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A child learns to ride a bicycle, loses a first tooth or wins a school prize. Somewhere overseas, a parent learns about it later, possibly through a photograph, a recorded message or an exhausted call at the end of a shift.

For Nepal's families separated by labour migration, ordinary childhood unfolds across international borders. The wider economy can count the money workers send home. It is far harder to count the school events missed, the responsibilities that move to grandparents, or the compromises that parents and children make to preserve a relationship.

This is not an argument that overseas work is a mistake. Families leave precisely because the earnings can improve their lives. But the same decision can relieve financial pressure and create emotional pressure. Both deserve to be visible.

The people behind the term ‘left behind’

The phrase ‘children left behind’ appears in international research to describe children who remain in their country or community when one or both parents migrate. It does not describe a single family arrangement. One child may stay with a parent and see the other on video daily; another lives with an aunt or grandparent; another has little contact and precarious financial support.

UNICEF’s policy work calls for migration and child-wellbeing systems to be examined together. That is a more useful approach than assuming all separated children experience the same outcome.

Income matters. Reliable earnings can pay school bills, fund healthcare, protect families from debt and give children possibilities that were unavailable before departure. Equally, a transfer of money cannot automatically provide a trustworthy adult when a child feels frightened, bullied or unwell.

The question should not be whether migration produces only benefits or only harm. It is which circumstances help children

flourish, and which create avoidable risks.

An invisible transfer of care

Migration can shift parenting duties without formal recognition. A grandmother who intended to help for a few months may become the person handling school attendance, meals and doctor visits for several years. An older sibling may take on work that would otherwise belong to an adult. A parent remaining in Nepal may have to manage both paid work and most household responsibilities.

In a documented case from Surkhet, UNICEF Nepal described a grandmother caring for her granddaughter after both parents went to India for employment. The focus of that account was the child's need for mental-health support and the relief that came when services became available to the family. It shows why caregivers themselves need support, not merely gratitude.

A separate UNICEF account from Ramechhap described siblings coping with extended parental absence and little contact. Those circumstances were severe. It would be misleading to present them as typical of migrant-worker families. But they demonstrate what can happen when a family's informal safety net fails.

The difference between parental migration and parental abandonment is essential. Sending earnings, remaining involved

and making a caregiving arrangement are not equivalent to neglect. Nor does providing money make all other needs disappear.

The limits of the video call

Mobile technology has changed long-distance parenting. Children can show exam results in real time. Parents can join festival greetings from abroad. Relatives may coordinate medical decisions and share daily routines through group calls. These connections are meaningful, especially when the alternatives once included long silences and expensive calls.

Yet communication still depends on working hours, privacy, connectivity and trust. A night-shift worker may be asleep when the child returns from school. Shared accommodation can make a private conversation difficult. Some parents hide workplace anxiety because they do not want their children to worry; some children hide difficulties because they know how hard their parents work.

When conversations become brief, they can collapse into practical questions: Have you eaten? Are you studying? Did you get good marks? A child needs those questions answered, but also room to be ordinary—to complain about a friend or recount something funny without feeling obliged to prove that the family's sacrifice is worthwhile.

No application can replace that space on its own. It has to be cultivated deliberately.

What the research can and cannot tell us

It is tempting to attribute every educational or psychological difficulty to migration. That is not sound reporting. Child wellbeing is shaped by the quality of caregiving, economic insecurity, family relationships, school environment, age and many other factors. Families who migrate may also face challenges that existed before anyone left.

Studies using different methods or populations may reach different conclusions. Correlation alone does not establish that parental absence caused an outcome. Nor should improved household income be credited with every positive change.

The more defensible conclusion is that separation changes the conditions of care. Good policy needs to identify households with greater vulnerability rather than treating migration status itself as a diagnosis.

Schools can help by keeping an accurate emergency contact, recognising caregiver arrangements and referring children who need support. Local services can ensure grandparents and other guardians know how to reach health and protection programmes. Recruitment and employment policy can better account for

workers' need to maintain regular family contact.

When homecoming changes the family again

A returning parent may expect a reunion to restore everything. But years abroad may have altered the family's routines. The child might have grown independent, attached strongly to a grandparent or become shy with the adult they know mostly as a face on a screen.

That adjustment is not necessarily rejection. Relationships need time to recover everyday familiarity. The relatives who carried responsibility while a parent worked abroad deserve recognition; children should not be asked to perform immediate happiness or forget the difficulties of separation.

For some families, reunification brings relief. For others, another contract begins within months. Economic pressure can turn a one-time departure into a recurring structure of family life.

What the remittance accounts leave out

In its October 2026 economic assessment, the World Bank reports remittance inflows equal to 35.8 percent of Nepal's GDP in FY2025/26. The figure captures a major pillar of national financial stability. It does not tell us how many children have a dependable caregiver, how much unpaid work grandparents perform, or

whether parent and child can speak privately.

There is no contradiction in recognising the economic contribution of migrant workers while demanding better family protections.

The stronger response would be to improve the quality of work abroad, build real employment choices at home and make support for separated families part of migration planning.

For the child, a parent's departure is rarely an abstract national economic decision. It may mean that an empty seat at a school event stays empty, even while next term's school fees have been paid. Nepal needs an economy that recognises the value of both.

Reporting note: Institutional sources and previously documented cases are attributed. No new interview or child quotation is represented as original reporting.

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