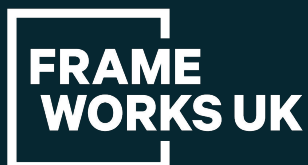


# Talking about child-family separation in Bulgaria

Exploratory research and recommendations

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# Introduction

Each and every child needs the same things to thrive: a safe and stimulating home and stable, caring relationships. We know that, unless there is violence or mistreatment, all children benefit from the care and support that families provide.

Advocates working to support children in Bulgaria are clear on three points: 1) too many children are unnecessarily separated from their families; 2) children are disproportionately separated from families in poverty, families where one member has a disability, and families from marginalised communities; and 3) with the right support, most families can and should stay together.

Experiencing poverty, having a disability, or being part of a marginalised community does not in itself make families more likely to separate. But the social exclusion, discrimination and lack of support some families are *more likely to experience* does.

Advocates working to end family separation face a series of challenges. For people without firsthand experience of it, separation is not seen as a significant issue in Bulgaria. And in particular, people often think that:

- family separation happens when parents make poor choices or have poor morals
- family separation is simply a product of eroded values and the instability of modern life, and
- the state has a role in supporting families –but lacks capacity to do so.

How family separation happens – and so what can prevent it – is neither widely known nor understood.

The framing strategy and recommendations that follow are designed to navigate this challenge. They sit alongside work by [Tanya's Dream Fund](#) to keep families together and at the centre of the child protection system. They draw from a body of exploratory framing research conducted in Bulgaria from August to December 2022, led by the [FrameWorks Institute](#) and [FrameWorks UK](#), and realised on the ground by [Junction Bulgaria](#).

We make these recommendations with the recognition that they are based on exploratory research only:

- eight peer discourse sessions with the public (including people with firsthand experience of family separation), in which we both explored how people understand this and related issues and tested framing strategies to build understanding and support for alternatives

- two usability trials with advocates in the family policy sector, in which we refined these strategies.

Further research is needed to deepen these findings.

### **What is framing and why does it matter?**

Framing is the choices we make about what ideas we share – and how we share them. It's what we emphasise, how we explain an issue, and what we leave unsaid. These choices affect how people think, feel and act.

The way in which a communication is framed shapes how we respond to it. When new frames enter public discourse, they can change how people make sense of an issue – how they understand it, who they think is responsible for addressing problems, and what kinds of solutions they support. As a result, frames are a critical part of social change.

Unlike a set of key messages, frames can and should be adapted to different contexts. This means we can tailor our communications for different audiences and channels while continuing to talk about our issue in a consistent way.

# Recommendations

1. [Stress the importance of family stability for all Bulgarians](#)
2. [Talk about how we all need solid ground to build and raise our families](#)
3. [Tell individual stories in context](#)
4. [Share solutions as well as challenges](#)
5. [Avoid appeals to fairness – and be careful talking about children's rights](#)

## RECOMMENDATION #1

### Stress the importance of family stability for all Bulgarians

Bulgarians already believe that family is fundamental to children's wellbeing. Connect the idea of stable families to stable societies to show how keeping families together (where possible) is fundamental to Bulgaria's wellbeing.

**Participant (parent):** Children need stability. Stable families are the foundation of a stable society. By improving our family support system, we can help more families experience stability.

**Participant (first-hand experience of separation):** [Children need] the relaxed family environment. And not only family, but peace in general.

Make sure to:

- talk about family stability *first*, before talking about disabilities, poverty, and/or ethnicity as factors in family separation.

#### Order matters

The way we start a communication matters. It shapes (or primes) the way people interpret what comes next; how open people are to our ideas – or if they shut those ideas out.

If we start with a narrow focus on 'vulnerable groups,' like people living in poverty, we risk reinforcing distance and indifference. People become unable – or unwilling – to see themselves and their families as at risk. Instead they draw on existing stereotypes of *who* is affected by family separation, which can reinforce harmful ideas about the most marginalised people in society. This means that they're less likely to support collective

solutions to reduce family separation and more likely to blame those ‘other’ families for their circumstances.

