



# Guidelines on supervised independent living for unaccompanied children



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# Guidelines on supervised independent living for unaccompanied children

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Separation of children from their families is one of the most prevalent protection risks for children of concern to UNHCR. According to global figures<sup>1</sup> in 2020, unaccompanied and separated children lodged 21,000 new asylum applications, with 153,300 unaccompanied and separated children reported among the refugee population at the end of 2019. Furthermore, during the decade 2010–2019, unaccompanied and separated children lodged around 400,000 asylum applications. Child protection actors across the globe continue to identify, assess, document and assist this growing number of unaccompanied and separated children across a wide range of contexts including camps, settlements, urban settings, and situations of mixed movement. While for some children, separation is temporary, many more remain without parental care, and in some cases, without contact with their families for prolonged periods of time. Some of these children – especially those separated during their teenage years – often transition to adulthood without adult care, supervision and guidance.

Family-based care is the preferred type of alternative care for unaccompanied children as outlined in the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children<sup>2</sup>. Family-based care provides children with individual care and attention and helps prepare them for reunification with their parents or other legal/customary caregivers. Family-based care also supports children in building social relationships, developing their identity and integrating into their community.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, family-based care arrangements may not always be immediately achievable owing to a range of factors. These can include the demography of the child's community, high levels of mobility among displaced children and adults, sociocultural barriers to family placement, poverty or other economic factors, the child's preference to live without adult care given their prior experience of living independently (particularly if they are nearing adulthood), and/or a lack of suitable caregivers.

In some cases, establishing or supporting spontaneous independent living arrangements that ensure safety, support children's development, and build on and link to community-based protection mechanisms, can be a viable alternative. This is recognized by the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, which lists supervised independent living as one type of alternative care.<sup>4</sup>

The decision to establish or support an existing independent living arrangement must be made with the utmost care, and individual decisions for children must be made through the use of Best Interests Procedure (BIP).<sup>5</sup> Independent living arrangements should only be considered after all options to place the child in safe and loving family-based care have been exhausted, or after concluding that family-based care is not the most suitable option. The decision-making process must fully involve the child, should take into account both short- and longer-term protection, care and developmental needs, and must include a robust monitoring and follow-up system.

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, Global Trends – Forced Displacement in 2020, available at: [www.unhcr.org/60b638e37.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/60b638e37.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> United Nations General Assembly, *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children* (2010), available at: [www.refworld.org/docid/4c3acd162.html](http://www.refworld.org/docid/4c3acd162.html)

<sup>3</sup> Inter-agency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, *Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit* (2013), sect. 3.3, available at: [https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/7672/pdf/ace\\_toolkit\\_0.pdf](https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/7672/pdf/ace_toolkit_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> See para. 29 of United Nations General Assembly, *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children* (2010), available at: [www.refworld.org/docid/4c3acd162.html](http://www.refworld.org/docid/4c3acd162.html)

<sup>5</sup> The “Best Interests Procedure” describes UNHCR's case management framework for asylum-seeking and refugee children. See UNHCR, *2021 Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child* (2021), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5c18d7254.html>

## 1.1 Purpose of the guidelines

Child protection actors continue to identify unaccompanied children for whom appropriate and safe care arrangements need to be made. This includes unaccompanied children, including child-headed households, who are living without adult care, or children for whom adult/family-based care is not immediately feasible. In such situations, child protection workers need to identify the most appropriate care arrangement, and this should include an assessment of whether it is safe and is in the child's best interests to continue to live independently.

These guidelines have been developed to assist UNHCR and partner staff working on child protection, and guide them in assessing and making decisions on the most appropriate alternative care, establishing and supporting supervised independent living arrangements, and monitoring and follow-up. It may also be useful in other settings with appropriate adaptations and contextualization.

## 1.2. How to use these guidelines

The [first chapter](#) of the guidelines establishes the key principles and provides a glossary of terms used. The [second chapter](#) introduces the concept of supervised independent living, describing the types of care and main conditions necessary to establish this type of arrangement. [Chapter 3](#) focuses on the main considerations and foundations when planning to establish supervised independent living arrangements in a given location. Finally, [chapter 4](#) provides guidance on placing individual children in supervised independent living arrangements.

Editable versions of the tools are provided as attachments to this document. To access these files, open the [attachments tab](#).

## 1.3. Key definitions

The following is a non-exhaustive glossary of terms used in the context of protection and care for unaccompanied and separated children. For a more exhaustive list, please refer to UNHCR 2021 Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child<sup>6</sup> and the glossary of the Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit (2013).<sup>7</sup>

**Unaccompanied children** are children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives, and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so. Please note that some States still refer to these children as “unaccompanied minors” in their legislation and policies; UNHCR uses the term unaccompanied children in line with the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children.

**Separated children** are children separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives and may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members.

**Alternative care** is the care provided to children by caregivers who are not their biological parents. This care may take the form of informal or formal care, and includes kinship care, foster care, other forms of family-based or family-like care placements, residential care, or supervised independent living arrangements for children. It also includes temporary places of safety for emergency childcare.

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<sup>6</sup> UNHCR, *2021 Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child*, (2021), available at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5c18d7254.html>

<sup>7</sup> Inter-agency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, *Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit* (2013), available at: [https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/ace\\_toolkit\\_0.pdf/](https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/ace_toolkit_0.pdf/)

**Foster care** is a situation in which a child is cared for in a household outside their family. Foster care is usually understood to be a temporary arrangement, and in most cases, the birth parents retain their parental rights and responsibilities. Foster care can be either informal (or spontaneous), where the child is taken into the care of a family that may or may not be related to the child, or formal (arranged), where the child is taken into the care of a family as part of an arrangement made by an external agency.

**Child-headed household** is a form of independent living in which unaccompanied children are cared for by an older sibling who is also a child or unrelated older children.

**Caregiver** is a person with whom the child lives and who provides daily care to the child, without necessarily implying legal responsibility. Where possible, the child should have continuity in who provides their day-to-day care. This person has a parental role but may or may not be related to the child or the child's legal guardian. The caregiver should not be the child's caseworker.

**Family tracing and reunification** is the process of searching for the child's family members or primary legal or customary caregivers, or for children whose parents are looking for them, and the process of bringing together the child and family or previous care provider for the purpose of establishing or re-establishing long-term care. The term "tracing" is often used to refer to the whole process.

**Guardian** is a person who is not a parent of the child but is given legal responsibility to care for a child; this may entail full parental responsibility, including childcare, or, in some systems, more limited responsibilities related only to making legal decisions on behalf of the child. A guardian could also be someone recognized by the community or traditional authorities as being responsible for caring for and protecting the child. A guardian may or may not be related to the child.

**Mentor** is a person, usually an adult, who is assigned or assumes the responsibility of being a trusted adviser to a child or groups of children. A mentor is usually a more experienced or knowledgeable person from the community who helps the child deal with day-to-day challenges, provides them with appropriate affection and care, and connects them to prospects for personal growth and development, and social and economic opportunities. Mentors do not usually live with children, but regularly visit them and provide them with the necessary support.

**Caseworker** is an adult who is allocated by a designated body or agency to a registered child to carry out assessment, care-planning and case-management responsibilities. This may be a government social worker, NGO worker or an adult member of a child protection committee. Caseworkers should receive training in their responsibilities, be under professional supervision, and not have a conflict of interest in working with the child.

**Best Interests Procedure (BIP)** describes UNHCR's individual case management procedure for children of concern. It is a multi-step process that encompasses identification, assessment, case action-planning, implementation, follow-up and case closure. It includes two important procedural standards: the Best Interests Assessment (BIA) and the Best Interests Determination (BID).

**Best Interests Determination (BID)** describes the formal process with strict procedural safeguards designed to determine the child's best interests for particularly important decisions that affect them. It should facilitate adequate child participation without discrimination, involve decision makers with relevant areas of expertise, and balance all relevant factors to assess the best option.

**Best Interests Assessment (BIA)** is an assessment made by staff taking action regarding individual children, except when a BID is required, designed to ensure that such action gives a primary consideration to the child's best interests. The assessment can be done alone or in consultation with others by staff with the required expertise, and requires the participation of the child.

**Supervised independent living** is a form of alternative care in which an unaccompanied child or a group of unaccompanied children live without being directly cared for by an adult, but receive regular supervision, guidance, mentoring and monitoring from an assigned adult mentor. It is sometimes referred to as "supported independent living", with the two terms often used interchangeably.

## 1.4. Guiding principles

**State responsibility** States are primarily responsible for the protection of all children and should support the establishment and implementation of child protection systems, in accordance with their international obligations, ensuring access for all children under their jurisdiction.<sup>8</sup> In the case of unaccompanied and separated children, the State is responsible for protecting the rights of the child and ensuring appropriate alternative care, with or through competent local authorities and duly authorized civil society organizations.<sup>8</sup> This includes ensuring the safety, well-being and development of children placed in alternative care, and ensuring age- and gender-appropriate access to protection and support services.

**Family and community-based approach** The family is the fundamental group of society and the best environment to support the growth, well-being and protection of children, and as such, all efforts must be made to create and support family-based care for unaccompanied and separated children, insofar as such care is found to be in the child's best interests. Where family-based care is not feasible, communities must still be supported to enable and support existing community mechanisms that protect unaccompanied and separated children.

**Urgency** Identification of appropriate care arrangements for unaccompanied and separated children should not be delayed. The protection and care of these children must always be a priority. Timely services, interventions, family tracing and decisions in children's best interests are essential.<sup>9</sup>

**Child participation** The right of all children to participate in and express their views on all matters affecting them in accordance with their gender, age, maturity and capacity should be a fundamental part of all child protection activities. Different participatory methodologies should be applied for different ages – that is, younger children compared with adolescents. Effective participation recognizes children and adolescents as rights-holders, builds their capacity and resilience, and allows them to protect themselves and their peers.

**Non-discrimination** Policies, procedures, programmes and interventions should support non-discriminatory access to timely and appropriate services and to the national child protection systems, regardless of the child's age, gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality or ability. Services should be sensitive to diversity and inclusive, and adapted to the specific needs of children of diverse ages, genders, abilities and other forms of diversity.

**Best interests of the child** The best interests of the child should be a primary consideration for all actors in all actions that directly or indirectly affect children. The best interests principle establishes that all children have the right to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives, including in the identification of their best interests. UNHCR will continue to ensure that the necessary procedures are followed for decisions regarding individual children at risk and their long-term care arrangements and solutions.

**Do no harm** All actors will consider the child's family, culture and social situation, and conduct actions, procedures and programmes in a manner that does not put the child at risk of harm. All efforts will be made to ensure decisions relating to unaccompanied and separated children do not inflict further harm. Children's participation in decisions that affect their lives will be planned and facilitated in a responsible and ethical manner with due regard to confidentiality .

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations General Assembly, Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2010), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4c3acd162.html>

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR, A Framework for the Protection of Children (2012), available at: [www.unhcr.org/50f6cf0b9.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/50f6cf0b9.pdf)





## 2. SUPERVISED INDEPENDENT LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

### 2.1. What is supervised independent living?

#### Key points

- Independent living arrangement is care in which the child lives without full-time adult care.
- It is suitable for children no younger than 15 years of age, except in the case of younger children living with an older sibling who is 15 years or above, where it is in their best interests.
- It may be established spontaneously by children themselves or by an external actor.
- Independent living should only be considered after all options for family-based care have been exhausted, prioritizing the child's best interests as a primary consideration.
- A trained and trusted adult is assigned to provide the child with guidance, support and mentoring, but does not live with the child.
- A child living independently is essentially a child-headed household.

All over the world, large numbers of children have been separated from their parents or other adults and are compelled to live without care due to a wide range of reasons. For refugees, separation may have occurred in the country of origin (in some instances, long before flight), during flight, in transit countries or in the country of asylum/final destination. These children are particularly vulnerable and often face tremendous protection risks including violence, abuse, exploitation and gender-based violence. Due to their specific circumstances, they are

also more likely to come up against barriers when accessing services and need support to ensure their health, safety and development. Children living without support can also experience difficulties in forming positive relationships among themselves and with adults, resulting in distress, adoption of negative coping strategies, and heightened risks.

A supervised independent living arrangement is a type of alternative care in which an unaccompanied child of 15 years of age or above – except when a younger sibling lives with a child who is older than 15 years – lives alone or in small groups of no more than four children (with younger siblings and/or peers), without the direct involvement of adults in their decisions and actions as in a family setting. This living arrangement may have been established spontaneously (see textbox below), by the children themselves or their families, or by an external actor (either the child’s community or a child protection actor). All independent living arrangements must be based on the child’s best interests and should include an agreed mechanism for regular supervision, mentoring and guidance from an adult whom the child trusts.

#### **Spontaneous/self-establishing independent living arrangements**

During emergencies, displacements and movements across borders, some unaccompanied children flee with their siblings and/or friends; others meet other unaccompanied children, develop strong bonds and often choose to live together independently. In some cases, families arrange for children to travel and stay together. “Spontaneous or self-established independent living arrangements”, as discussed in these guidelines, refers to living arrangements established without the involvement of child protection actors.

Supervised independent living arrangements may be established at any stage of the displacement cycle, but only after all options for identifying family-based care for the child have been exhausted, and independent living has been assessed to be in the child’s best interests. Access to all forms of alternative care, including supervised independent living, should be available to all children without discrimination, including on the basis of their nationality, immigration status or other forms of documentation.

Besides enabling children to maintain independence and retain increased responsibility for their lives, supervised independent living also ensures that they receive necessary guidance, emotional support and encouragement, and the information they need to navigate what are often complex circumstances. It also allows for continued exploration of options for family-based care as necessary, maintains links to family tracing and reunification efforts, and supports the child’s transition into adulthood with renewed resilience and dignity. Supervised independent living arrangements should also be linked to and be part of a holistic programming for children, including education, vocational training, livelihoods, and plans for the transition to adulthood.

### Supported independent living arrangements

In different settings the terms “supervised independent living” and “supported independent living” are often used interchangeably to refer to the type of alternative care described in these guidelines. However, in some contexts, the term “supported independent living” is used to refer to provision of in-house support and assistance to people with mental health conditions and/or disabilities, and older people<sup>10</sup>. In such arrangement, support providers work in shifts but are available on site 24 hours each day. The level of support may vary, depending on the individual’s support needs, but can include assistance with cooking, cleaning, laundry, and management household finances. In some settings supported independent living for unaccompanied children also refers to children renting a room in a family house but living independently. For the purposes of these guidelines, this is not considered a form of supervised independent living. Rather, the child is considered to be living independently and would need the same support as other children living independently.

