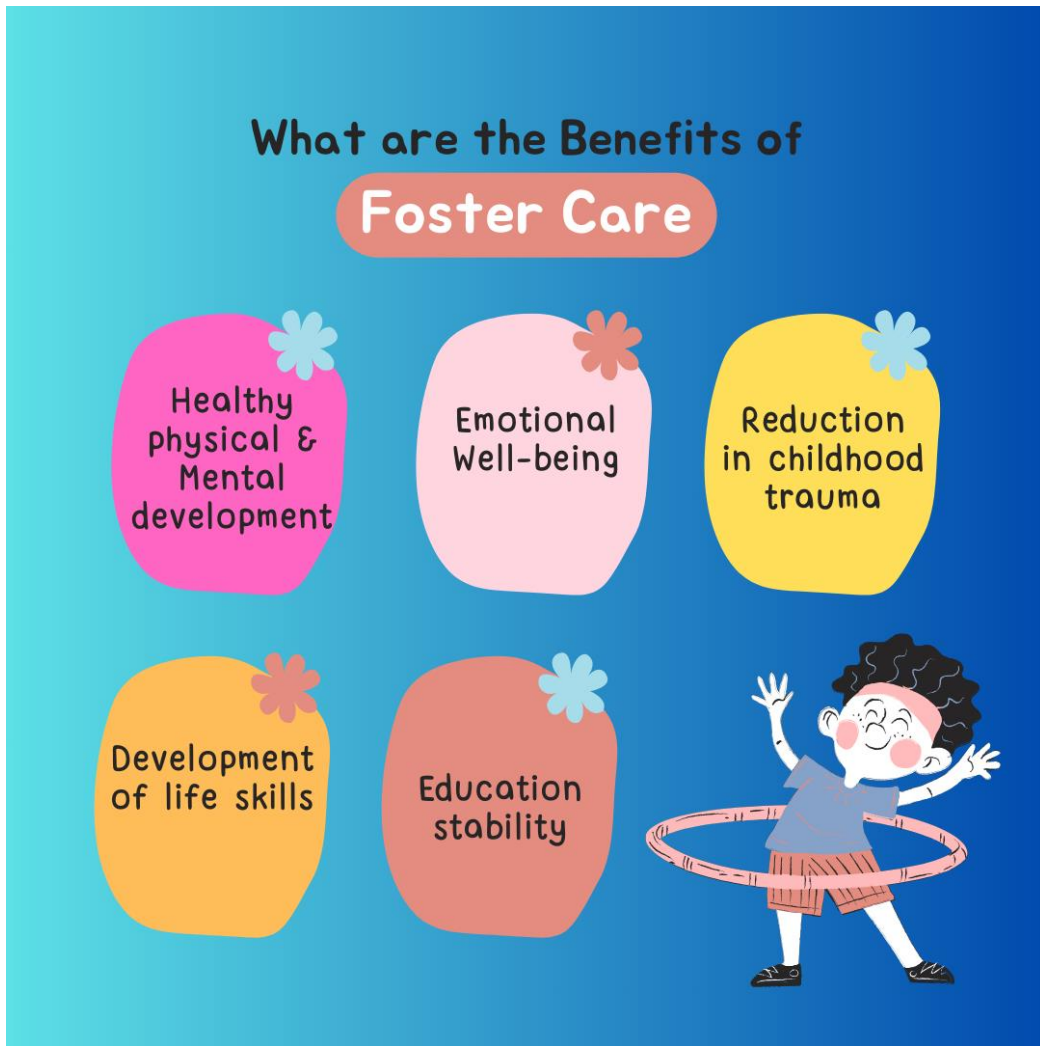
<sup>12</sup> Adoption Statistics available at [https://cara.wcd.gov.in/resource/adoption\\_Statistics.html](https://cara.wcd.gov.in/resource/adoption_Statistics.html) (last visited on 09 May, 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Coakley, J. F., & Berrick, J. D., Research Review: In a rush to permanency: preventing adoption disruption. *Child & Family Social Work*, 13(1), 101-112 (2008).

<sup>14</sup> Vasudhra & Sarma Archana, *Foster Care in India and its Future prospects: A socio-legal Analysis*, Northcap University, Gurugram, Sohnganga, Web.2021, available at <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/373536> (last visited on May 10, 2024)

<sup>15</sup> Supra note 2, s.44.

<sup>16</sup> WP (Civil) No. 1003 of 2021, SC



### 3. Purpose and objective

This study seeks to delve into the complexities surrounding disruptions within the foster care system, understanding their impact on children, families, and the overall efficacy of the foster care system. The objective is to identify areas for improvement and develop strategies to enhance placement stability and the well-being of children in care.