We can start to overcome this thinking by placing specific groups in a broader, collective frame – *the stability all families need* – and then talking about the specific factors that affect families living in poverty, experiencing disability, and from marginalised ethnic groups.

## How to do it

**Connect *family stability* to social stability.** Use words like ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’ to build collective thinking early on – and to remind people that all of us have a stake in keeping families together.

**Combine this with the *solid ground* metaphor to talk about the external factors that can shape and stabilise family life.** Decent wages, an effective transport system and state-funded healthcare, for example, all shore up ground around families – and improve family social stability.

**Show how all families can benefit from government action, and then narrow in on specific families.** And show a range of families affected (like ages, ethnicities, classes) in different circumstances (like locations, health, income). This helps broaden people’s understanding of *who* is affected by family separation – and who needs support.

**Avoid talking about ‘family values.’** This makes it harder for people to see the systems and conditions that shape family life. It also makes it easier to blame family separation on a decline in ‘moral values’ in Bulgarian society – and in Roma communities specifically.

**Don’t over-emphasise families’ or children’s vulnerability** in ways that make them seem damaged beyond repair. This is likely to reinforce distance and stigma towards different social groups.

Instead of	Try
Parents of children with disabilities face significant challenges: exclusion from kindergarten, judgement from teachers and friends. It’s not surprising that these families are more likely to separate – they need more support.	The <b>stability</b> of our society depends on the <b>stability of our families</b> . When children are separated from their families, this <b>disrupts</b> our society. We need to support all families to stay together – and this means more support for parents of children with disabilities, who can face significant challenges.

## Why this works

Bulgarians recognise the instability facing families across the country. Disruption to economic, social and family life was a pervasive concern throughout each discourse session – sometimes this took the form of nostalgia for the predictability of the Socialist era.

Bulgarians also draw on a shared model of parental support when thinking about child wellbeing. Family members – including extended family, but especially mothers – are seen as fundamental to child development.

**Participant (parent):** The family is the basis of everything for the child.

**Participant (teacher):** We all want to have a stable family, but at some point something goes wrong, like before the pandemic, now the global crisis, and the problems in families get worse.

This gives us an opening: to make the case that interventions that help stabilise families can also bring stability to communities and the nation. And that unnecessary family separation is itself a source of instability for families – and disruptive to the lives and wellbeing of children.

Significantly, *family stability* guides people's thinking towards systemic solutions. In discourse sessions, participants focused on government support – not individual effort – as a way to ensure family and social stability.

## RECOMMENDATION #2

### Talk about how we all need solid ground to build and raise our families

Use the metaphor of *solid ground* to build people's understanding of the systems and circumstances surrounding families. Make sure to:

- name the systems that shore up ground and stabilise our lives, and
- explain how things like poverty and disability weaken that ground and make it harder for families to stay together.

## How to do it

**Use this metaphor in different ways.** Draw on a range of images and synonyms associated with solid ground to explain the needs of children and families. In discourse sessions, participants talked about a secure base, strong roots, stable foundations and the importance of tending and preparing the soil to cultivate healthy family life.

**Participant (works with children with disabilities):** A stable base, it is the key.

**Participant (parent):** Poverty, social marginalisation and disabilities can lead to decay and erosion.

**Talk about the preventative support that can stabilise and shore up ground.** And be specific. For example: increasing the winter heating allowance, better state support for parents of children with health conditions, scaling local civil society programmes for families, and improving access to education. Name the institutions and organisations responsible for shoring up the ground surrounding families.

**Avoid a narrow focus on individual households.** Focusing on individual hardships narrows people's understanding of how family separation happens –and who is affected by it. Use *solid ground* to bring in factors that can affect all families, as well as specific populations or groups.

**Don't use *solid ground* to paint a harrowing picture of families struggling against irreversible erosion.** When we call attention to problems, we also need to say and show how they can be fixed.

Instead of	Try
All families need help when they're struggling – and monthly social benefits can be the help families need to stay together.	All of us need a <b>solid ground</b> to <b>build</b> our lives and <b>grow</b> our families. Monthly social benefits help <b>lay a strong foundation</b> for families to stay together and <b>thrive</b> .