Alternative care arrangements, including independent living arrangements, should be considered temporary pending the primary goal of reunification of children with their parents or former caregiver. If reunification is not possible or not in the child’s best interests, more long-term family-based care arrangements should be continuously sought and, where possible and in the child’s best interests, formalized through national systems.<sup>11</sup> A child living in an independent arrangement is essentially a child-headed household and should be supported through the implementation of the BIP.

## 2.2. Why consider supervised independent living for some children?

### Key points

- Family-based alternative care should be explored for all unaccompanied children.
- Identification of appropriate alternative care should be based on a BIA, with the child’s meaningful participation.
- Family-based care may not be feasible for a variety of reasons.
- Children may have lived outside of family-based care for a long time and may prefer to remain independent.
- Independent living arrangements should seek to empower children and strengthen self-reliance.

Identifying suitable family-based care for unaccompanied children can be challenging for various reasons. Social and economic factors often play a significant role in the ability and willingness of families to take in and care for unaccompanied children. For instance, families with adolescent girls or boys may hesitate to bring an unrelated child of the opposite sex into the household. Perceived behaviour issues or risk-taking behaviour of older children can also lead potential foster families to prefer younger children. Alternatively, high levels of poverty, large family size and a lack of economic opportunities may limit families’ ability to care for additional children. Identifying family-based care for child-headed households (siblings, child mothers and children caring for other younger children) can also be challenging, since families may not be able to care for more than one unaccompanied child.

<sup>10</sup> For more information, please refer to the following: <https://www.openminds.org.au/news/what-supported-independent-living>, and <https://ourguidelines.ndis.gov.au/supports-you-can-access-menu/home-and-living-supports/supported-independent-living>

<sup>11</sup> For guidance on formalizing alternative care, see sect. 3.8.2 of UNHCR, *2021 Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child* (2021), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5c18d7254.html>

While most separations occur during or as a result of flight, or in countries of asylum, some children of concern to UNHCR may have already been without parental care for months, and in some cases, years. Some children may have been living without their parents' care for shorter durations. For instance, children may have left their homes and villages/towns for safety but remained in the country of origin until they were compelled to flee to another part of the country or across the border. Children may also have been compelled to leave home to find work or continue their education in other towns and cities. Over time, these children become accustomed to living without adult care and may wish to maintain their independence. Newly separated children, those who arrived with their parents, or unaccompanied and separated children who are in family-based care may leave such care arrangements and opt for living by themselves or with peers. Children may also be motivated by the perceived flexibility and freedom independence provides in terms of finding work, continuing their journeys to their final destinations, or in some cases, reunifying with a relative who may be living in a third country .

Identifying safe and sustainable family-based care within communities with high levels of mobility can also be challenging. In these situations, both adults and children may prefer to stay with their friends, and establish new contacts as they plan and prepare for the next stage of their journeys. In some cases, where foster care is offered through national child protection systems, obstacles may exist in placing refugee, migrant and to a lesser extent, internally displaced children, in family-based care. This may leave few options for family-based care for children who are not planning to leave in the immediate future and those wishing to remain in the present country. Investments should continue to be made in addressing these challenges, while simultaneously exploring whether supervised independent living could be an appropriate complement to other forms of alternative care.

Upon identifying an unaccompanied child, identifying and providing appropriate family-based care should be the preferred care option child protection workers first explore. Where family-based care is not feasible or not considered in the child's best interests, child protection actors may consider establishing, and in the case of unaccompanied children already living without adult care, supporting, independent living arrangements. For individual children, the decision must invariably be based on a detailed assessment of the child's best interests, taking into account protection risks; the child's age, gender, maturity and evolving capacities; the child's experience, views and opinions, and the support systems available to them. This includes community-based protection mechanisms that will work to ensure the child's safety and well-being.

Benefits	Drawbacks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children are in charge of their own lives and daily routines</li> <li>• Supports empowerment and independence</li> <li>• Can help keep large sibling groups together</li> <li>• Helps develop trust and networks among peers</li> <li>• Can be a good “transitional” arrangement for older children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children may lack important bonds and guidance from a trusted adult</li> <li>• Children can be exposed to a high level of risk</li> <li>• Power dynamics between children can put some children at risk within the household, e.g. bullying and exploitation</li> <li>• Children may adopt negative coping mechanisms</li> <li>• High degree of peer influence</li> </ul>

## 2.3. Who is supervised independent living suitable for?

### Key points

- It should only be considered for children who are 15 years or older, and should be based on a case-by-case assessment.
- Younger siblings may be placed in independent living arrangements with siblings who are 15 years or older, with appropriate safeguards.
- Self-established independent living arrangements should be reviewed with the child and alternatives explored.
- Children's wishes cannot be the sole deciding factor, and should be balanced by other factors including safety and the immediate and longer-term benefits of family-based care.
- The community's norms and traditions regarding children's independence should be taken into consideration.

Supervised independent living arrangements may be considered for children who are 15 years or older, on a case-by-case basis. However, reaching this age threshold does not automatically mean that an independent living arrangement should be considered. In addition, staff should not assume that children found to be living in self-established independent living arrangement should continue to do so without assessing the child's protection situation and risks, and the options for placing the child in family-based care arrangements, with consideration of the child's best interests and their views.

Older children with younger siblings should not be separated from each other when considering the continuation of spontaneously established independent living arrangements or placement of children in supervised independent living arrangements. A household with an older child and several siblings below the age of 15 years may be placed in independent living arrangements, provided that this arrangement is in the children's best interests, family-based care options have been exhausted, each child's views have been taken into account during the BIA, and monitoring, support and mentoring measures are established.

While some children may show eagerness to live without adult care, not all are aware of or have sufficiently considered the risks, challenges and new responsibilities that living independently entails. On the contrary, children who are currently living independently may opt for family-based care if given adequate information and the opportunity to be part of the process and decisions regarding identification of suitable foster families, placement and monitoring.

The vital role of a family environment for children's safe upbringing and development is well understood by child protection actors and many community members. As such, no efforts should be spared in finding suitable family-based care for unaccompanied children.

Although not all child-headed households will experience protection risks, establishing systems for monitoring, support and mentorship for children in independent living arrangements will help prevent potential risks, including discrimination, abuse, neglect, violence, exploitation, lack or difficulty of access to age- and gender-appropriate services, mental health issues or engagement in harmful coping strategies. Without a support system, children caring for other younger children may face further challenges in coping with the demands of daily life, and accessing the protection and assistance needed to care for themselves and the children they are looking after.

However, regardless of how they are established, independent living arrangements can be empowering for some children. With a well-developed care plan, and a strong support and mentoring system, independent living

arrangements can help develop the child’s self-worth and self-reliance. It can also be a helpful transition for children or even young adults who have been living in other forms of alternative care. This is particularly true for children who were not in family-based care arrangements such as institutional care, which, though in principle a last resort, remains widely used. When such children turn 18, moving into a supervised independent living arrangement can help them make the transition to independent living more safely and successfully.

While family-based care should be explored for children who are living in self-established independent living arrangements, this should not disrupt any relevant social support or relationships that the child has built. Children living independently will have developed close bonds with peers and established ways of communicating that seek to keep them safe, and this mutual support can be disrupted when moving from close-knit peer living arrangements to a family-based arrangement. Children and families may also need support when adapting to such arrangements – families will be caring for a child who is used to a high level of independence, and children will need to adapt to family dynamics, structures and routines.

## 2.4. Different types of independent living arrangements

Where independent living is found to be a suitable care arrangement for a child, the format of the arrangement to be adopted will be determined by various factors: the child’s specific protection, emotional and developmental needs; their gender and relationship with their peers, existing community mechanisms and social relationships; the national legal and policy framework, and the services and resources available.

<p><b>Living with siblings</b></p>	<p>In this arrangement, a group of children who are siblings live together. Usually, the older child is responsible for caring for the younger siblings and managing the household. Often, gender norms define the roles of girls and boys in the household. While multiple variations exist, girls tend to be given disproportionate responsibility for household chores while the older boy or boys are more commonly expected to look for work for an income and protect the siblings in the household.</p> <p>In some cases, one or more related/unrelated children may also be part of the household. These children may be cousins, nephews and nieces, or children previously known or unknown to a child in the household. In some cases, the unrelated child may be older and take on the caring responsibility.</p>
<p><b>Living with peers</b></p>	<p>In this type of arrangement, a group of children of similar or different ages, related (but not siblings) or unrelated, live as one household. While different scenarios exist, this type of living is often gender-segregated, with boys and girls living in separate households. Household size may remain constant or fluctuate over time as children move in and out of the household.</p> <p>Household chores may be shared by some or all children. However, there is a risk that younger children may be discriminated against, and forced to perform most or all of the household chores.</p>
<p><b>Single child living arrangement</b></p>	<p>Although rare, in this type of arrangement, a child lives by themselves. In urban settings, children may live in a rented space or room in a family house but are not under the care of the landlord. This is also seen when children move from camps/settlements to nearby cities for work or education.</p>

## 2.5. Key conditions

When considering independent living arrangements for an unaccompanied child or group of unaccompanied children, child protection actors must ensure that a number of key conditions are met. These are relevant to both establishing an independent living programme, and deciding whether to place an individual child in an independent living arrangement or facilitating the continuation of a self-established independent living arrangement.

**Necessity** One of the first questions child protection staff should ask is whether this type of care arrangement is necessary. That is to say, for unaccompanied children, family reunification, care by relatives and foster care by unrelated families should also be considered (see [section 3.1](#)).

**Suitability** Together with children, their community and the national or local child protection authorities, staff should evaluate whether independent living arrangements are an appropriate form of care arrangement in that particular context. Consider whether there are any groups of children for whom supervised independent living may not be appropriate – for instance, if girls or children from a particular country of origin face high levels of discrimination and violence, it may not be appropriate due to safety concerns (see [section 3.2](#)).

**Best interests of the child** The best interests of children in general, and of each individual child, should be a primary consideration when exploring appropriate care arrangement options, including if and how supervised independent living should be provided.

**Role of national child protection system** Care arrangements and mechanisms for their establishment should be, to the extent possible, integrated within the national child protection system. This includes ensuring that the programme is informed by the national legal and policy framework regarding alternative care, and involving key counterparts responsible for child protection in the planning, implementation and monitoring of the programme (see [section 3.3](#)).

**Community-based protection and support** Communities should be involved in decisions relating to the establishment of an independent living programme, and decisions regarding the placement of children in independent care arrangements, and monitoring and support. Communities and children themselves should be consulted on the modalities and standards for supervised independent living, including which children it would be suitable for. Community networks or respected child rights advocates in the community can also help to identify suitable locations, arrangements and mentors to support these children (see [section 3.5](#)).





## 3. ESTABLISHING AN INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAMME

**To establish a supervised independent living programme, the following is required:**

- Child protection actors must adopt a coordinated, multi-agency, community-based approach.
- The programme must meet the fundamental standards of child safety, protection, well-being and development.
- The programme must be established as part of a holistic child protection programme.
- The programme must have clearly defined procedures and roles and responsibilities

The following sections set out the key steps for establishing an independent living programme within the operation. Placement of individual children in independent living arrangements and measures for supporting children who are in self-established independent living arrangements is discussed in [Chapter 4](#).

### 3.1. Consider whether it is necessary

In operations where there is no prior experience of independent living as a form of alternative care, child protection actors should collectively evaluate if the establishment of an independent living arrangement is necessary. In doing so, they should explore the potential benefits of such a living arrangement for children, and whether alternative targeted efforts could help ensure that family-based care is strengthened and supported instead. The requirements for establishing supervised independent living should also be identified, including an assessment of the operation's capacity and ability to mobilize the human and financial resources needed both at the outset and to sustain the arrangement in the intermediate and longer term. It is important to remember (for



instance, if considering independent living as a transitional arrangement between reception and family-based care) that once the arrangement is established, it may be harder to reverse and to move children away from their peers to place them in family-based care.

#### **Preventing family separation**

For children presently in family-based care and seeking to live independently: find out and address the underlying reasons for preferring independent living.

Assess why the child wishes to leave family-based care – this may include children living with their biological family, or unaccompanied or separated children living in family-based care – and address them with the aim of supporting continuation of family-based care. Only once these options have been exhausted should supervised independent living arrangement be considered for children in family-based care.

#### **Reasons children may seek to leave family-based care:**

- the child has reached a certain age/level of maturity and wants to be more independent;
- the child is experiencing family conflict and/or is not being accepted by the family, for example in the case of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ+) individuals;
- the child is experiencing or is at risk of violence, abuse or exploitation;
- in the case of unaccompanied children, a biological daughter has reached adolescence and the family no longer wishes to have an unrelated male in the household (or vice versa);
- the child is experiencing emotional distance, neglect and discrimination;
- the child is being pressured to find work/support the family, and/or get married;
- the family caring for the child feels that the child is a financial burden;
- the family feels that the child is a negative influence on the family's biological children or is seen as disobedient;
- the family believes the child may have better opportunities elsewhere.

#### **Key actions**

- Assess gaps and challenges in the existing family-based care arrangements and work to address these.
- Consult children to understand the reasons, if any, for opting for independent living, engage in dialogue to promote family-based care as a suitable alternative, and/or work to address children's concerns about family-based care.

### **3.2. Consider if it is suitable for the context**

Independent living arrangements may not be suitable in all situations. Considerations and decisions relating to the establishment of independent living arrangements should be aligned with social norms and practices, insofar as these do not pose a risk to children. For instance, where there is a tradition of families sending children away for education, these arrangements can be adapted for the purposes of supervised independent living. Where there is no prior practice of older children's independence, establishing such a care arrangement without meaningful dialogue and engagement with the child's community is unlikely to succeed, which in turn will have a negative impact on the child's safety, well-being and development. For example, some communities may accept independence among boys but consider it unsuitable for girls; in such contexts, child protection staff should invest sufficient time and effort to identify the most appropriate solution, balancing issues relating to protection, care and non-discrimination.



#### Key actions

- Assess the community's views and concerns regarding independence of girls and boys.
- Evaluate the benefits and risks of establishing independent living arrangements against potential negative effect on the child and the community.
- Review the operation's capacity to establish and support independent living arrangements in the short, medium and longer term.
- Gauge the extent to which other sectors are open to and able to provide sustained support to children in independent living arrangements should they be established.

### 3.3. State responsibility and the national child protection system

States are primarily responsible for the protection of internally displaced persons (IDPs), asylum-seekers and refugees within their territory, including both children who are accompanied by their parents or customary caregivers and unaccompanied and separated children. This is further reiterated by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its General Comment No. 6: Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside their Country of Origin (2005).<sup>12</sup>

The State is also responsible for ensuring appropriate alternative care, with or through competent local authorities and duly authorized civil society organizations.<sup>13</sup> As such, where States have established mechanisms to provide timely and appropriate alternative care for refugee children in their best interest, and where these children have meaningful access to the national child protection systems, UNHCR and its partners should support and facilitate such care as quickly as possible.

