# What is "gatekeeping"?

Gatekeeping is a term often used in discussion of care reform and is about making the **right choices** for children at risk of, or already denied, adequate parental care. It includes **policies, systematic procedures, services and decision-making processes** which ensure that alternative care is used only when absolutely _necessary_, and that children receive the most _suitable_ support to meet their unique individual needs. Additionally, gatekeeping involves **strict procedural safeguards** to ensure an individualized approach that places the best interests of the child at the centre of all decisions.

# Objectives of gatekeeping

1. To prevent unnecessary separation of children whenever possible and in the best interests of the child (i.e., necessary)
2. To ensure that when alternative care is required that the option selected best meets the unique needs and situation of the individual child (i.e., suitable).
3. To support timely reintegration of children who are in alternative care, with particular focus on ensuring that the placement is safe and sustainable.

## Signs a gatekeeping system is operating well

- Actors mandated with children's care systematically utilize standardized procedures to make decisions.
- There is a range of targeted family support services and few unnecessary child-family separations.
- There is a range of alternative care options, with more family-based options as compared to residential care.
- There is range of universal and targeted community-based support services necessary for young people who have left residential care for independent living (i.e., care leavers).

## Signs a gatekeeping system may need to be strengthened

- There are few targeted family support services and many children with families are separated from them and placed in alternative care (i.e. it is likely if the family had received support, the child could have remained living in the family).
- There is an overreliance on residential care (resulting in more children residing in residential care than family-based alternative care options) or limited or underutilized alternative family-based care options.
- There are very few family-based alternative care services including services which support young people in independent living arrangements.

# Essential components of effective gatekeeping systems

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| Child rights-based legal and normative framework | Recognised oversight body responsible for coordination, monitoring and regulation | Gatekeeping mechanism to review cases and make decisions using standardized protocols | Trained and supported workforce equipped with sufficient resources |
| Range of family support and alternative family-based care services, including supported indepedent living | Tools, standards and protocols | Research, data collection and information management systems | Social norms, attitudes and practices that are supportive of families |

# Core principles of effective gatekeeping

## Necessity

- Placement into alternative care must only be considered **when all resources have been exhausted to prevent family separation, or when it is in the child's best interest to be removed from the family** as they have experienced, or are at risk of experiencing, significant harm.
- Family dynamics and situations can change quickly, so there should be ongoing assessment of necessity (i.e. is it still necessary for the child to be away from their family, or has the situation improved?)
- Think of necessity in health terms – we want to do everything possible to "fix" an injury/illness and we **start with the least invasive targeted interventions.** For example, if our arm had a cut which was infected and painful, would we first think to amputate the arm? Would this seem *necessary*? Or would we start by treating the cut and the root cause of the infection? Applying this metaphor to children's care, when we "amputate" children from families, rather than treating the "infection", we see many children unnecessarily placed in alternative care

## Suitability

- If a child's situation has been rigorously assessed and alternative care has been deemed 'necessary,' an appropriate alternative care option should be selected, i.e. an option that is **'suitable' to best meet the child's unique needs and situation**.
- This principle requires that **a range of alternative care options be available, to ensure that real choice exists and that there are varied care options suitable for children of different ages, stages and abilities.**
- Children grow and develop rapidly, meaning similar to the principle of necessity, the principle of suitability should also be reviewed and examined on a regular basis (i.e. it must be assessed that the placement is still suitable to best meet the needs of the child).
- To ensure that an alternative care option is suitable to the unique strengths, needs and situation of the child, it is critically important that the **child is provided with an opportunity to express his or her opinions to** inform the decision. This participation should reflect the age and evolving capacities of the child.

## Best interest of the child

Throughout gatekeeping processes, the best interests of the child should be **the determining factor of all decisions in gatekeeping.**

Factors to be considered in determining the best interest of the child include:
- Views of the child.
- Safe environment able to meet the unique needs and abilities of the child.
- Proximity to family and community relationships, including school, when possible.
- Links to ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious communities of the child.
- Development and identity needs

# Frequently asked questions

1. **What is the difference between a gatekeeping system and a gatekeeping mechanism?**
Gatekeeping systems comprise the total child protection system; all actors who are involved in the child protection system have a gatekeeping role/function.

   The gatekeeping mechanism is *one component* of the broader gatekeeping system. The gatekeeping mechanism is a group of people who make decisions about children's care based on rigorous assessment. The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children notes that decision-making should:
   - "be *carried out on a case-by-case basis*"
   - *"by suitably qualified professionals"*
   - *"in a multidisciplinary team"*

2. **Who decides if it is necessary to remove a child from their family and who chooses the most suitable type of care (i.e. who decides what is in the child's best interest)?**
The gatekeeping mechanism, taking into account views of the child, family, other relevant supporting actors, and case worker recommendation, should make decisions about the removal of children (principle of necessity) from their families and the most suitable type of alternative care (principle of suitability). The gatekeeping mechanism should be comprised of a multidisciplinary team with relevant skills and expertise related to child development and protection, children's rights and alternative care. They should follow strict procedural protocols when making decisions, to ensure that decisions are robust, safe and in the best interest of the child.