### Why this works

People tend to think that families are separated when individual parents make choices – either to abandon their family (due to poor morals) or to seek economic security (due to poor finances). This leads people to reason that family separation is inevitable and unfixable.

Metaphors can build understanding of complex issues. Solid ground drives attention to the broader societal contexts that shape lives and decision-making, and how those contexts can and should be changed.

After exposure to the *solid ground* metaphor:

**Participant:** We can want to create a healthy family, but along the way of life, we don't know what will happen... But if it is a stable relationship, they will overcome any difficulties.



**Participant (parent):** When someone is in trouble, someone lends a hand. These should be observed, not only in terms of the Roma people, but for everyone. And to have more programmes for families and for children.

### RECOMMENDATION #3

## Tell individual stories in context

Add context to individual stories to show how systems and environments aren't working – and how they need to work differently to help families to stay together.

This means we:

1. focus on the options available to families – not the choices made by individual caregivers
2. name and explain the systems and conditions that improve or limit families' options, and
3. show scale by connecting to others with similar experiences.

### Messengers matter

An effective messenger can amplify the effects of their message. Expertise on the subject matter – gained through study or experience – enhances credibility and makes it more likely that an audience will hear us.

In discourse sessions, participants with first-hand experience of family separation focused on the importance of role models: people who could help others imagine different options and opportunities in their own lives.

We can make the most of this by asking messengers with first-hand experience to explicitly talk about context – and the external systems of support that can and should help individuals to thrive.

### How to do it

**Talk about what is and isn't available to children and families.** Give examples of what makes it easier or harder for families to stay together – and for children to thrive. Talking about things like nearby schools and well-resourced Day Care Centres can help focus the story on the systemic supports that all of us need – rather than on individual 'willpower' or 'ability'.

**Connect individual stories to others in similar circumstances.** It can be hard to connect one person or family’s story to wider social trends. Use phrases like “Like a lot of families in Varna, we had to...” or “Hundreds of families are forced apart across Bulgaria” to make these connections explicit.

**Avoid ‘hero’ or ‘saviour’ stories that only focus on the life of an individual** without naming the external factors that helped or harmed. For positive stories, celebrate what’s possible when we have [solid ground](#) beneath us.

**Avoid reinforcing the idea that stress and hardship builds character.** This makes it harder for people to see the need for family support and services. And easier to dismiss negative experiences like family separation as a necessary part of life. If we need to talk about stress, explain that [most forms of stress undermine children’s development \(video in English\)](#).

Instead of	Try
Elena lost her job when the pandemic hit.  “I just had to make some tough decisions,” she says. “Mila had to stay at home and help. And that’s when the social worker got involved.”	<b>Like a lot of people with insecure work</b> , Elena lost her job when the pandemic hit.  “I just <b>didn’t have the same options</b> ,” she says. <b>“We couldn’t afford the bus to get Mila to school.</b> And that’s when the social worker got involved.”

### Why this works

Advocates in Bulgaria face two challenges when sharing personal experiences of family separation: the extent of unnecessary separation is neither known nor widely understood.

In discourse sessions, people defaulted to blaming individual parents for their choices or – for Roma parents in particular – for the perceived traits of their community. Participants recognised that some families were more likely to struggle and separate, but not *why* this was the case.

**Participant (parent):** The biggest problems are in the minorities. They have an integration problem... they drop out of the education system.

Telling stories in context drives people’s attention to the systems and circumstances that shape family life across Bulgaria. It makes it harder for people to blame individuals or communities for what happens to them. And easier to [make the case for systems change](#).

## RECOMMENDATION #4

### Share solutions as well as challenges

It's not enough to say that families are being separated unnecessarily in Bulgaria. When we talk about a problem, we also need to show how it can be fixed.

This means sharing a range of solutions: from national increases to social benefits to family-specific support like better-resourced kindergartens.

#### How to do it

**Balance urgency (we need to act) and efficacy (we can act).** Be explicit about the change that institutions and organisations can make to [shore up ground](#) – and the difference this will make to children and families.