CEAC observed 38% of disruption which is high as compared with the research on stability. From psychological perspective, the displaced children may experience an increased sense of rejection and impermanence as well as difficulty in forming attachments

and trusting adults.<sup>17</sup> To improve stability and continuity in foster placement it was felt necessary to study the reasons and root causes of disruption and work towards stabilizing the placements. The analysis was undertaken to comprehensively examine the factors contributing to disruptions in foster care placements.

#### **4. Methodology**

Descriptive research methodology was adopted for this study as it allows a flexible approach, hence important concerns and questions during the interview were attempted. This method was helpful to obtain first hand data from the respondents to arrive at sound conclusions and recommendations. The interview schedule was developed in Hindi to speak to respondents and understand the challenges. The following activities were carried out for the analysis:

- Physical and telephonic interviews with foster parents
- Case history of child
- Experience of a child while in foster care
- System related concerns
- Comparison of successful placements against failed placements

There are many studies and reviews on challenges in foster care stability and this article explores the factors associated with disruption in foster care in the state of Chhattisgarh. The sample consists of placements that have survived the challenges and disrupted cases. Out of 24 children's placements, 9 children returned to the Child Care Institution.

Some of the findings below are based on a comprehensive review of disruptions that happened in the state of Chhattisgarh. The risk factors identified from the literature review are organized by child, family, and system related characteristics.

#### **5. Factors associated with disruption**

There are many risks and protective factors contributing to foster care placement discontinuity, rather than a single cause. Several studies and researches have revealed the

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<sup>17</sup> Bederian-Gardner D, Hobbs SD, Ogle CM, Goodman GS, Cordon IM, Chong JY, Instability in the lives of foster and nonfoster youth: Mental health impediments and attachment insecurities. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 84, 159–167, (2018).

complexities of successful placement and combination of factors that lead to disruptions in placements.<sup>18</sup>

## **5.1 Child related factors**

### **5.1.1 Behavioral challenges**

A direct association is found between behavioral problems and disruption. Children who have a history of severe trauma have difficulty in developing attachments with foster families. The reported specific behaviours which triggered displacement were lying and manipulation, defiance, aggression, stealing, hyperactivity and the threat of running away. Apparently 30% of disruption was due to behavioural issues. Majority of the respondents found themselves incompetent to handle the extreme behavioural problem. The review report by Oosterman showed significant relation between behaviour problems and disruption.<sup>19</sup> Another study by James found that 20% of all placement changes were due to behaviour and 70% of disruption was the result of the system of policy mandates.<sup>20</sup> Only 10% of disruptions were due to events happening in the lives of foster families. Interestingly, many studies demonstrate no relation between disruption and mental health, conversely, no family in the state expressed willingness in fostering a child with mental health concerns.

### **5.1.2 Disrupted attachment history**

Children residing in CCIs may have physical security but not emotional security. Many young children didn't even get the opportunity to develop secure attachments with adults. According to Hofer, the absence of a supportive attachment figure, influences developmental outcomes including behavioural maladjustment and cognitive development.<sup>21</sup> The risks associated with disruption of attachment are deep and intense. The child with attachment disorder has difficulty in stress

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<sup>18</sup> Palacios, J, *When things do not go as expected: Adoption breakdown*. University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Rudd Adoption Research Program (2019) available at: <https://www.umass.edu/ruddchair/sites/default/files/rudd.palacios.pdf> (last visited on May 10, 2024).

<sup>19</sup> Oosterman, M., Schuengel, C., Wim Slot, N., Bullens, R. A. R., & Doreleijers, T. A. H., Disruptions in foster care: A review and meta-analysis, *Children and Young Services Review*, 29, 53–76 (2007).

<sup>20</sup> James, S, Why do foster care placements disrupt? An investigation of reasons for placement change in foster care. *The Social Service Review*, 78, 602-607 (2004).

<sup>21</sup> Hofer MA: Psychobiological roots of early attachment. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 15:84-88. (2006).

regulation, impacting self-control, coping skills and emotions. These children develop survival strategies and want to control others as cannot trust or rely on caregivers. The study found that 20% of children tried to control the foster parents and were hostile towards them. Open hostility and defiance are their coping skills. The more foster parents attempted to offer comfort and care, the more distrustful and angry they became, resulting in disruption.

### **5.1.3 Sibling placements**

The finding is mixed regarding whether sibling be placed together is a risk or protective factor disruption, due to nuances of sibling relationships and biological and extended family dynamics. The sibling disruption of 50% was surprising as compared to the findings of Oosterman et.al. which showed that placements with siblings had less breakdown.<sup>22</sup> For example, eldest sibling was jealous of extra care being given to youngest sibling, which resulted in disruption. Though, later realizing the extent of sadness it gave to their siblings, due to his/her extreme emotions, replacement is being requested to place the younger siblings in foster care and while he/she continues to be in CCI.