3. **Does gatekeeping have a role in the prevention of family separation?**
Yes. Gatekeeping plays a critical role in preventing child-family separation. One of gatekeeping's primary objectives is to prevent the unnecessary separation of children from their families. The diagram to the right demonstrates how effective gatekeeping prevents family separation. When a family is in crisis and a child becomes at risk of separation (step 1), an assessment is conducted to determine what the cause of potential separation might be, and what kind of support might help the family to keep their child. The gatekeeping mechanism makes recommendations about how to best

   

   support the family (step 2), and these recommendations are then implemented (step 3) to help the family to care for their child, and to ensure the child remains in their family (step 4).
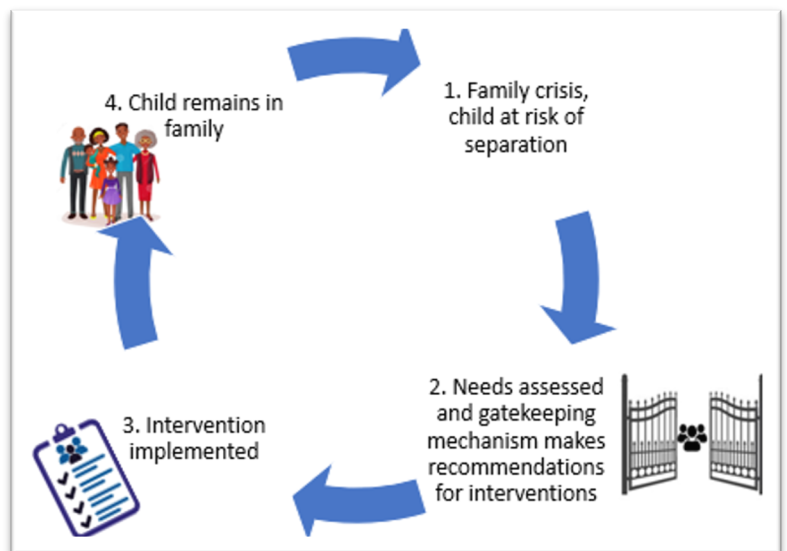
4. **Is gatekeeping only about deinstitutionalisation?**
No. Gatekeeping also involves preventing the unnecessary separation of children from their families by careful assessment, standardized review processes and facilitation of linkages to relevant social services with the aim of supporting families to care for their children. Gatkeeping plays significant role in preventing separation with an aim towards family strengthening. Gatekeeping also relates to reintegrating

children back to their families and communities of origin from other forms of alternative care (for example, temporary foster care).

## 5. How does gatekeeping facilitate planned and successful reintegration?

Gatekeeping helps to facilitate timely reintegration of children in alternative care (foster care, small group homes, large scale residential care) back to their family or community of origin. Gatekeeping promotes thoughtful planning and ensures informed decisions are made about the reintegration process. This includes looking at the strengths and needs of the child or young person and the family or community that he or she will be returning to. Gatekeeping, if done well, should also look at reintegration from a holistic perspective and include the views of the child, young person, family members, case worker, teacher, etc.

## 6. What does gatekeeping have to do with care reform?



Strengthening gatekeeping mechanisms and procedures plays an important role in catalysing care reform. It helps to create demand for and divert resources toward family strengthening services, and high quality, family-based alternative care options. For example, where a gatekeeping mechanism is strong, it will consistently recommend / refer families to support services to enable them to care for their children i.e., preventing separation, or where it is not in a child's best interest to remain in their family, the mechanism will mostly refer to family-based alternative care options.[1] This increases demand for targeted family support services and family-based alternative care services, and signals to service providers that more of these services are needed. In systems which see an overreliance on residential care, strengthened gatekeeping practices can help to redirect resources away from institutional care services (which are known to be expensive) toward family support services and/or to family-based care options (which are known to be more cost effective, as well as better for children's development). This means the childcare system begins to reform using resources which already exist within the system.

## 7. Are gatekeeping mechanisms only operational at national level?

No. Gatekeeping mechanisms can be present at community, sub-national and national level, and ideally it is present at all three. For example, there can be national gatekeeping guidelines or policies which are designed, mandated and overseen by a national body. At sub-national level, there can be a gatekeeping mechanism responsible for implementing the national guidance. This mechanism might have the responsibility for overseeing or supervising the decisions made at the local community level. Sometimes a sub-national gatekeeping mechanism is responsible for making decisions of especially difficult or sensitive cases or as the final deciding body for recommendations made by the gatekeeping mechanism at the local level. At the community or local level, the gatekeeping mechanisms could be responsible for considering, reviewing and making decisions on individual cases.



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[1] Aligned with guidance from the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children that residential care should only be used only as a last resort.