**Be aspirational as well as realistic.** Talk about the support that can and should be there for all families in Bulgaria – and how this will help them to stay together. Avoid only sharing bleak facts and statistics about the scale of family separation. These are likely to trigger disbelief (this can't be true) or fatalism (this can't be solved).

**Use straightforward language – and give concrete examples of solutions.** Complicated, technical or specialist language signals that this is an issue for other people to solve.

**Focus on access to support – as well as the need for it.** Families in remote villages, for example, won't benefit from more day care centres in cities if the roads and bus systems to get there aren't usable.

Instead of	Try
Unnecessary family separation is a real and growing problem across Bulgaria.	Timely support for parents can help families stay together and provide the best care for children across Bulgaria.

#### Why this works

Bulgarians recognise the state's responsibility to support families, but often do not fully understand *how* the state can keep families together. Or are sceptical about its capacity to do so.

Sharing specific examples of good policy and practice can help fill in the blanks. Talking about what the state can do and is already doing to support families sets an expectation that the state can and *should* prioritise support for families.

Focusing on systems-level solutions and access to resources can help divert people away from blaming individuals or groups. For example: improving *structural* access to education – with more buses and safer roads between rural homes and urban schools – could reduce people’s tendency to blame parents (and specifically Roma parents) when their children can’t attend school.

## RECOMMENDATION #5

### Avoid appeals to fairness – and be careful talking about children's rights

Appeals to fairness and children’s rights alone can backfire. These terms are often used in vague ways and are misunderstood by the public. Or they are co-opted in harmful ways, like conflating ‘fairness’ with ‘deservingness’ or ‘rights’ with ‘privileges.’

Instead of fairness, try appealing to *family stability*. And when talking about children’s rights, first talk about *why* those rights matter to children and families.

#### How to do it

**Don’t rely on appeals to children’s rights alone.** Talk about the specific needs of children – like stable environments and safe, supportive relationships – and why these matter to all children and families.

**Be explicit about policy and programme asks – and the difference they can make to children’s and *families’ stability*.** Not everyone will make the connection between children’s rights and children’s needs.

#### Why this works

Appeals to children’s rights alone can backfire. In short: people often support what rights are *for* (like keeping children safe and healthy), but don’t connect these things to children’s rights.

What people do connect to children’s rights is often unproductive. Like the belief that rights are privileges to earn, or that ‘entitled children’ have too many rights. In discourse sessions, participants talked consistently about the weaponisation of rights – either by children against their parents, or as part of a wider breakdown in society.

Participants with first-hand experience linked this weaponisation to rights frames used against families – and in itself a rationale for separation.

Appeals to fairness risk a similar backfire effect. People often link fairness to deservingness – and then negatively evaluate the behaviours of specific groups. In discourse sessions, a fairness frame

was easily hijacked to critique Roma communities (seen as unfairly abusing the system), the misuse of 'fairness' by politicians, and life in general. Fairness led to cynicism and fatalism – and failed to drive people's attention towards the systemic causes and consequences of family separation.

Instead of	Try
Children should have their rights respected and realised. Unnecessary family separation is symptomatic of wider unfairness in Bulgarian society.	Children <b>need safe environments and stable relationships to be safe and well.</b> This means taking action to keep struggling families together – and <b>help every child in Bulgaria to thrive.</b>

# Conclusion

To end unnecessary family separation in Bulgaria, we need to tell a new story: a story centred on stable families on solid – shored up – ground. A story about children who thrive when families are supported – across all Bulgaria, including in marginalised communities. About changes to systems and environment that are both urgent and possible.

This brief is part of this story. It joins efforts by funders and advocates across the country to refocus public commitments on the vital importance of keeping families together, wherever possible.

# About FrameWorks UK

FrameWorks UK is a not-for-profit communications research organisation, and we work with mission-driven organisations to communicate about social issues in ways that will create change. We're the sister organisation of the FrameWorks Institute in the US. Our research shows how people understand social issues, and we use this knowledge to develop and test strategic communications to help organisations shape public conversation.

Change the story. Change the world.

Learn more at [www.frameworksuk.org](http://www.frameworksuk.org)

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