### **5.1.4 Age at placement**

Though many researchers suggest that stability in older children is a challenge as compared to children who are young.<sup>23</sup> But, CEAC was able to place older children in foster care. The range of age of children placed in foster care is between 7 to 17 years. The findings indicate that many families prefer young children, due to their parenting capabilities. However, the success of stability was higher in older children in Chhattisgarh as compared to many studies which suggest breakdown when older children are placed.

## **5.2 Parent related factors**

### **5.2.1 High or unrealistic expectations**

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<sup>22</sup> *Supra* note 19.

<sup>23</sup> Berry, M., & Barth, R. P, *A study of disrupted adoptive placements of adolescents. Child Welfare, 69*(3), 209-225. (1990)

Foster family's high expectation from child without understanding the challenges and trauma that the child has encountered, has led to 22% disruptions. The idealized expectations by foster families and imposing unrealistic expectations on their progress made situation difficult for the child. The study suggests lack of knowledge and understanding in foster families that every child has a different learning style and pace. Each child is unique and have different strengths and challenges. One-day orientation of foster families on foster care seems to be insufficient to make them ready for fostering.

### **5.2.2 Caregiver Commitment**

The commitment of both the caregivers, has huge influence in the success of foster care. It was observed that in 22% foster families, the whole burden of fostering came down to foster mother, which became overwhelming to her, resulting in disruption. Wherever, two parents are not involved in fostering the placement has resulted in disruption. The caregivers experience multitude of stresses and it can take a toll on their relationship. Unless the caregivers have healthy marriage, which is important for parenting, it would be difficult to have stability in placements.

### **5.2.3 Continued attachment of child with birth parents or relatives**

The strong and continued attachment with relatives or memories of biological parents has posed a strong risk of disruption. The attachment, relationship and memories of biological parents has led to disruption in 30% of cases. The findings of the present study corroborate with the findings of Oosterman et.al. that children in foster care are less likely to experience disruption when the quality contact with family members is in conjunction with professional intervention, promoting successful placements, stability, and reunification. Terling-Watt confirms in the exploratory study of kinship care that contact with biological parents do impact the placements and was a stressor both for child and caregivers.<sup>24</sup>

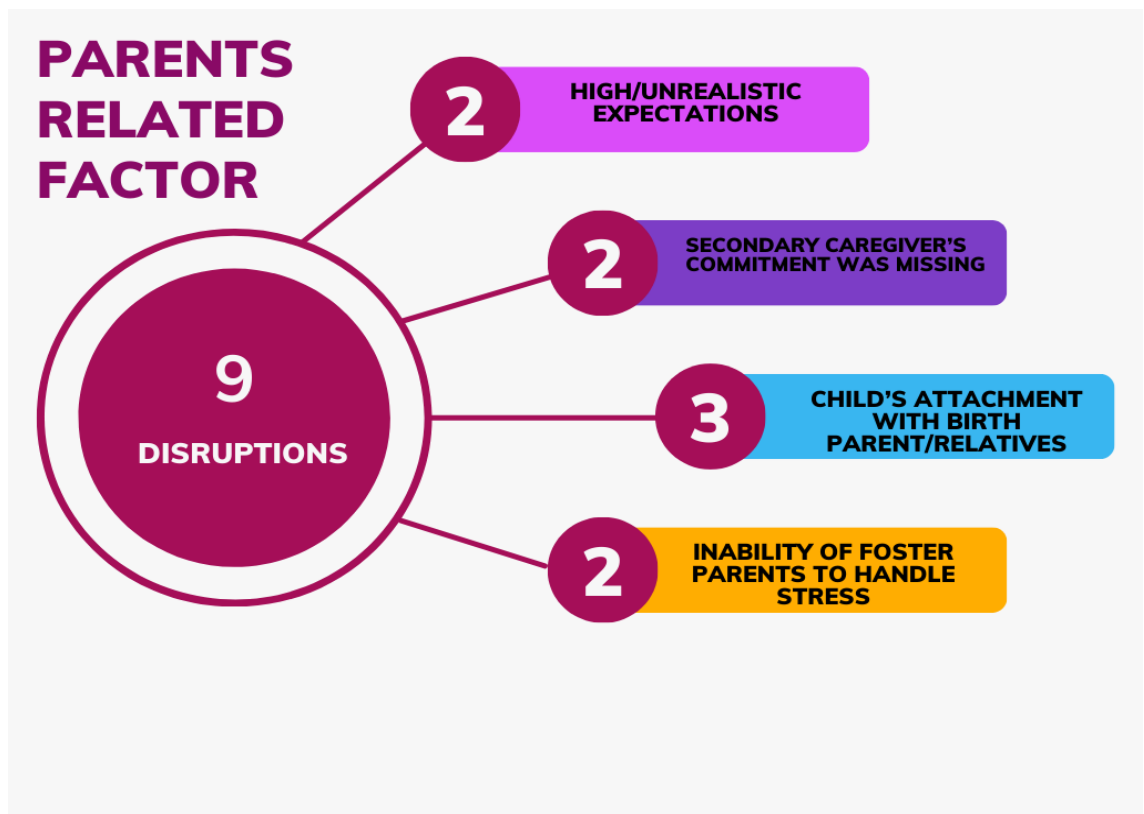
### **5.2.4 Caregivers inability to handle stress**