When considering the establishment of an independent living programme, child protection actors should first review and map out the national legal and policy framework relevant to alternative care, and how this applies to unaccompanied asylum-seeking, refugee and migrant children. Understanding the national system for alternative care will help ensure that the programme established is sustainable.

<sup>12</sup> UN Committee on the Right of the Child, *General Comment No. 6: Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside their Country of Origin*, available at: [www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/GC6.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/GC6.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> United Nations General Assembly, *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children* (2010), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4c3acd162.html>

In some settings, the national alternative care system may not fully align with international standards – in particular the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children – or where asylum-seeking, refugee or migrant children may not have access to family-based care within the national child protection system on a par with national children.<sup>14</sup> In such cases, humanitarian actors may provide a greater range of alternative care options than stipulated in national legislation, provided that: (1) the alternative care options are in line with Standard 19 of the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action,<sup>15</sup> and (2) national legislation does not explicitly forbid these other forms of alternative care. Supervised independent living is often not explicitly articulated in national alternative care laws, policies or standards; where this is the case, national or local child welfare authorities should be consulted on the establishment of such an arrangement, and their support sought. Where provisions and standards for supervised independent living do exist, these should be complied with, provided that they are not contrary to the principle of children’s best interests.

Humanitarian settings can provide opportunities for innovations in alternative care procedures, including strengthening family-based care options and establishing a high-quality supervised independent living programme. When done in partnership and consultation with national or local authorities, such innovative alternative care models, once proven to work in a specific setting, can then be expanded or integrated into national alternative care services and procedures.

In contexts where the national child protection systems are yet to meet international standards, humanitarian child protection actors should work with key staff from the relevant national social welfare system<sup>16</sup> when considering the most appropriate care arrangement for children. As a minimum, government protection focal points should be included in the assessment and decision-making process when deciding whether to support the continuation of existing independent living arrangements or when considering options for establishing new independent living arrangements, as well as in the monitoring and support of children living independently. When establishing new approaches to alternative care such as supervised independent living, it is important to have a strong monitoring system in place so that the system can be adapted, to build on opportunities and to address any risks or challenges that emerge.

#### Key actions

- Carry out a desk review of national laws, policies and procedures relating to childhood, separation, children’s autonomy and the State’s role in protecting and supporting children, particularly those without parental care.
- Involve key national authorities and agencies in the discussion, planning, supporting and, where possible, funding of alternative care, including for children living independently.
- Develop protocols, criteria, and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in consultation with the relevant social welfare authorities.

<sup>14</sup> Lumos Foundation, *Rethinking Care: Improving Support for Unaccompanied Migrant, Asylum-seeking and Refugee Children in the European Union* (2020), available at: [www.wearelumos.org/resources/rethinking-care/](http://www.wearelumos.org/resources/rethinking-care/)

<sup>15</sup> The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, *Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action*, 2019 Edition, available at: [https://alliancecpha.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/cpms\\_2019\\_final\\_en.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=35094](https://alliancecpha.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/cpms_2019_final_en.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=35094)

<sup>16</sup> Social welfare agencies may be either government authorities or civil society organizations responsible for providing social welfare services.

## 3.4. Supervision and mentoring

Successful and protective independent living arrangements depend on supervision and mentoring support built on child rights principles, and involves the children themselves and their communities. Supervision, in this case, does not mean adults exerting control over and directing the lives of children in independent living arrangements. Rather, it is a function of support, guidance and mentorship that acknowledges children's maturity and autonomy, supports their dignity, and strengthens their resilience.

### 3.4.1. Role of caseworkers

Caseworkers are staff members of the child protection actor and are assigned to manage individual child protection cases.<sup>17</sup> This includes unaccompanied children in independent living arrangements. For unaccompanied children, caseworkers are responsible for identification, conducting Best Interests Assessments (BIAs), developing case plans, directing or overseeing the implementation of the case plan, and undertaking monitoring and follow-up as part of the case management process. As part of this work, caseworkers oversee and support the work carried out by mentors assigned to children living independently. The roles and responsibilities of a caseworker are defined in the Terms of Reference<sup>18</sup> established by the child protection actor. Caseworkers are generally social service staff such as social workers, para-social workers, child and youth care workers, counsellors, or, in humanitarian settings, staff trained in case management.

**When working with mentors, the caseworker has the following additional responsibilities:**

- screening potential mentors and completing the recruitment process;
- matching and assigning mentors to unaccompanied children in independent living arrangements;
- advising and guiding mentors on how to perform their role;
- reviewing mentors' work and determining extension of their engagement;
- organizing and facilitating training and referring mentors to enhance their skills; and
- monitoring mentors' well-being and responding to any sensitivity or emotional impact of cases, advising them and referring them for psychosocial support as necessary.

### 3.4.2. Role of mentors

Mentoring is a form of adult support provided to children living independently. Mentors are preferably members of the child's community who understand their cultural, social and religious context, as well as the risks and challenges children living without adult care are likely to face. Mentors may either be from the child's country of origin or from the host community, depending on the needs and skills of the specific child and context in which the child is living. Mentors require specific skills to perform their responsibilities, including knowledge of child protection, familiarity with the case management system, and good communication with children. Ideally, mentors are from the same neighbourhood as the children they are assigned to mentor, or are able to travel regularly to meet the children. Being a mentor requires that the individual assigned to the child has time flexibility and is able to respond quickly if the child needs urgent attention, such as when they are feeling emotional distress or needs to seek advice.

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<sup>17</sup> For guidance on case management for refugee and asylum-seeking children, see UNHCR, *2021 Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child* (2021), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5c18d7254.html>

<sup>18</sup> For a sample terms of reference for child protection caseworkers, see the Forms folder of the BIP Toolbox, available at <https://www.unhcr.org/handbooks/biptoolbox>

Guided and supervised by a child protection caseworker, mentors tap into their knowledge and build on their networks within the community to help unaccompanied children access formal and informal services, resolve challenges, ensure children's safety and protection, help identify solutions, and build social support and networks. They provide guidance and advice to children in independent living arrangements and support them through their transition to adulthood. Once assigned as a child's mentor, the individual acts as their trusted advocate, identifies their strengths and capacities, and supports them as they navigate the circumstances, challenges and opportunities facing them.

While case management is ultimately the responsibility of the child's caseworkers, mentors complement and support the work of the caseworkers as agreed between the child protection actors, the child and the mentor.

#### **Key responsibilities of mentors:**

- regular home visits;
- discussing concerns, challenges, fears and expectations;
- encouraging and praising achievements;
- advising and guiding on ways to overcome challenges and mitigate risk;
- sharing information on protection situation, community-based programmes and services;
- supporting children in their social and emotional development, and friendships and other relationships;
- helping children learn how to manage their finances, time and other resources;
- being available when children need an adult to talk to and providing emotional support, affection, attention and reassurance;
- helping them enrol in schools or other educational/learning opportunities, and complete their education;
- accompanying them to services when needed;
- identifying key protection risks and when needed, referring children to the caseworker for follow-up; and
- facilitating links with young people in the community, and promoting play and recreation.

Given that they have regular contact with the children, mentors are in a unique position to promptly detect potential protection concerns for children that require timely intervention from caseworkers. This includes high-risk behaviours among adolescents, incidents or risk of exposure to abuse, exploitation, violence and neglect, as well as conflicts between children. In this way, mentors perform the essential role of referring medium- and high-risk protection cases, and flagging potential cases that require close and more frequent follow-ups by caseworkers.

### **3.4.3. Essential criteria for mentor selection**

A mentor is someone who displays a strong interest and motivation to work with children. They are able to understand each child's particular situation and harness children's own resilience and capacities to support actions that contribute to their protection. A mentor is also someone who is respectful of children's views and opinions and adopts a sound child-friendly approach when providing advice, guidance and support. They also use their knowledge and networks within the community to guide children in accessing services, community-level support, including family tracing and reunification support. The mentor and child need to speak one language in common and, if different, the mentor should also speak the language (or one of the official languages) of the host community.

**The candidate should:**

- ideally be from the community;
- be well-respected and have good relations within the community;
- display an interest and motivation to work with children;
- be able to dedicate time for the child/respond to calls for support;
- be good at communicating with children and adults; and
- adopt a child rights-based approach.

### 3.4.4. Identifying, training and engaging mentors

Identification and engagement of mentors should be undertaken with great sensitivity to their background, standing in the community, child-sensitive approach, communication skills and their ability to dedicate time to carrying out regular home visits, follow-ups, and respond to unexpected requests for support from children. In some cases, children in self-established independent living arrangements may have already established a support and protection system with a trusted adult in the community. Where such informal mentoring support systems are in place, it is important to assess these, with due respect for the existing bond and support structures, and to formalize them through training and monitoring.

#### Steps for identifying and engaging mentors<sup>19</sup>

##### Step 1: Identify potential candidates/current informal mentors

There are two possible outcomes when identifying individuals for a mentor role. The first is finding a new candidate for this role. The second is finding an individual who is already providing such support to an unaccompanied child through an informal process of spontaneous self-assignment.

New mentors may be identified by seeking suggestions from unaccompanied children themselves, requesting recommendations from the community and other humanitarian actors, or identifying active community members during community events. A suitable candidate may also be identified from an existing pool of community volunteers, in which case their current role is expanded to include the responsibilities of a mentor.

Self-assigned mentors are usually identified during initial assessments or implementation of BIP for children in self-established independent living arrangements.

##### Step 2: Screening and reference check

Screening is the process of exploring the candidate's background, judging their ability to perform the role, assessing their suitability to work with children, gauging their standing in the community, and determining whether to proceed with the recruitment process.

Reference checks help validate and confirm the suitability of the candidate to work with children and perform the role, and to ensure transparency. It is recommended that [Tool 1](#) and [Tool 2](#) or similar are used to guide the screening and reference check process and documentation. Completing the screening form requires the assessor to interview the candidate, and fill in several sections by combining the candidate's responses and the assessor's own observations. The assessor's recommendation is presented in the final section (Part III) of the screening form, which is then signed by the assessor and the manager ("approving officer").

<sup>19</sup> Adapted from the *Community Support Volunteers for Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children Toolkit*, available in the UNHCR BIP Toolbox, accessible at: <https://www.unhcr.org/handbooks/biptoolbox>

Child safeguarding should remain a priority since mentors visit children in their homes without other adults present. It is recommended that a background check be carried out in addition to a reference check, in countries where these can be done safely through either the police or child protection registries. Where this is not feasible, background checks should be completed through triangulation with other national authorities, humanitarian organizations and national NGOs.

### **Step 3: Undertaking of commitment**

Once the assessor and the manager are satisfied with the credentials of the candidate, they proceed with preparing and completing the Undertaking of Commitment and Terms of Reference ([Tool 3](#) and [Tool 4](#)). This tool helps formalize the relationship between the selected mentor and child protection actor responsible for managing the programme. The Undertaking of Commitment form outlines the overall premise and modalities of the engagement. Operations and programmes may choose to have the Undertaking of Commitment form signed, while others may prefer to use it as a guide. In addition to the Undertaking of Commitment, the mentor should be briefed on, and requested to sign, the actor's Code of Conduct.

### **Step 4: Training and capacity-building**

Ideally, the selected mentor will have experience in community-based child protection work and will have worked alongside the child protection actors. However, it is also likely that self-assigned mentors and newly identified mentors will require training and capacity-building on child protection and supporting unaccompanied children living independently.

With adaptation to the context, the training package included in the Community Support Volunteers for Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children Toolkit<sup>20</sup> may be used to train mentors before assigning them to children living independently.

### **Step 5: Matching and assigning mentors to children living independently**

Mentor matching and assignment should follow the three steps listed below (the process is described in detail in [section 4.3.2](#)):

1. Match the child to a mentor based on their profiles using the matching form
2. Formally introduce the child and mentor and observe the rapport between them. Subsequent monitoring should explore how the mentoring process is progressing, including the child and mentor's own assessments of the relationship.
3. Complete the formal confirmation of the assignment through verbal or written confirmation by both the child and the mentor.

### **3.4.5. Planning for discontinuation of a mentor**

Those working as mentors are individuals with their own life circumstance and ambitions. It is therefore likely that some will seek to discontinue their role for personal reasons, or their engagement may be terminated by the child protection actor due to not adhering to the expected standards of conduct (see [section 4.5.2](#) for details on feedback and response mechanisms). As such, it is necessary that plans are in place to replace the mentor with another suitable individual without affecting the quality of support and guidance received by children in independent living arrangements. This means ensuring that a standby pool of mentors are available to be assigned. Another option is to keep an up-to-date list of assigned mentors who can be re-assigned, provided that they have not already been assigned the maximum number of children (see [section 4.3.3](#) for guidance on ratio and mentor replacement).

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<sup>20</sup> Included in the UNHCR BIP Toolbox, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/handbooks/biptoolbox>

### 3.4.6. Remuneration and incentives

In the spirit of the community-based process, the proposed role of mentors is primarily voluntary in nature. Any financial support provided should preferably be for the purpose of covering costs incurred by the mentor during the course of their engagement with the children (for example, transportation and communication), rather than compensation for their time. However, in situations where community members have no other means of income, it is likely that any engagement will be seen as a means of income. The child protection actor has to consider various options when determining the type of compensation to be provided to the mentor. Where multiple child protection actors are involved or different types of incentive-based programmes already exist, a common standard should be adopted in relation to incentive payment for mentors.

### 3.5. Community engagement from the outset

In the absence of parents, the child's community has a significant role to play in their protection and care. Communities are also an essential component in the development of the child's identity and personality. Alternative care arrangements, including independent living arrangements, often exist informally within the child's community. Such arrangements should therefore build on those existing community child protection practices and attitudes, while addressing any risks or limitations of such spontaneous practices or commonly held attitudes to such care arrangements within communities. When considering independent living as a possible alternative care option, it is important to continue to involve the community in efforts to strengthen family-based care.

In situations where it is determined that independent living is necessary, suitable and can be managed safely, staff should work closely with community members to support the effort. For instance, while there may be significant reluctance among a given community to establish a new independent living arrangement for a child/group of children, they may be open to the inclusion of a child into an existing independent living arrangement/child-headed household. Community buy-in can also be explored by involving key members of the community in the decision-making and monitoring process. It is important to note that communities may initially be reluctant and that support for this effort may need to be built up over time, by demonstrating the benefits and showing how risks can be mitigated. Involving community members in the process is also crucial to building trust and gaining advocates for this programme within the community.

