



**Panel intervention by James Kofi Annan, chairman of Family for Every Child  
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**To a child, nothing is more essential than a family**

(James tells his personal story.)

Because of this, I founded Challenging Heights in Ghana. In the last 15 years, we have rescued hundreds of children from slavery in the fishing industry in Lake Volta, children who undergo a comprehensive rehabilitation programme at our shelter while we work closely with their families and communities.

It is also because of this that I co-founded and chair Family for Every Child which is a global member-led alliance of organizations from 30 countries. We all work together to improve the lives of vulnerable children.

Most of all, this is what brings me here today. To tell you what I believe could have made my childhood different and what I believe could make the story of millions of girls and boys different and to share with you what I believe is **essential** for children right from the start.

And this essential is simple. The best mechanism to protect a child from trafficking and exploitation and abuse and child labour and from living on the streets **is for them to grow up in a strong and effective and supported and safe family.**

**When a family is not supported, it cannot protect children**

Globally, families face extreme internal and external pressures that challenge their ability to care properly for their children; pressures that push children away from their homes. This is why many children end up living and working on the streets. They are forced into harmful labour or residing in inappropriate institutional care. They are exploited, without access to education or health services or shelter or even food.

As you all know, it is not only about poverty. Natural disasters and armed conflicts and wars make things worse for boys and girls who get separated from their parents. In the middle of the chaos, these children become vulnerable to all sorts of exploitations in their own country or as immigrants in other countries.

Imagine the impact on the quality of life of boys and girls, on their development and growth, and overall happiness, imagine the impact if we focused our efforts on investing in families, giving them the skills and resources, helping them protect themselves and their children from vulnerabilities. Imagine the world if we considered the family as an essential to children's lives!



Experience, research and practice from child protection agencies and from Family for Every Child, our global alliance, show that healthy and effective parenting has great impact on the success of a child. It provides protection and boosts the emotional development of the child and her ability to contribute meaningfully in society. What could be more 'essential' for children than that?

### The importance of family – and a call for support

I am not being naïve: some families are not always safe or loving environments for children. This is why child protection systems need to be strong, especially to be able to provide temporary or permanent high-quality alternatives to the children who are not well cared for by their families.

But the point I want to make here, what I want us all to consider is that there is a disproportionate amount of children that are separated from their families **unnecessarily** - due to poverty, violence, exploitation, emergencies and conflict. **We can shift this paradigm. We, in the global development community can change the way we protect children through their families.**

In humanitarian crisis, our focus on essentials is often reduced to basic services. Of course we want children to have food, shelter, safety. These basic services are needed. But they are not enough to prevent children from the many risks they're exposed to. We need to also invest in the family.

A strong family is better prepared in time of crisis to protect its children. It is the first line of defence, an informal system of social protection, a source of safety and resiliency for children.

A few years ago, Family for Every Child talked with 700 boys and girls aged 8 to 17 in seven countries. They were living without parental care, on the street, in institutional care, in detention, with extended families. We asked them: "what do you want for your future?" Many said "health!", "education!" But the overwhelming majority expressed one single desire: to have strong, safe and loving relationships with their parents or caregivers, to be cared for and protected, to be treated fairly and with understanding and kindness. Many of them prioritized family over other 'basic needs' such as education, food, shelter, and peace.

I believe if you strengthen and protect the family then its children have more access to education and health care. Children have more chances to be safe and will engage less in anti-social and criminal behaviours.

I believe if you strengthen and protect the family then you will improve the future prospects of its children. And when these children become adults, they will have more chances to access employment, to overcome poverty, to contribute to society, to peace, reconciliation and progress in their countries.



## How to support a family so that it's the best protection for children?

So how can we strengthen and protect the family?

Of course, solutions are complex, just like the problems. Especially when we're talking about ensuring a child is cared for and protected, about ensuring the right of each child to the 'right start in life'.

At Family for Every Child, a member led, grass roots-up alliance, we are 30 organizations from across the planet - including the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children here in the UAE which we are very proud to have with us. Our members come from very different contexts, very different cultures – but all work hard and in different ways to strengthen and protect families, addressing the challenges they face.

In Mexico, our member JUCONI, carries out very intensive therapy which is focused on the family, based on the strengths existing in the family to restore healthy parenting, caregiving capacities in families facing intergenerational cycles of violence. Through this innovative approach, JUCONI has succeeded in reunifying 92% of children to their families. We are now replicating this innovative approach in eight other countries.

In Indonesia, very poor and stigmatized families often place their children in institutions, hoping that they will receive education, food and shelter there. Muhammadiyah, our member in that country, is gradually reversing this trend of unnecessary family separation. It connects vulnerable families with needed supports and services so that they stop feeling the need to rely on institutional care for their children.

In my own country of Ghana, Challenging Heights, as I said, is reunifying families by rescuing and rehabilitating trafficked children. We provide emotional, practical, educational and livelihoods support to parents, children and communities to increase awareness and provide families with self-sustaining futures. Our overall aim is to stop family separation occurring through trafficking by providing the support to reduce poverty and increase family stability, as well as bringing home the enslaved children. According to a recent impact evaluation, there has already been a 77% reduction in this trend.

In Rwanda, South Africa and Ghana, Family for Every Child's members conducted a study to understand the impact of cash transfers on the ability of families to care for their children. In each one of these countries, the findings showed that even among the most vulnerable of families, good social protection can help millions of children in sub-Saharan Africa grow up in a safe and caring environment. Good social protection reduces stress in the household and improves familial relationships. It even enables families to care for children who are not their own; and improving the material and nonmaterial well-being of children.

## Final call to action

These examples prove that we can mitigate the challenges facing families and threatening the wellbeing of children. To do so, the family must be prioritized as an investment.

So in the name of Family for Every Child, in light of the real progress we can all achieve for children and families, I would like to urge you all, policy makers, decision makers, dream makers and makers of the future:

- Let's recognise that a strong family is a basic essential for children everywhere. That we must invest in families and support them to be safe, effective, and caring for children regardless of poverty, conflict or adversity.
- Let's prioritize mechanisms of support to families in our investment in aid and development
- Let's urge policymakers and practitioners to implement the UNCRC and the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children which both underscore the rights of children to families.
- Let's invest in further research, in collective further understanding of the role of families in reducing vulnerabilities for children, in increasing the access for children to basic protections and rights in crisis
- Let's acknowledge the cultural and context realities that children, their families and their communities live in. Let's work in partnership with the local leaders, experts and practitioners who know what's best to strengthen families in their context.

Whether it's here in the Middle-East, in Africa, in Europe, in America, in Asia, families are the bedrock of our society. We need to work together to strengthen and empower them so that they can take better care of their children.

It's by growing up with the love, care and safety of a family that boys and girls around the world will be able to achieve their full potential, to lead a healthy, fulfilled, socially and politically engaged life.

Thank you