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<sup>24</sup> Terling-Watt, T. Permanency in kinship care: An exploration of disruption rates and factors associated with placement disruption. *Children and Youth Services Re- view*, 23, 111–126.(2001)



The inability of parents to understand the behaviours exhibited by foster child caused significant stress, leading them to quit from the role of foster parents. Foster families are underequipped to deal with stress which comes into their lives due to behavioural issues or management of time or trying to be perfect etc. For example, one family stated that they were ‘always on alert and it was distressful’.



### 5.3 System related Factors

#### 5.3.1 Lack of training to foster families

It was observed that families did not receive adequate training before placement. One day orientation was found to be insufficient to equip foster family with skills necessary to foster children who come from different backgrounds and trauma baggage. The study showed that foster families were inexperienced to care for foster children, because they have never cared for any child. Foster Family didn't have knowledge of trauma informed care which plays important role in establishing attachments and long-lasting relations. The Pre-Placement training, which is yet to

take off, could have trained them with real-life strategies to address age related behaviour issues.

### **5.3.2 Information sharing**

Not sharing enough information about child was identified as one of the risk factors in stability. Many disruptions happened when disclosure of information happened by child based on his/her memory which was not available in the file. Due to fear of negative consequences, many children restrain from disclosing the actual information to CCI staff/counsellors, leading to absence of background information in the case files of children. However, as child gets comfortable with foster family, and shares the information, a situation of mistrust and misinformation gets created between foster family and stakeholders. It has led to disruption in 33% of cases. It's unfortunate that disclosure of surname by a child to foster family led to disruption. The gap in information and child history was identified as a major concern which needs to be addressed.

### **5.3.3 Parent child matching**

The analysis indicated that the longer the time given to foster family and child to understand, better was the result. Matching mistake occurred when a foster family was encouraged to foster 3 siblings, which was beyond what they initially considered when applying for fostering, thereby "stretching" the parents' desires. Inclusion and sense of belonging plays important role in permanency. The findings by Palmer found that inclusive practices, like respecting the biological parents as important part of children's lives, promoted stability. Participation of child in the whole process of matching influences the adjustment and well-being of foster children. On the contrary, too much of indulgence of child or biological parents in the process also leads to disruption. A balance needs to be maintained by social workers to respect child, biological parents and foster families.

### **5.3.4 Technical and Ongoing support**

This finding supports the results of Oosterman et.al. that placements with social worker support and training were less likely to disrupt. The number of social workers, their experience besides tenure and positivity brought success. Answering the distress call of foster family and providing multidimensional support and

solutions had better outcomes.<sup>25</sup> Increasing family access to resources such as support groups or counselling or mental health therapists have proved to increase the chances of stability.

## 6. Conclusion

The disruption rate of 38% in this study seems high at first glance, however, it would be important to add that India is yet to fully implement foster care in the country. Behavioural issues in foster care cases often stem from a combination of individual challenges and past traumas which negatively clouds the foster care environment. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach that prioritizes emotional support, effective communication, and cultural sensitivity. Collaborative efforts between foster parents, child protection system and mental health professionals are essential for fostering positive relationships and promoting the well-being of children in foster care. From the perspective of foster parents, fostering a child comes with myriad challenges, including managing behavioural issues, addressing educational concerns, navigating trust and communication issues, and fostering emotional connection and integration within the family. Effectively strengthening the child protection system, mandatory 20 hours training of the foster parents, imparting knowledge of importance of a family in children, are crucial to assisting foster parents in addressing these challenges and providing a nurturing environment for foster children's growth and well-being.

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***About the author:***

**Dr. Vasundhra**, is Founder and Managing Director of Centre of Excellence in Alternative care, India (CEAC). She has 24 years of expertise in child protection and rehabilitation of vulnerable and trafficked children. She has served on the Board of International Foster Care Organization, UK from 2015-2023.

She has authored publications on foster care & child protection in collaboration with international and national agencies like NCPCR. CEAC is implementing foster care in India in partnership with UNICEF and Sri Lanka with Their Future Today, UK. CEAC is pioneer in developing resources on foster care and its implementation in India.

**Chetna Desai** is Child Protection Specialist with UNICEF Chhattisgarh Office, India. She has 22 years' experience of working on child protection with international organizations and UN. She is MA in Development Studies from Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex and was part of the research on child poverty and well being.