Community acceptance can also be transformed into community support and guidance for children in independent living arrangements. Members of the community can perform roles such as mentoring, monitoring the programme and helping children access services. Youth can take on the role of peer support to children, helping them participate in recreational activities and establish meaningful and safe bonds with other children in the community to support their integration.

The child's community should also be an integral part of planning, preparation and support for children transitioning to adulthood and subsequently leaving the supervised independent living arrangement. Active community members who are "friends of children", community leaders, religious leaders, women's groups, youth groups and children's clubs should be engaged in this process. Community structures should be consulted when developing the transition plan, including for identification of appropriate living arrangements, and for assistance linking the young person to services and social/cultural community activities.



#### Key actions

- Involve community members in discussions and planning from the outset.
- Map community views and practices regarding alternative care for unaccompanied children, and strategies to strengthen these in children's best interests.
- Consult community members on their potential role in supporting the independent living programme and the support they need to be actively engaged.
- Involve community members in the programme through various roles.

### 3.6. Services for children

Protection and care for children separated from their parents or customary caregiver cannot be seen as a stand-alone activity. BIP, identification and establishment of safe and appropriate alternative care, and solutions should be part of a broader child protection programme. When considering the establishment of an independent living programme, child protection actors should map the assistance available together with sector leads, and work with each sector to ensure that children in independent living arrangements are part of the sector's planning and service delivery. Such joint efforts should involve the community as well, both in terms of identification of needs, capacity and resources, and follow-up and monitoring.

#### 3.6.1. Housing and site-planning

In both camp and urban settings, where children stay is a key consideration. The location should be as safe as possible and facilitate access to services and recreational facilities. Children's access to members of their own community should also be considered when selecting a location, particularly when this is identified as a priority for the child. Housing locations for children in self-established independent living arrangement should be assessed and alternative locations found if necessary.

In camp settings, housing should be located among other family homes (see Figure 1). This means that neighbouring families can easily take on a support role of assisting children as needed. Families living around the homes of children living independently can form a protective bubble around the children, and actively engage them in neighbourhood events (for example, social events such as weddings), which can facilitate their integration and the development of their identity and social skills. However, consideration should be given to the likelihood of families feeling that they have the right or responsibility to control the children. For example, families may become overprotective or judgmental of girls living independently if they are perceived as not prescribing/adhering to traditional gender norms. It is therefore necessary to establish clear expectations for both the children and families on the role and responsibility of the family, and continue to work with both sides to ensure a positive support system.

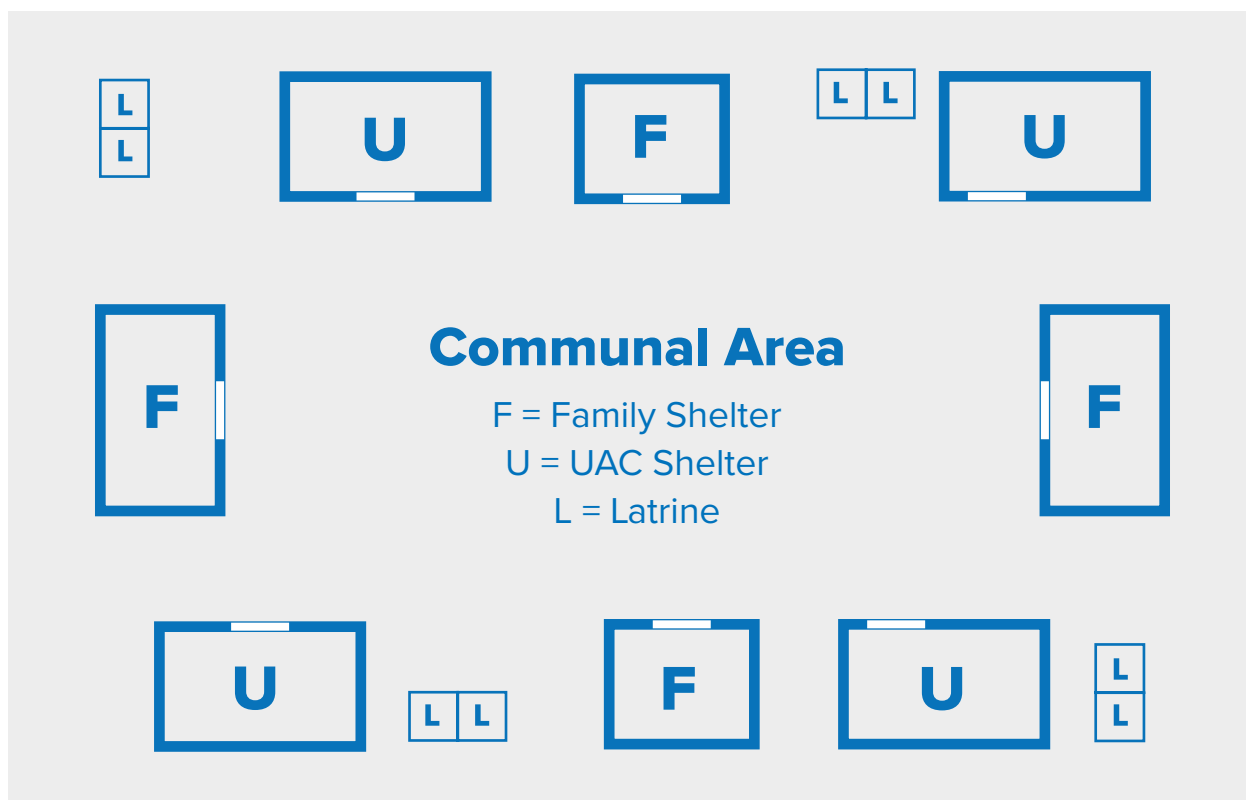


Figure 1: Independent living arrangement for unaccompanied children in Shire, Ethiopia

In camps, actors responsible for shelter construction should budget for provision and maintenance of shelters for children in independent living arrangements. Similar to standard shelters for families, shelters for children in independent living arrangements should ensure safety and privacy, with locks both inside and outside, near any communal water points and latrines. In operations where beneficiaries are expected to construct their own shelters, special provisions should be made to assist children, since their physical capacity may prevent them from carrying out certain tasks and/or they may not have the skills to construct their own shelters. Such assistance may take the form of mobilized community support or paid constructors.

While it can be difficult to find an optimal housing option in crowded cities, no effort should be spared in finding housing/apartments in areas close to the child's own community. In urban settings, accommodating children in hotels and guesthouses should be avoided or be a temporary measure with a clearly defined time frame for transition to appropriate housing/apartments. If housing is found within the host community, it is important that child protection actors ensure that positive contact is established and families from the host community play an active role in supporting the children. Funding for renting apartments should be secured. In some settings, operations may consider providing cash for this purpose if other options are not available and a risk assessment has been conducted.<sup>21</sup>

Children in independent living arrangements should be given training and advice on basic home maintenance and other home skills such as cooking and cleaning. They should also be given the most up-to-date contact information for the focal points responsible for shelter maintenance.

<sup>21</sup> UNHCR, *Guidance on Child Protection Outcomes through Cash-Based Interventions* (2021), available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/60d43f824.pdf>

### Key actions

- Together with the site-planning sector and the children's community, identify a safe location for housing with easy access to key services.
- Ensure that housing for children in independent living arrangements is located among families of the child's own community.
- Ensure that a sufficient budget is allocated for shelter construction/apartment rental.
- Construct shelters/rent apartments that are not significantly different from those of others in the community, and that ensure safety and privacy.
- Where shelters are constructed by the recipient of assistance, make special provisions to assist children. This may include mobilizing adults in the community or assigning constructors.
- Make provisions in the shelter plan sourcing community members to help teach children how to manage and clean their house.

### 3.6.2. Food and non-food items

Distribution of food and non-food items/core relief items are often a standardized service in many refugee operations, although increasingly food vouchers or Multipurpose Cash Grants are being used to meet this need. In others, food and non-food items may be distributed as one-time support at the time of arrival. In some cases, these types of support may be provided on a case-by-case basis, usually based on an assessment of the recipient's vulnerability.

Children who are being placed in an independent living arrangement or those in self-established independent living arrangements should be provided with a minimum start-up package of support to ensure that they can establish their living arrangement quickly. While the support required by each child varies and should be assessed as part of the BIP, a minimum support package should be pre-sourced and ready for distribution.

#### **Suggested minimum start-up support package (items and quantities may vary based on the operational context):**

- food rations or food vouchers;
- clothing (including undergarments), shoes;
- sanitary supplies;
- toiletries including toothbrush, toothpaste, shaving kit;
- kitchen set;
- stoves and cooking fuel (depending on the context);
- mats, sheets and mosquito nets;
- safe box/locker;
- torch, solar lamp;
- educational support materials;
- mobile phone top-up credit.

When distributing food and non-food items to children in independent living arrangements, due consideration should be given to whether children will be able to transport them to their shelters. Often, food rations and non-food items are bulky and heavy, and many children would be unable to carry the load. As a result, children may seek the assistance of individuals acting as porters, in which case they may be expected to pay a fee or portion of the ration in return. It is therefore crucial that actors responsible for distributing food and non-food items work closely with child protection staff, the child's mentors and community leaders, and the children themselves, to determine the most appropriate option for distribution. This may include recruiting and deploying porters to assist children, making home deliveries, or distributing these items in smaller quantities and with greater frequency.

Distribution times can also affect children, interrupting their learning and recreation time. Child protection staff and distribution actors should identify the most appropriate distribution times together with the children, educators and community members, and distribution should not take place during school hours.

Food distributed to children should take into account their developmental needs, with teenagers in particular requiring appropriate meals to aid their physical and mental development. Child mothers and pregnant girls will need nutritional food in appropriate quantities, meeting the kilo calorie (kcal) requirement; also ensure that sufficient funds are allocated for supplementary feeding in such cases. Non-food items should include sanitary material for girls (often called dignity kits), which should be distributed discreetly. Child mothers should be provided with basic items required for caring for babies. Clothing should be appropriate for the weather in the location where the children are living and for the child's and surrounding community's culture.

Food and non-food item distribution should be carried out at locations that are safe and easily accessible to children.

#### **Children in independent living arrangements should have:**

- livelihood support or food rations;
- cooking fuel;
- sanitary material;
- toiletries; and
- educational materials.

#### **Key actions**

- Pre-position a minimum start-up support package.
- Involve children and their communities in deciding where distribution will be carried out.
- Ensure that children have help carrying bulky and heavy food rations and non-food items. Alternatively, consider organizing home deliveries.
- Organize distribution at times that do not obstruct school attendance and recreational times.
- Ensure that non-food items also include sanitary supplies for girls, and supplies necessary for child mothers' babies.
- Plan for distribution of culturally and weather-appropriate clothing.

### 3.6.3. Livelihoods

Child work, as opposed to child labour, is the kind of work that contributes to the child's development, is age-appropriate and does not harm their well-being or interfere with their physical and cognitive development. Older children, particularly those nearing adulthood, are likely to already be engaged in work or seek work as a way of affirming their independence. It is also understood that under non-hazardous and safe conditions, age-appropriate work can positively contribute to children's development and self-reliance. In situations where children are engaged in work, these should only be in accordance with international child labour standards and norms.<sup>22</sup> Child protection actors should seek to ensure that children's work is only complementary to the assistance and support they receive, and supports their development.

Meanwhile, child labour is "any work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity ... that interferes with children's education and negatively affects their emotional, developmental and physical well-being. Many child labourers are engaged in the worst forms of child labour, including forced labour, recruitment into armed forces or groups, trafficking for exploitation, sexual exploitation, illicit work or hazardous work. Humanitarian crises may increase the prevalence and severity of existing forms of child labour or trigger new forms."<sup>23</sup> All actors should work towards realizing Standard 12 of the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, which states that "All children are protected from child labour, especially the worst forms of child labour, which may relate to or be made worse by the humanitarian crisis."<sup>24</sup>

#### Child labour

Article 2 of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Minimum Age Convention sets the general minimum age for admission to employment or work at 15 years (13 years for light work) and article 3 of the Convention sets the minimum age for hazardous work at 18 (16 years under certain strict conditions). In all operations, particularly those where the minimum age is lower than the international standard and/or child labour monitoring and enforcement of labour standards is not effective, child protection actors must work with livelihoods and development actors to ensure that child protection programmes and support systems for children living independently are provided so that children are not required to engage in child labour to survive. Such programming must be combined with advocacy and support to strengthen national labour and child protection laws and policies. Unfortunately, in many operations, IDPs and refugees are working predominantly in the informal labour market, which does not offer the protection of the formal labour market. As such, helping children living in supervised independent living arrangements who need and want to work, to find work that is safe, non-exploitative and appropriate to their age and development should be a priority, along with providing access to education. To that end, UNHCR's Child Protection Issue Brief: Child Labour<sup>25</sup> and the UNHCR, UNICEF and ILO regional strategic framework for action on child labour within the Syrian refugee response provide guidance for UNHCR staff and partners on addressing child labour.<sup>25</sup>

When setting up a supervised independent living programme, child protection actors should prioritize helping children living independently access education, and other forms of support such as cash assistance, scholarships and/or food or non-food items. These other forms of support are essential to avoid unaccompanied children having to work to survive and being unable to continue their education. However, for some children in independent living arrangements, work that meets the minimum conditions for children aged 15–17 may be considered. This includes part-time work for children continuing their schooling. In some cases where the child has completed basic education required under national law and/or where continuing education is not possible or in the child's best interests, children above the minimum age of employment may be supported to participate in safe and meaningful non-hazardous work. If children are engaged in work at the time of placement in supervised independent living arrangements, the child protection actor should assess if this is in accordance with the relevant standards for child work (including legal age of work and safety) and help them return to

<sup>22</sup> See ILO, Minimum Age Convention, C138, 26 June 1973, C138, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/421216a34.html> and ILO, Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, C182, 17 June 1999, C182, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3d4b6e0c4.html>

<sup>23</sup> The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, *Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action*, 2019 Edition, (Standard 12), available at: [https://alliancecpha.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/cpms\\_2019\\_final\\_en.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=3509](https://alliancecpha.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/cpms_2019_final_en.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=3509)

<sup>24</sup> See International Labour Standards on Child labour at: <https://www.ilo.org/global/standards/subjects-covered-by-international-labour-standards/child-labour/lang-en/index.htm>

<sup>25</sup> See UNHCR, *Child protection Issue Brief: Child Labour* (2014) available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/53fc38804.html> and UNHCR, UNICEF and ILO, *Child Labour within the Syrian Refugee Response: A Regional Strategic Framework for Action*, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5a74728d4.pdf>

education and remove them from child labour. When children are engaged in non-hazardous, age-appropriate work, it is important for mentors to continue to monitor conditions. Mentors play a crucial role in monitoring children's work situation and working conditions, identifying alternatives for working children including education and cash assistance, advising children on safe and appropriate work opportunities, and linking children with livelihoods actors to support part-time income-generating activities that also support children's skills development.

For children living independently who are engaged in child labour – that is, hazardous work – mentors should refer these cases to children protection caseworker for assessment and so that an action plan can be developed. In these situations, the priority should be to remove them from child labour and help them either return to school and/or find non-hazardous work. However, in situations where children rely on this labour to survive, caseworker must consider the risks to the child of continuing work, the impact of stopping work and alternative ways to provide for the child's basic needs in order to determine the best course of action. Removing the child from child labour is the preferred option, and where the child is facing immediate and severe harm (such as slavery, sexual exploitation, exposure to dangerous chemicals or machinery, or involvement in illegal activity), urgent removals are required. However, where immediate removal is not in the child's best interest, all possible efforts should be made to limit risk while working to remove the child from the hazardous work.<sup>26</sup>

As children transition to adulthood, those who are already engaged in various types of employment should be counselled on how to continue and grow. Other children transitioning to adulthood and not pursuing further education should be linked in advance with livelihoods actors and supported in securing safe employment or livelihoods opportunities upon leaving the supervised independent living arrangements. Mentor support may include helping the child prepare for interviews, facilitating access to skills training, introducing the child to prospective employers, and helping identify work that is safe and non-exploitative. Where children or young adults are working, national labour authorities should be engaged in monitoring conditions such as whether they are remunerated appropriately and on time, whether the work is safe and, in the case of children, whether it is light work and meets any other working conditions for older adolescents.

One key opportunity to explore is whether the young adult leaving the living arrangement can participate in other child protection and assistance programmes. For instance, they may be assigned the role of mentor to children remaining in independent living arrangements, engage as community volunteers or work in community or recreational activities for children. These opportunities should be identified as part of preparations to establish independent living arrangements.

#### Key actions

- Education should be prioritized, and opportunities for children to receive financial support such as cash assistance or scholarships should be explored.
- Where children above the minimum age work, their work must be in accordance with international standards and norms.
- Where children are engaged in child labour or hazardous work, caseworker should work with children and other actors to remove them as soon as possible and find suitable alternatives to meet their basic needs.
- Engage with children, their communities, livelihoods actors and national labour authorities to identify livelihoods opportunities, including training in line with the job market and wage- or self-employment, and help them access them (for example, transportation, infrastructure and equipment).
- Explore the possibility of engaging those who have transitioned out of supervised independent living programmes as mentors.

<sup>26</sup> For more guidance, see *Interagency Toolkit: Supporting the Protection Needs of Child Labourers in Emergencies*, available at: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/inter-agency-toolkit-supporting-protection-needs-child-labourers-emergencies> and UNHCR, UNICEF and ILO, *Child Labour within the Syrian Refugee Response: A Regional Strategic Framework for Action*, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5a74728d4.pdf>

### 3.6.4. Access to education

Children living with their parents are usually supported by them to enrol in education. Children living independently, however, require support from a mentor and/or the child’s caseworker to ensure access to these services. Lack of access to education has direct negative impacts on children’s well-being and development, and children who are out of school can face greater child protection risks.<sup>27</sup> Without support, encouragement and guidance, unaccompanied children living independently may not be able to access education, stay in school and achieve educational success. All actors should work towards realizing Standard 23 of the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, which states that, “All children have access to quality education that is protective and inclusive and that promotes dignity and participation throughout all essential activities”, including children in supervised independent living arrangements.

In line with UNHCR’s Strategic Objectives for Refugee Education 2030, child protection actors should work with education actors, including the national education authorities, to “promote equitable and sustainable inclusion in national education systems for refugees, asylum-seekers, returnees, stateless and internally displaced persons” and “foster safe, enabling environments that support learning for all students, regardless of legal status, gender or disability”.<sup>28</sup>

Prior to establishing a supervised independent living programme, child protection actors should consult the education actor on the requirements and modalities for enrolment. Such consultations should include discussions and agreement on enrolment of children arriving after the start of the school year. Agreement should also be reached regarding requirements for documentation of prior school attendance or learning and grades, since these may not be available to refugee or internally displaced children. To assess children’s education level and which grade to enrol them in, schools may conduct tests. In such an event, they should be given sufficient time and support to prepare for the test. If children are unable to immediately join standard formal education, other forms of education should also be considered, such as accelerated education or informal education to teach basic literacy, numeracy and life skills.

Refugee or internally displaced children may not possess birth certificates or other identity documentation. Where these are required to enrol for education, advocacy with authorities and service providers should be undertaken to promote acceptance of other identity documentation such as refugee or IDP registration records.

Young people who are in school or participating in other educational activities at the time of transition to adulthood should continue to receive support to pursue their learning via links to education and work opportunities. This includes prior planning, including financial assistance to meet school-related expenses (see [section 3.7](#) on cash-based assistance), support securing scholarship opportunities and access to adult learning opportunities where possible, support enrolling in vocational training programmes, and provision of the option to participate in apprenticeship programmes.

#### Key actions

- Map requirements and modalities for school enrolment, including documentation requirements, and agree on alternative forms of documentation for entry/enrolment where required.
- Where necessary, establish a mechanism to determine the appropriate entry grade for the child.
- Plan in advance for children transitioning to adulthood to ensure support for continued learning, including access to vocational training programmes.

<sup>27</sup> The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, *Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action*, 2019 Edition, (Standard 23), available at: [https://alliancecpha.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/cpms\\_2019\\_final\\_en.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=35094](https://alliancecpha.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/cpms_2019_final_en.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=35094)

<sup>28</sup> UNHCR, *Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for refugee Inclusion* (2019), available at: [www.unhcr.org/5d651da88d7.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/5d651da88d7.pdf)

### 3.6.5. Access to health services

When a child falls ill, their parents normally provide care and often help them access health care services. Furthermore, parents and caregivers play a crucial role in noticing symptoms of illness and taking timely action by seeking medical help. As such, ensuring that children in supervised independent living arrangements have access to guidance on a healthy lifestyle and quality health services that reflect their views, ages and developmental needs should be an integral part of the programme.<sup>29</sup> Supporting children's health increases children's protective factors, while supporting children's protection can (and should) improve children's physical health and well-being. Mentors have an important role in providing guidance on healthy lifestyles including exercise, eating, smoking, alcohol and drug use, and identifying when children need more specialized health services such as for nutrition or addiction.

Children in independent living arrangements should be supported to access health services. This begins with all children in the household being advised on seeking medical assistance when feeling unwell, accompanying their peers to the nearest medical facility and/or contacting the mentor for further guidance. Health service providers should ensure that children without parental supervision can seek and receive health support and advice, and that their inquiries and illnesses are treated with confidentiality. This includes access to sexual and reproductive health services as well as those for chronic or acute illness. Furthermore, links to mental health service providers should be integrated into the supervised independent living programme at the outset so that distressed children can be referred upon identification of concerns. Referral pathways should include safe referrals of child survivors of gender-based violence to appropriate services in liaison with gender-based violence actors. Children transitioning to adulthood should continue to receive medical treatment for ongoing illnesses even after they leave supervised independent living arrangements.

#### Key actions

- Mentors can provide guidance on healthy lifestyles and help identify when children need more specialized services.
- Ensure that children are aware of how to access health services, including reproductive health services when required.
- Health services should be prepared to provide health services to children without parental supervision.
- Links to mental health and occupational health services should be integrated into the supervised independent living programme.

### 3.6.6. Recreation

Children in independent living arrangements may find themselves consumed by household chores, education or work, or lacking contacts to develop friendships with other children or supportive adults in the community. This can lead them to miss out on social events and recreational activities. When setting up an independent living programme, child protection actors and educators should actively engage children and young people in the community, seek to understand the sports and other recreational activities children participate in, and develop a contact list to facilitate interaction between them and the children who may be placed in independent living arrangements. Special attention should be paid to the types of recreational activities girls in the community participate in, including times and locations where young people meet and socialize, since social and gender norms often dictate or influence the types of activities that girls participate in. Other young people in the community may be identified to provide peer support to newly arrived unaccompanied children and help integrate them into the community.

<sup>29</sup> The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, *Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action*, 2019 Edition, (Standard 24), available at: [https://alliancecpha.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/cpms\\_2019\\_final\\_en.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=35094](https://alliancecpha.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/cpms_2019_final_en.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=35094)



Where possible, sports and recreational activities should be organized in such a way that children in independent living arrangements can also participate. In addition, it is important that mentors and caseworkers help children in independent living arrangements to plan their activities and chores at home, to allow them time to play and socialize. Practical support and tools to help young people manage their time and finances is very important for children living independently.

#### Key actions

- Map different sports and recreational activities for children in the community, and prepare of a list of young people willing to support unaccompanied children living independently.
- Explore and understand the types of recreational activities in which girls and boys in the community participate.
- Organize sports and recreational activities at times that are likely to be suited to children in independent living arrangements.
- Mentors and caseworkers should support children’s skills in planning to create time for playing and socializing in addition to their other responsibilities.

### 3.6.7. Refugee protection services

All refugee and asylum-seeking children should have access to timely registration and asylum procedures that are child-friendly,<sup>30</sup> with prioritized services for unaccompanied children. UNHCR or the authorities responsible for refugee protection procedures should work with the child protection actor to prioritize unaccompanied children. However, asylum procedures should not be a pre-requisite for identifying appropriate alternative care in children’s best interests, including supervised independent living arrangements where this care meets the criteria of necessity and suitability. In settings where the identification of an appropriate alternative care itself depends on completion of registration and asylum procedures, this results in children remaining in reception facilities for prolonged periods of times, where research has shown that unaccompanied children generally do not receive appropriate levels of care.<sup>31</sup>

Best Interests Determinations (BIDs) are necessary to ensure durable solutions for unaccompanied children, including complementary pathways that do not involve family reunification. They should be initiated as soon as possible, and completed no later than two years following identification of the children at risk. A BID process for durable solutions, including complementary pathways, should consider a variety of options simultaneously.<sup>32</sup> A child’s stay in a supervised independent living arrangement itself should not be a factor for the child to be considered for resettlement. In fact, attention should be paid so as not to create a “pull-factor” through the creation of a perception that supervised independent living arrangements serve as a gateway for resettlement.

#### Key actions

- Prioritize unaccompanied children for protection procedures.
- Identification of alternative care, including supervised independent living arrangements, should not depend on completion of asylum procedures.
- Identification of durable solutions for unaccompanied children in independent living arrangement requires a BID.
- A child’s stay in a supervised independent living arrangement itself should not be a factor for the child to be considered for resettlement.

<sup>30</sup> UNHCR, *Technical Guidance: Child-friendly Procedures* (2021), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/61b7355a4.html>

<sup>31</sup> Lumos Foundation, *Rethinking Care: Improving Support for Unaccompanied Migrant, Asylum-seeking and Refugee Children in the European Union* (2020), available at: <https://www.wearelumos.org/resources/rethinking-care/>

<sup>32</sup> UNHCR, *2021 Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child* (2021), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5c18d7254.html>

## 3.7. Cash-based assistance

Cash-based interventions – which can include the provision of both cash and/or vouchers – are increasingly the preferred transfer modality to address the basic needs of people of concern to UNHCR. Cash-based interventions can be used across a number of different sectors, including to cover expenses related to basic needs, education, shelter and health. They can also be used in child protection to cover children and their households' basic needs or to facilitate children's access to various services that form part of the child protection response.<sup>33</sup> It is therefore crucial that operations considering the establishment of supervised independent living programmes for unaccompanied children pay particular attention to how cash-based interventions can be employed in support of these children.

### 3.7.1. Determining the appropriateness of cash-based assistance for children

While in principle, children should not be the direct recipients of cash and the possibility of providing cash to children through an adult caregiver should be explored as a first step, for children in supervised independent living arrangements the possibility of family-based care will already have been explored. Cash-based assistance for these children may therefore be considered, provided that it is in the child's best interest and an adequate risk assessment that considers the child's experience, maturity and risks has been made.

For unaccompanied children who have previously worked and those living in self-established independent living arrangements, handling and managing cash will not be a new responsibility. It is therefore vital that these children's experience is understood and learned from. Each social context and displacement situation will be different, calling for a contextualized approach to cash transfer to children living independently.

#### Key aspects to consider:

- children's preferences for transfer modality (cash/card/voucher/in-kind);
- household dynamics that impact how cash-based assistance is received and/or managed;
- previous experience handling cash;
- previous experience using technology such as mobile phones/automated teller machines (ATMs)/point of sale (POS) machines;
- concerns related to reaching distribution points/agents/ATMs/banks;
- concerns about accessing shops or markets;
- safety concerns related to receiving cash or vouchers;
- available peer or mentor support in case children need help accessing or using cash/cards/vouchers.

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<sup>33</sup> UNHCR, *Guidance on Promoting Child Protection Outcomes through Cash-based Interventions* (2021), available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/60d43f824.pdf>

### 3.7.2. Deciding on the recipient and how cash-based assistance will be spent

Cash-based assistance may be provided to either the household or individual children within the household. The decision regarding who should receive the assistance may vary depending on the type of household (for example, household with siblings cared for by the older child, or household with children who are not closely related). However, it is essential to agree on a consistent approach. For instance, the amount to be disbursed may be calculated per child, but disbursed to the household. Where children are related, household-level disbursement will normally be the preferred option. In non-related households, this should be determined on a case-by-case basis. Where disbursement to the household is made for non-related children living independently, it is important to ensure that the children within the household nominate a representative who is responsible for receiving the money on behalf of everyone.

To ensure harmony among household residents, it is crucial that children within the household agree on how cash is spent. Regardless of whether cash is disbursed individually or to the household, it is recommended that children agree on how much will be for individual use and what portion of the cash will be for the use of the entire household. One option is to include provisions in the household rules for mandatory contribution to the household cash pot and for how this money will be utilized, and to define responsibilities for managing the pot and bookkeeping.

### 3.7.3. Child-centred restrictions and conditionality and risk assessments of delivery mechanisms

Cash-based interventions can either be unconditional and unrestricted or they can apply one or more conditions or restrictions.<sup>34</sup> While unconditional and unrestricted cash should be considered the norm, restrictions can in some instances be helpful when providing cash-based assistance directly to children in order to mitigate risks (for example, risks associated with carrying larger sums of cash) or to help children better handle and manage cash (for example, by restricting cash cards to use in ATMs or certain shops).

In all cases, children who receive cash should be provided with counselling by the mentor and/or life skills training on financial management. In some settings, it may be found – either by the initial assessment or ongoing monitoring of the use of cash – that linking the receipt of cash to conditions, such as participation in common activities, would be helpful to promote children’s engagement in programmes that benefit their development and emotional well-being, as well as promote a sense of responsibility. Conditionalities can include shared responsibilities within the household and active participation in learning and recreational activities. Children should be fully involved in the selection of restrictions and/or conditions and ways to monitor observance. The cost–benefit analysis of conditional cash in these situations should be carefully considered, as well as potential unintended consequences or risks – for instance, how to verify that conditions have been met.

Cash-based assistance can be provided through a variety of different mechanisms that allow for a high degree of tailoring to recipients’ needs and capacities. These mechanisms help in finding safe and appropriate ways of delivering cash assistance directly to children when this is required. Options to mitigate the risks when providing cash to children include providing cash-in-hand as opposed to mobile money if children do not have access to phones or banking services; distributing commodity vouchers rather than cash if children may struggle to manage cash; and putting in place ATM restrictions on cash cards to limit spending on non-essential items. See UNHCR Guidance on Promoting Child Protection Outcomes through Cash-based Interventions for key considerations when conducting a risk assessment of the cash delivery mechanism.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> See the definition of “Cash and Voucher Assistance” in *The Cash Learning Partnership – CaLP Glossary of Terms*, available at: [www.cashlearning.org/downloads/calp-glossary-english.pdf](http://www.cashlearning.org/downloads/calp-glossary-english.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> UNHCR, *Guidance on Promoting Child Protection Outcomes through Cash-based Interventions* (2021), available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/60d43f824.pdf>

### 3.7.4. Participation of children and collaboration with cash-based intervention actors

As part of planning for cash-based assistance, children should be consulted to help understand social norms relating to their access to, and use of, cash-based assistance, and how this should be managed in the context of children living independently. Children should be fully involved in determining transfer modalities (cash, voucher, in-kind), delivery mechanisms (cash payments, cards, at banks, mobile transfers) and arrangements (recipients and management). Gender issues and risks associated with cash-based assistance should be carefully assessed and monitored.

Child protection actors should work with cash-based intervention actors to jointly determine the exact transfer modality (for example, cash or vouchers) and the delivery mechanism, and to agree on referral pathways and roles and responsibilities for information provision and support to recipients, as well as monitoring.

### 3.7.5. Mentoring support and monitoring by caseworkers

As part of the support provided to independent living arrangements, mentors and caseworkers should assist children by assessing the appropriateness of cash, providing guidance and monitoring the use of cash. Linking cash-based assistance to mentoring initiatives and monitoring can take the form of follow-up visits to explore additional needs, determine concerns and provide advice and guidance on how to overcome obstacles. If needed, children can be referred to other services for additional support.

#### **Key aspects to review and provide guidance on with the child include:**

- experience with receipt of cash/card/voucher and usage;
- experience with accessing shops/retailers/markets;
- ability to meet basic needs;
- reliance on negative coping strategies;
- safety concerns;
- household dynamics; and
- financial planning and expenses

### 3.7.6. Continuity of assistance after children turn 18

In order to ensure that vulnerable children are not left unassisted as they transition out of independent living arrangements, caseworkers should work with cash and/or protection staff (as relevant) to ensure that such children transitioning out are systematically referred and assessed for inclusion into ongoing cash programmes whenever their socioeconomic situation requires. This process should be initiated well in advance of children turning 18 to avoid gaps in assistance.

In line with UNHCR BIP Guidelines,<sup>36</sup> in cases where the situation of the child warrants continued assistance from a protection perspective even after they turn 18, cash assistance should be considered until they turn 21.

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<sup>36</sup> UNHCR, 2021 *Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child* (2021), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5c18d7254.html>

#### Key actions

- Determine the appropriateness of cash-based assistance for children.
- Decide on the recipient in consultation with the children.
- Ensure household consensus on how cash-based assistance will be spent.
- Consider child-centred restrictions and/or conditionality in consultation with the children.
- Conduct a risk assessment of delivery mechanisms.
- Ensure the participation of children throughout planning and implementation.
- Establish collaboration and coordination with cash-based intervention actors.
- Provide mentoring support, counselling and monitoring via caseworkers.
- Plan for continuity of assistance after children turn 18, when appropriate.

### 3.8. Protocols and standard operating procedures

The safe and functional operation of independent living arrangements depends on a set of ground rules agreed by the children in the household, and on standards, procedures, roles and responsibilities agreed on and adhered to by service providers.

#### 3.8.1. Ground rules for children in supervised independent living arrangements

Since children within each independent living arrangement will be of varying ages, and have different backgrounds, motivation and interests, it is important that child protection actors develop a set of ground rules together with the children themselves. This includes agreed rules that govern how children should behave and interact with each other, focusing on respect and mutual support, and house-rules that outline various chores and how tasks are to be divided among children. These ground rules promote harmony among residents, help them manage the household with limited conflict over roles and responsibilities, and develop a culture of support and self-development. Rules developed without consultation or agreement with children will often fail. The teenage years are often a time of personal change, aspiring for independence and challenging authority structures. At the same time, young people expect to be taken seriously and respected. Rules developed by children are more likely to be upheld than ones that are imposed on them. Furthermore, child-led processes to develop rules can be educational.

In order to ensure effectiveness, efficiency and consistency, child protection actors may formulate a set of points to guide their discussions with children. It is important to encourage children to provide inputs first, and to complement these with additional inputs based on those prepared by the child protection caseworker together with the mentor. Where disagreements arise, it is important to negotiate a resolution and help children understand that the rules are meant to ensure that all children in the programme are treated equally. The child who is most opposed to certain points in the rules may be encouraged to present alternatives and supported to find an agreement.



### 3.8.2. Standard operating procedures for independent living arrangements

SOPs are a set of written instructions that guide actions and ensure that guiding principles, approaches and best practices are upheld when responding to the protection needs of children at risk. They are developed and agreed upon by actors providing direct and indirect child protection services within a defined geographical area. SOPs also help ensure that the process is transparent and promote accountability, efficiency and better resource management.<sup>37</sup>

All forms of alternative care arrangements should be part of a holistic child protection programme that should include the necessary processes and clearly defined procedures for identifying appropriate alternative care for unaccompanied children. These should be documented in inter-agency SOPs for the implementation of the BIP<sup>38</sup> – in some settings referred to as a child protection case management SOPs. As establishing and managing independent living arrangements will involve a set of additional actions, with specific roles and responsibilities for child protection and other actors, a short but detailed set of procedures should be developed. Developing the procedures for alternative care, including independent living arrangements, should be a collaborative process involving all key actors. These additional procedures can be either integrated into the SOPs or added as an annex. In addition, referral pathways with service providers and contact information should be included.

<sup>37</sup> For further information, please see UNHCR's BIP SOPs Toolkit, available in the BIP Toolbox, accessible at: <https://www.unhcr.org/handbooks/biptoolbox>

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*



## 4. PLACING AND SUPPORTING INDIVIDUAL CHILDREN IN SUPERVISED INDEPENDENT LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

The previous chapter discussed how to establish a supervised independent living programme. This chapter will focus on the steps for placing **each individual child** in independent living arrangements or formalizing a self-established independent living situation.

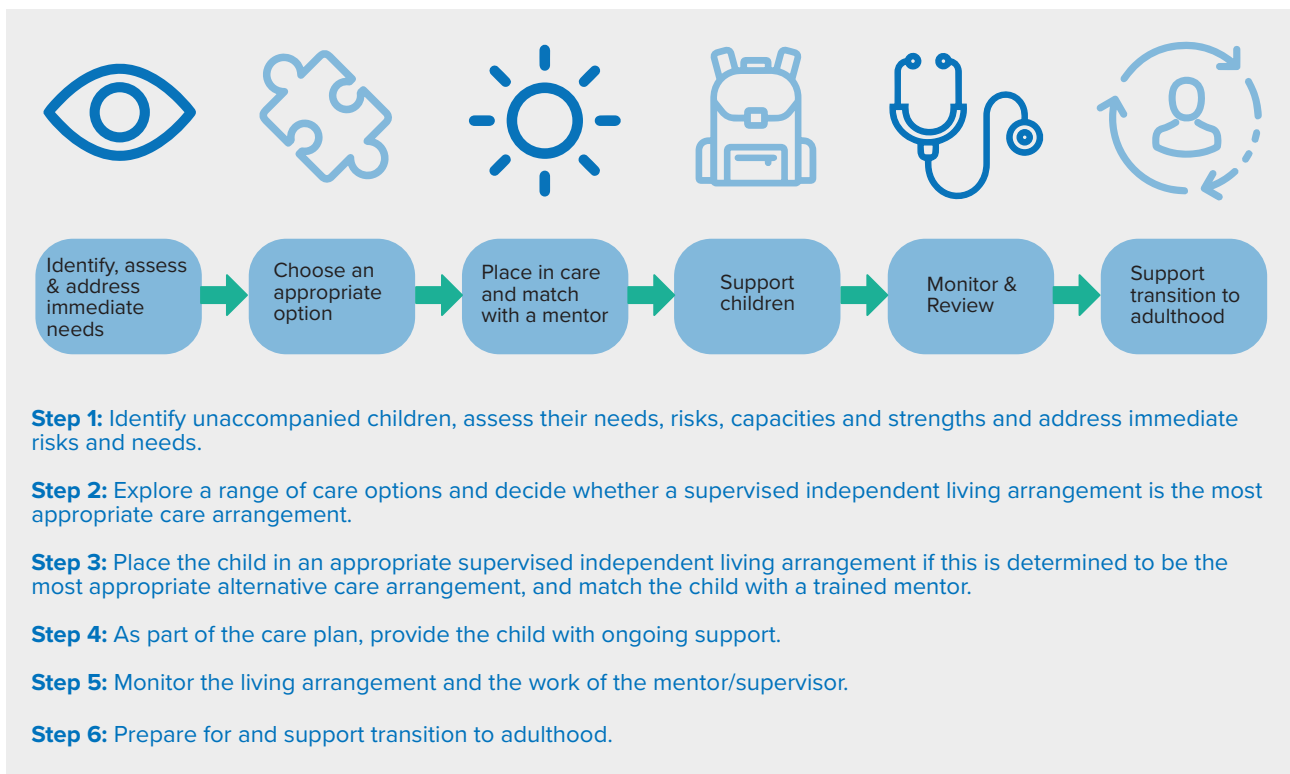


Figure 2: Steps for placing the individual child in a supervised independent living arrangement to supporting their transition to adulthood

## 4.1. Identify, assess and address immediate risk and needs

Identification of children at risk – including unaccompanied children without family-based care and children at risk of separation – should start as soon as possible after displacement and should be ongoing. Ongoing identification of unaccompanied children is important in all situations, but particular emphasis on this is required if there is a population influx, significant movement of the population – either within the country of asylum or onward movement to another country – or another situation (such as increasing poverty) that might result in secondary separation of children from their families. Front-line workers (including border officials, registration staff and asylum officials) and members of the community play a crucial role in identifying children in need of alternative care. Once an unaccompanied child is identified, referral should be made to the child protection actor, who will assign a caseworker to i) assess the child's immediate risks and needs, ii) conduct a Best Interests Assessment<sup>39</sup> to ascertain specific risks, the child's capacities and strengths, and iii) identify the appropriate alternative care option (see [section 4.2](#) on choosing an appropriate care option).

### 4.1.1. Addressing the child's immediate risks and needs

The immediate risks the child faces and their needs will vary from one child to another. The type of support the child requires will depend on when the child arrived in the country of asylum, their previous living arrangement, whether they are caring for other children (for example, siblings), the type, quality and accessibility of services available in the area where they are staying, the degree to which the community is involved in supporting unaccompanied children, and the child's own strengths and capacities. Immediate risks can include lack of registration and/or asylum decisions, risk of recruitment by armed forces/groups, gender-based violence, abuse, exploitation and emotional distress, while immediate needs can include sufficient food, access to clean water, medical attention for injuries and appropriate clothing and/or hygienic material. An initial assessment of the child's situation will help determine the support to be provided, either directly by the child protection actor or through referral services. The child protection caseworker should ensure the child receives immediate support by liaising with other actors and, where necessary, accompanying the child to the service provider.

## 4.2. Choose an appropriate care option & placement

Each child should receive an individual assessment of their situation and best interests.

For unaccompanied children, their best interests should be assessed while exploring the following appropriate alternative care options:

- reunification with parents or other legal or customary caregivers
- care by extended family members (kinship care);
- foster care by families unrelated to the child;
- supervised independent living.

Family-based care is generally preferable over supervised independent living. However, there are children for whom supervised independent living would be considered to be in their best interests, either because other family-based options are not immediately available or because they are deemed not suitable for this specific child.

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<sup>39</sup> UNHCR, *2021 Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child* (2021), available at: <https://refworld.org/docid/5c18d7254.html>



### 4.2.1. Care for children who have been identified as living independently

The caseworker should seek to understand the reasons why the child is not in family-based care and explore opportunities for placement in family-based care if this is in the child's best interests. The assessment should consider the time spent outside of family-based care, the nature and duration of the relationship between the child and other children with whom they are living, the dynamics within the household, including roles and responsibilities for household income and chores, and sleeping arrangements. The assessment should also seek to find out the child's views on the possibility of living under the care of an adult/a family. Efforts should be made to explore and encourage, together with each child, options for moving into a family-based care arrangement, and identify any negative implications of being removed from their peers. If children have siblings, they should not be separated from them.

**Before opting for an independent living arrangement, child protection caseworkers should ensure that:**

- the child is above 15 years of age;
- all other family-based care options have been explored and exhausted;
- the child displays a high degree of maturity in relation to their age;
- no risks are present, or mitigating measures are in place;
- the child indicates their preference for living independently;
- the child will not face significant opposition from the community or neighbours to them living independently;
- the child agrees to having a mentor/supervisor assigned to them.

### 4.3. Place child in independent living arrangement and match them with a mentor

#### 4.3.1. Placing children in supervised independent living arrangement

Once a child's situation has been assessed and a decision reached to place them in an independent living arrangement, the caseworker should proceed to identify a suitable household where the child will be placed. Based on the child's profile and background – including age, place of origin, language and culture – documented through the BIA, the caseworker should identify a household with other unaccompanied children whose profiles and backgrounds match those of the child. The aim here is ensure the child is welcomed into a supportive environment of peers. The caseworker and the mentor should prepare the children who are already in the selected independent living arrangement by briefing them about the new member of the household, while at the same time informing the child to be placed in the care arrangement about who they will be living with.

The caseworker and mentor should introduce the children to each other, remind everyone about the ground rules and protocols (see [section 3.8.1](#)), ensure that the new member of the household is familiar with their rights and responsibilities, and brief them about the role the mentor will play. The mentor will need to make frequent visits during the first few weeks to ensure that the child is adapting well to life with their new peers and provide guidance and advice to all children.



### 4.3.2. Matching and assigning mentors to children living independently

Mentors carry out a range of tasks in support of unaccompanied children living independently. These include providing children they are mentoring with practical information, guidance and advice, and emotional support. For guidance on mentor selection and training, and the role of caseworkers, please see [section 3.4](#).

#### **Responsibilities of a mentor:**

- Conducting regular home visits.
- Discussing plans, hopes, concerns and expectations with children.
- Encouraging and praising children's achievements.
- Supporting children to identify ways of overcoming challenges and mitigating risks.
- Sharing information on the situation in the place where children are living, their rights and responsibilities, and available programmes and services.
- Supporting children in their social and emotional development, as well as helping them develop social relationships.
- Helping children learn how to manage their finances, time and practical household responsibilities.
- Being available when children need an adult to talk to and providing affection, attention and reassurance.
- Supporting children to enrol in schools or other educational/learning opportunities, and helping them complete their education.
- Supporting children to participate in recreational and social activities.
- Referring children to, and accompanying them to, services when required.
- Identifying protection risk and changes/concerns that require the child to be referred to the child protection caseworker.

**Mentors who were selected and trained in accordance with the guidance in [section 3.4](#) should be individually assigned to unaccompanied children living independently in accordance with the three following steps.**

Step	Key action	Tool
<p><b>Step 1:</b> Matching the child to the mentor's profil</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The caseworker is responsible for matching and assigning the mentor.</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The assignment should be based on a thorough matching process that seeks to ensure compatibility between the child and the prospective mentor.</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The mentor assigned should be a person who lives close to the child to ensure regular and ongoing support.</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Matching should give due weight to the child's views, preference and needs.</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The caseworker should use the Mentor Matching Form (for unaccompanied children living independently). If the child is living in a group with other unaccompanied children, it is advisable to explore the possibility of assigning one mentor for all the children in the household.</li> </ul>	<p>The mentor's preference is recorded in the Mentor Screening Form (<a href="#">Tool 1</a>). See <a href="#">section 3.4.3</a> and <a href="#">section 3.4.4</a> for guidance on mentor selection and training.</p> <p>Mentor Matching Form (<a href="#">Tool 5</a>)</p>
<p><b>Step 2:</b> Introducing the mentor to the child and evaluating the initial rapport</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> While the profiles of the child and the prospective mentor may match on paper, the reaction and initial rapport between the "parties" when they meet will indicate whether the assignment is likely to be successful.</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Prior to the face-to-face introduction, the child should be briefed by the caseworker about the proposed mentor and a suitable date for the first meeting should be determined. The introduction should be made by the caseworker.</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Although the mentor should take over the assignment after the initial introduction, it is recommended that the caseworker accompanies the mentor during their first few home visits. This is particularly important if the mentor and the child were not previously known to each other. In all circumstances, the child should be reminded that they may contact the caseworker at any time if and when they want.</li> </ul>	<p>N/A</p>
<p><b>Step 3:</b> Signing the Confirmation of Mentor Assignment form (to be determined at the operational level)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The Confirmation of Mentor Assignment form should be used to document the assignment of a mentor to a child living independently, and the parties' agreement to such assignment.</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Whether or not the form is signed by the different parties should be determined at the operational level in accordance with existing practices.</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If the mentor is assigned to more than one child, separate forms will be completed for each individual assignment.</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Care should be taken when considering whether to use the Confirmation of Mentor Assignment form to formalize a pre-existing informal support arrangement, as this may be seen as burdensome and scrutinizing by those who have hitherto spontaneously taken on the role of a "mentor" to a child or group of children in their community.</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Each pre-existing support arrangement should therefore be carefully assessed prior to determining whether to introduce the Confirmation of Mentor Assignment form to the child and their informal mentor.</li> </ul>	<p>Confirmation of Mentor Assignment (<a href="#">Tool 6</a>)</p>

### 4.3.3. Children-to-mentor ratio

The number of children to be supported by any one mentor needs to be decided according to the needs of each child, the context of the care arrangement, the frequency of home visits as described in each child's case plan, and the capacities of each mentor. Ideally a single mentor will be matched with and assigned to all the children in the same household, as children will have been placed together based on their similar backgrounds and shared interests. The suggested ratio is four children per mentor. However, where more than four children are living independently in one household – usually in the case of households made up of siblings – the mentor may be required to support all the children. Mentors may support more than one household of supervised independent living if the households are located close together and the mentor has sufficient time to dedicate to all children in the households.

### 4.3.4. Mentor's role in the Best Interests Procedure

While the implementation of the BIP (i.e. case management) is ultimately the responsibility of the child protection caseworker, mentors complement and support the work of the child's caseworker (see [section 3.4.1](#) on the role of the caseworker, and the UNHCR BIP Guidelines for further guidance). As a general principle, the mentor will be assigned only to cases categorized as "low risk". However, the child protection caseworker, with guidance from their supervisor, may assign mentors to medium-risk cases based on a case-by-case assessment of each child's situation. For high-risk cases, mentors may support the caseworker by undertaking additional monitoring visits, but the primary responsibility for supporting the case should remain that of the caseworker until the risk level is reduced. In some high-risk cases, it may be necessary to temporarily place the child in another form of alternative care – such as a shelter or emergency foster care – until the risk to the child is mitigated prior to placing them back in supervised independent living. A Risk Categorization Criteria form should be used to guide mentors on cases to be referred to the caseworker. (A sample Risk Categorization Criteria is included in [Tool 7](#)).

Mentors' regular contact with children makes them best placed to identify risks and potential protection concerns that require timely intervention by caseworkers. This includes high-risk behaviours among adolescents; incidents of, or risk of exposure to, abuse, exploitation, violence and neglect; as well as conflicts between peers. Thus, mentors perform the essential role of identifying and referring children for further support and flagging potential situations or cases that require close and more frequent follow-up by the child's caseworker.

On a case-by-case basis, mentors may also be invited by caseworkers to participate in BIP coordination forums,<sup>40</sup> or the BID Panel, where they may be called upon to share information on the case at hand in order to facilitate the deliberations of the panel/forum.



<sup>40</sup> For more guidance on BIP coordination forums, please see chapter 3.2.5 of the UNHCR, *2021 Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child* (2021), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5c18d7254.html>

## 4.4. Support children in the care arrangement

Once the child has been placed in an independent living arrangement or a decision to formalize self-established independent living has been reached, they should receive a minimum start-up support package necessary to establish and manage their life in this care arrangement. While a standard package of support is advised so as to not create expectations or tension and disagreement between children, the support provided should nevertheless take into consideration the specific needs of each individual child. See [section 3.6.2](#) for the suggested contents of a start-up package.

While initial support helps children establish their lives in an independent living arrangement, children will require ongoing support and assistance for their protection, well-being and development. Additional and ongoing support to children in independent living arrangements should be based on, or similar to, the support available to refugees and asylum-seekers in general, but with specific assistance in accordance with the children's specific context and needs. Ideally these should be the same as the type of assistance and support provided to other unaccompanied and separated children, which in general can be adapted to each child's BIA and case plan.

Ongoing support described in the case plan includes food and non-food items (see [section 3.6.2](#)), livelihoods ([section 3.6.3](#)), education ([section 3.6.4](#)), health services ([section 3.6.5](#)), recreation ([section 3.6.6](#)), refugee protection services ([section 3.6.7](#)) and cash-based assistance ([section 3.7](#)).

## 4.5. Monitoring, feedback and response mechanisms

All children at risk for whom a BIP has been initiated require systematic follow-up and monitoring.<sup>41</sup> This includes unaccompanied children in independent living arrangements. In addition to monitoring the work of the child's caseworker in the supervised independent living programme, the work carried out by the assigned mentor should also be regularly monitored. Children should be informed about the organizational feedback and response mechanisms as well as, where they exist, protection or child helplines. This provides another mechanism for children to report any concerns or issues with their situation or with the mentor's or caseworker's service.

### 4.5.1. Monitoring support and supervising mentors

The responsibility for supervising and guiding the work of mentors rests with the child's caseworker, to whom mentors assigned to children will report. Monitoring and supervision involve individual consultations with each mentor for the purpose of reviewing their work and the status/situation of the children assigned to them. This should be combined with regular home visits by the caseworkers, and confidential discussions with the child, as outlined in the child's care plan. Home visits should be undertaken together with the mentor as well as, periodically, without the mentor.

Meetings with the child, in addition to monitoring the implementation of the care plan, should also focus on assessing the work being done by the mentor and identifying areas for improvement. Caution should however be exercised so as not to compromise the positive relationship that is likely to have developed between the mentor and the child or undermine the position of the mentor within the community.

The caseworker should regularly check and be responsible for ensuring that the mentor abides by the provisions of the Code of Conduct at all times and follows the tasks described in their terms of reference. Monitoring and supervision should also include regular follow-up on the mentor's own well-being and emotional status.

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<sup>41</sup> For more guidance on follow-up and review as part of BIP, please see chapter 3.2.6 of the UNHCR, *2021 Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child* (2021), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5c18d7254.html>

### 4.5.2. Feedback and response mechanism

Feedback and response systems should be an integral part of the supervised independent living programme, as they allow child protection actors and linked service providers to hear directly from children, to have a real-time understanding of the protection risks they face, to gauge the impact of the support they receive<sup>42</sup> and to address concerns relating to the mentoring support. Feedback and response mechanisms should be established based on consultation with children and their communities, with an emphasis on children's views and opinions. Formal and informal feedback includes comments, suggestions and complaints from children on issues within the supervised independent living arrangement and on services they receive or are unable to access. It includes issues relating to the design and implementation of the programme; misconduct – the failure of mentors and staff to comply with obligations defined in rules, regulations and policies and to meet the standards of conduct expected of them; and allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Children should be involved in establishing a feedback and response mechanism. The process includes:

- assessing and understanding how children communicate, access and barriers to providing feedback, and children's preferred and accessible methods of giving feedback and getting information (including taking into account the methods of communication available to children of different ages, genders and abilities)
- selecting the most appropriate mechanism to be used and ensuring that children know how to communicate safely;
- establishing internal support structures for receiving feedback, response and reporting; defining roles and responsibilities; establishing referral procedures;
- ensuring SOPs detail exactly who does what, when and how, including how to handle sensitive and confidential complaints from children and respect data protection principles;
- monitoring the appropriateness and effectiveness of the feedback and response system

The child protection actor should ensure that feedback received from children is acknowledged and that responses are timely and appropriate without compromising children's safety. Where a complaint is raised regarding a mentor, action should be taken to investigate it in a manner that does not put the child in further harm either from the mentor against whom the child has made a complaint, the mentor's colleagues, or other children, and to discontinue the mentor's service should this be necessary (see [section 3.4.5](#) for more on replacing a mentor).

If the child raises concerns over the quality of services, lack of access to specific services, or misconduct by service providers, the child protection actor should work with the service provider's relevant units to address these issues and children should be informed about the actions taken.

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<sup>42</sup> UNHCR, *Operational Guidance on Accountability to Affected People (AAP)* (2020), available at: [www.unhcr.org/handbooks/aap/documents/UNHCR-AAP\\_Operational\\_Guidance.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/handbooks/aap/documents/UNHCR-AAP_Operational_Guidance.pdf).

## 4.6. Transition planning

All alternative care arrangements must include detailed plans for children's transition to adulthood. Children in independent living arrangements, in particular, will need specific support with preparing for life outside the support system of this arrangement once they reach 18 years of age. Plans for transition should recognize that some young people will need support during what can be an exciting but challenging period.

Child protection programmes should include activities that support children to prepare both mentally and in terms of their physical needs, as well as for the greater responsibilities that come with adulthood. Children who will remain within an independent living arrangement after an older child transitions to adulthood and departs will also need support, particularly in terms of their emotional well-being. Children who live together in independent living arrangements will normally develop strong emotional bonds and come to depend on each other for support. The departure of one of the members can be a difficult experience, even if the older individual will still be living within the community. Supporting the children who remain in the independent living arrangement to maintain contact with the child/adult who is moving out can help make the transition easier.

Reaching the age of 18 years does not mean that the child should automatically exit the independent living arrangement. The situation of each child needs to be assessed throughout the preparatory transition phase, and a decision grounded in protection and safety should be made in consultation with the child and their mentor.

### Key considerations

- Eighteen years is not a fixed age for exit from the living arrangement.
- The protection and safety of the young person should be a primary factor in deciding when this should occur.
- Siblings should not be separated unless they agree to it and separation is determined to be in their best interests.
- Children should be supported to prepare for transition.

### 4.6.1. Advanced planning and preparation

Discussions, planning and preparations should start in good time – ideally about 12 months before the child turns 18. This will allow time to properly evaluate whether the child is ready for life outside the independent living arrangement, to provide support and prepare the child and to make specific arrangements based on individual factors. Planning and preparation involve reviewing the child's case plan together with the child and beginning to explore options for when the child moves out of the independent living arrangement. If the child is living alone, it means discussing options for managing the young person's life after certain support services cease.

The process of planning and preparation should include service providers from other sectors (including education, vocational training and livelihoods) in order to determine the type of preparatory and continued support the child should receive. On the basis of market assessments and the child's preference, they should be included in appropriate learning opportunities and supported to have access to safe work and/or cash assistance (depending on their needs and capacities and the opportunities in the location where they live).

### Key actions

- Preparation for transition should start at least 12 months in advance.
- Plans for transition should involve the child from the outset.
- Children should be supported to have access to education, safe work and/or cash assistance based on their specific needs, capacities and the support and opportunities available.



#### 4.6.2. Psychosocial preparation

While some children may be eager to leave the supervision and monitoring linked to supervised independent living arrangements, and fully embrace independence, not all will be emotionally prepared for their separation from fellow residents and for the relative loneliness that this may bring. Furthermore, some young adults may find it difficult to cultivate new contacts and bonds if their social circles are confined to the other children in the household. It is therefore essential that children are helped to build new friendships outside the household. This is usually achieved through supporting them to participate in learning and recreational activities.

In settings where children of different ages are living in the same household, younger children should also be supported with preparing for their housemate (and possibly friend) to leave the home. Caseworkers and mentors should pay special attention if children have developed a dependent relationship/friendship. The preparation should involve both the child who will soon be transitioning out of the supervised independent living arrangement and those who will remain in it. Mentors, with support from caseworkers, should therefore organize regular discussions within the household to talk about how each child will deal with the separation and develop arrangements for continuing contact, including inviting the young person who has transitioned out of the supervised independent living arrangement to visit the other children and participate in social events with them.

Careful preparations will be required in situations where new residents join the household once the previous resident exits. Where children living in supervised independent living arrangements are reluctant to accept a new resident, some time should be allowed to lapse before introducing the idea of accommodating another child in the household. The amount of time needed will depend on the children remaining in the house. The mentor should discuss with the children their feelings, concerns and preferences prior to deciding on introducing a new child. Increased monitoring will be needed during the first few weeks of introducing the new child to the household.



#### Key actions

- Consider the emotional impact of separation for both the child transitioning to adulthood and the children staying behind in the independent living arrangement.
- Together with the children, draw up a plan on how they will stay in contact.
- When introducing new children to the existing independent living arrangement, ensure all children are well prepared for the change and that the children's view on the timing of the new child's arrival is taken into account.

### 4.6.3. Living arrangement for young adults after transition

Where and how young adults are able to identify housing will depend on the context. In camp or settlement contexts, camp administration authorities are usually responsible for allocating shelter (in some cases shared accommodation) for new families as well as young adults. In many urban settings, refugees or IDPs find their own accommodation, often through renting or living in informal settlements. In some cases, apartments or shelter in urban settings may be provided by the authorities.

In camp settings, camp management authorities and community-based protection actors should be engaged in counselling and, where necessary, assisting those who have transitioned to adulthood with finding safe areas in which to live. During the preparation for transition, the mentor and/or the caseworker should advise the child on how to apply for accommodation. It is important to advocate with the authorities to ensure that young adult refugees or IDPs are allocated shared homes, where this is the practice, ensuring that women are accommodated with other women, while paying particular attention to the safety and protection needs of LGBTIQ+ young people when allocating shelter. It is crucial to avoid creating a segregated living area, instead cultivating an ally system to enhance acceptance, safety and protection.

In urban settings, preparations for transition should include counselling the child about options, staying safe and which authorities to contact for social welfare support (including housing), where available. Children transitioning to adulthood will benefit from negotiating skills when looking for a place to rent and understanding rental contracts before signing. Enlisting national social welfare and housing authorities or civil society organizations working on these issues to speak to children can prove helpful.

When advising young adults about suitable living arrangements after leaving an independent living arrangement, one option can be to link them to other families who may require support and care. Young adults can play a support role to the family they will be living with, where they are in agreement over this arrangement. Living with such a family will provide an opportunity for mutual support, care and protection between the family and the young person. Similarly, having the young person rent a room in a family home – particularly where the family is known and trusted by community networks or associations – can be a good option to provide a safe transition from supervised independent living to fully independent living.

### Key actions

- In camp settings, involve camp management authorities in preparing young people to transition to adulthood and advocate for timely allocation of shelter.
- Involve community-based protection actors and advocate for and support shelter allocation for those who are likely to face particular risks, including young women and LGBTIQ+ young people.
- In urban settings, commence counselling in good time, and provide advice on options for housing.
- Where available, involve the national social welfare and housing authorities or civil society organizations in advising and counselling children.
- Where possible and preferred, consider linking the young adult with a household that will provide mutual benefits of protection and support or a room to rent in a family's home.

#### 4.6.4. Access to services

The preparation phase should include activities aimed at helping the young person nearing the age of 18 years to be able to access key services. Information on how to access services and the required documents should be provided to the young person exiting the independent living arrangement. This may involve providing information about the services, accompanying the young person to the service points, and explaining how the system works. The young person should also be provided with a contact list for the services. Where child protection focal points exist in these services – for instance, in child protection referral pathways – the caseworker or mentor may refer the young person to services as needed to receive ongoing support. For instance, if young people who are moving out of supervised independent living need access to cash grants, the caseworker or mentor should refer young people to these services well in advance of them turning 18.

Child protection actors should work with service providers in developing and agreeing on a system of prioritization for the young person, who should be provided with the contact information for key services, so that they can reach out to these actors. In some cases, continued support to access services may be required even after transition to adulthood. This can include being accompanied to reproductive health services or accessing medical services in a different part of the district or country.

Support should also be provided to help the young person obtain the various documents they will require when accessing services. For example, in settings where a single ration card is used by the household, the person exiting the living arrangement should be given an individual card prior to exit. In most contexts, adults will require identification documents to facilitate free movement and access to services. Application for such documents must be made in advance of the young person leaving the independent living arrangement, and this is a key responsibility of the child protection actor. In addition, the young person should also be advised on how to renew certain documents and how to obtain new documents in the event of loss or theft.

### Key actions

- Introduce the child to service points and how to access various types of service.
- Prior to exiting the care arrangement, assist the child in obtaining personal documents required for free movement and services.
- Agree with service providers on prioritization based on ongoing vulnerabilities.
- Where required, continue supporting the child to access services after exit based on individual needs.

### 4.6.5. Celebrating transition

Different cultures celebrate transition to adulthood or what may be variously described as “coming of age” or “rites of passage” in different ways. Although such celebrations may be associated with different stages in a child’s physical development, and social and gender norms, reaching the age of 18 marks an important milestone in an individual’s life and in many communities or cultures. Becoming an adult means additional freedoms, but also new responsibilities. Events that celebrate this transition can be a positive experience and a chance for the community to welcome and recognize the young adult as an autonomous member of society. They can also help the young person feel welcomed, empowered and included in communities in ways that they may have not done as children.

Preparations for celebrating transition should include identifying celebrations that could contribute to the young person’s status within the community without causing them harm or humiliation. Ensure that children themselves are involved in planning and implementing the event. This includes formulating key activities based on the child’s own preferences. The celebration is for children themselves and should be centred on their wishes. As such, encourage and support children – both those who are transitioning to adulthood and those remaining in the independent living arrangement – to lead the planning, organizing and implementing of the event.

Where possible, organize a group event so that young people can celebrate together and build collective memories of their transition to adulthood. This can help strengthen bonds between children themselves. Group events are likely to bring together more people from the community to signal to the young person that the entire community supports them. The participation and support of key government official or community leaders – such as from local social welfare services, the local administration or local religious, sports, arts, women or youth networks – may also be beneficial. Planning and preparation should include identifying a day of the year that is convenient to the community and others involved, such as national protection and social welfare authorities, and identifying funds or materials required for the event.

Some societies value certificates of recognition, and children may expect a certificate when they reach the age of 18 years. In addition to such certificates, which may be issued by the child protection actor, the event to celebrate transition to adulthood can also be used to ensure that the young person is provided other vital documents that they will need as adults (such as identity cards).

#### Key actions

- Map common ways of celebrating transition to adulthood, and work with communities to identify practices that do not harm or humiliate the young person.
- Ensure children are involved in event planning and implementation from the outset.
- Consider organizing group events and promote active engagement of communities and local social welfare actors or authorities.
- Organize the event around other social and community events.
- Ensure sufficient budgetary allocations are made for organizing and implementing the event.
- Use the event to facilitate the issuance of vital documents to the young people.



#### 4.6.6. Monitoring support and support beyond transition

Transition to adulthood and the subsequent exit of the young person from the independent living arrangement should not mean that all monitoring and support activities should cease. Continuing specific needs, vulnerabilities and protection risks faced by the young person should be addressed by appropriate, timely and sustained programmatic interventions. As indicated earlier in this guide, transition to adulthood does not mean that the young adult must automatically exit the supervised independent living arrangement. However, for those who wish to leave, and those whose protection needs can be managed and addressed outside a supervised independent living arrangement, their protection situation and access to services and support should be monitored for a period of time. The specific period of time that follow-up should be provided depends on the individual situation of the young adult and should be decided on a case-by-case basis that respects their views.

As decisions cannot be made for adults, all interventions and monitoring activities should be based on a revised case plan, in which the young adult plays a lead role. The mentor should offer to work with them on the services to be provided, referrals to be made and other follow-ups to be undertaken.

As case management for the young adult with ongoing protection issues will normally no longer be carried out by the child protection caseworker, a transition plan should be agreed together with the young adult and the refugee protection caseworker or the social welfare agency responsible for the follow-up. With the young adult's consent, the case should then be transferred to the relevant actor for follow-up.

##### Key actions

- Support for young people with specific needs should not cease once they reach the age of 18 years.
- For those leaving the independent living arrangement, support and monitoring should continue for a period of time determined on a case-by-case basis.
- The decision to continue receiving services and monitoring is made by the young adult; however, the mentor should offer to assist them in reaching such a decision
- The types of services to be provided and the monitoring arrangement should be agreed through a revised case plan and managed by the refugee protection and/or social welfare actor, with the young adult's consent.

#### 4.6.7. What if the young adult is not ready to leave the living arrangement?

Not all young people are likely to be ready to leave the independent living arrangement upon reaching the age of 18 years. This may be due to specific vulnerabilities or protection concerns that cannot be managed or addressed outside the supervised independent living arrangement, or the child/young person may strongly indicate that they do not want to leave the living arrangement.

##### Young person with protection concerns/specific needs

The decision on whether a child transitioning to adulthood should leave the supervised independent living arrangement should be based on an assessment of the young person's protection risks and specific needs. A comprehensive Best Interests Assessment should be used to inform this decision. Assessment should also include an analysis of support mechanisms in the community and within the national child protection system and steps to ensure social support.

For most-at-risk individuals, resettlement or other complementary pathways may also be considered, as a protection tool. Providing protection and support for young people transitioning out of the supervised independent living arrangement should become part of the broader protection, community-based protection and social welfare programmes. This means that when preparing for transition, plans are developed for other protection services and actors to integrate and provide services to children transitioning out of a supervised independent living arrangement, while child protection actors implementing the supervised independent living programme should identify any ongoing needs that children have and refer them well in advance to relevant services.

Where social welfare services are being developed or are weak, making them unable to take over the protection and response services for a young person who is transitioning to adulthood, including a young person who is under consideration for resettlement or other complementary pathways, child protection actors should – in exceptional circumstances and on a case-by-case basis – allow the individual to remain in the supervised independent living arrangement until they reach 21 years of age.

##### Key actions

- Develop plans for other protection services and actors to integrate and provide services to children transitioning out of the supervised independent living arrangement, and ensure these actors receive referrals in advance of the transition.
- Together with focal points from the national social welfare system, map available services and work on securing access to such services for persons of concern to UNHCR.
- Make use of a comprehensive BIA to decide whether children transitioning to adulthood may remain in the living arrangement until appropriate support can be provided.
- Prioritize young people with protection risks and specific needs for resettlement and other complementary pathways where these would provide appropriate solutions to the protection concern.

## Young person who is unwilling to leave

Leaving a secure and organized living arrangement where friendships and bonds have been established is not an easy experience, especially for some young people. Even after making detailed preparations for transition and life outside the living arrangement, young people may change their minds on or around the agreed day when they are expected to move to a different type of living arrangement and live as adults in the community.

As part of the planning for transition to adulthood, mentors and child protection caseworkers should be prepared for such a scenario. Judgment, blame and reprimand must be avoided, and additional time should be allowed for these young people to prepare to move. One option is to explore whether the young person can alternate their stay outside the living arrangement for some weeks, to give them time to become accustomed to the different living arrangement. Emotional support and encouragement by trained mentors are crucial to assist with the transition.

### Key actions

- Be aware that young people may change their minds, and avoid judging, blaming or reprimanding them.
- Where possible, allow the young person to remain in the living arrangement, while providing emotional support and encouragement to assist with the transition.
- Explore different options, including facilitating a short stay outside the independent living arrangement to help the young person become accustomed to the different living arrangement.





## 5. KEY ACTIONS

### 5.1. Legal and policy framework

- Map and analyse national laws, policies and administrative procedures relating to unaccompanied and separated children and alternative care and, where appropriate, advocate for children of concern to UNHCR to access national care services. Determine any provisions in the national legal and policy framework that relate to supervised independent living.
- Establish clear SOPs for determining, managing and monitoring alternative care arrangements, including managing and supporting children living independently (within broader BIP or child protection case management SOPs or as an annex to such SOPs).

### 5.2. Knowledge and data

- Conduct a needs assessment to identify children in need of alternative care, including children living in self-established independent living arrangements and child-headed households, and understand community perceptions towards these children.
- Map the existing community care arrangements and understand community attitudes to various alternative care arrangements, particularly children living independently.
- Ensure individual registration for all unaccompanied and separated children and the systematic assessment through BIAs prior to any alternative care arrangements, including establishing new (or formalizing self-established) independent living arrangements. Regularly update and analyse the data recorded in the information management systems, such as ProGres and CPIMS+.

### 5.3. Human and financial capacities

- Train staff and community workers on supervised independent living, and train staff from other sectors to facilitate identification and referrals
- Identify, assess and train community members who can serve as mentors to children living independently.
- Train and guide community mentors on supporting and monitoring children in independent living arrangements.
- Assess and plan to cover the cost of establishing and supporting independent living arrangements and supporting children transitioning to adulthood.

### 5.4. Coordination

- Coordinate with key national actors and community stakeholders regarding the establishment, support and monitoring of independent living arrangements, clearly defining roles and responsibilities
- Develop alternative care programmes, including independent living arrangements, within the framework of the BIP (i.e. case management), including referrals to services.
- Ensure that care plans for children living independently are part of a holistic support system that links to other services.

### 5.5. Prevention and response

- Together with unaccompanied children and their communities, explore options for family-based care as a preferred form of alternative care. This includes balancing a child's desire for independence with their rights to family-based care and protection from harm.
- Involve the child's community from the outset to ensure children in independent living arrangements are integrated into the wider community. This means helping children living independently to participate in social, cultural or religious activities, education, and recreational programmes such as sports and arts.
- Develop care arrangements (including supervised independent living arrangements) that are inclusive and supportive of children of diverse backgrounds, including children with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ children.
- Support measures to prepare children in independent living arrangements for self-reliance, adulthood and participation as productive members of their communities.
- Systematically monitor supervised independent living arrangements and the mentoring support provided by the assigned mentors.

### 5.6. Advocacy and awareness-raising

- Advocate with and support the national child protection system to provide for and regulate alternative care arrangements in line with the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children and to provide provisions for independent living arrangements for children of concern to UNHCR.
- Raise awareness within the community about care and support for children living independently, and work to identify potential and spontaneous foster families.



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## 7. TOOLS

Tool 1 - Mentor Screening Form ([click to access](#))

Tool 2 - Mentor Reference Check ([click to access](#))

Tool 3 - Undertaking of Commitment ([click to access](#))

Tool 4 - Terms of Reference for Mentors ([click to access](#))

Tool 5 - Mentor Matching Form ([click to access](#))

Tool 6 - Confirmation of Assignment ([click to access](#))

Tool 7 - Risk Categorization Criteria [Sample] ([click to access](#))



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