

A commitment to care, regardless

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Working and living within the confines of Ethiopia's impoverished reality, I have had to clarify what I believe is important about families. You see, as an American I know that extreme poverty can disqualify parents as fit guardians, requiring them to send their children into government care. Now, as an American living in Ethiopia and working to keep children in families, I have had to wrestle with this viewpoint, because most of these children's guardians are extremely poor – some poorer than I ever imagined possible. So, do I disqualify these guardians based on their income level? If I did, there would be about 100 children without guardians just from the non-governmental organization (NGO) I work with alone. To illustrate this point, let me tell you about Hanna and Sarah.

Hanna, 11, and Sarah, 6, are sisters who come to Children's Home Ethiopia's Drop-In Center. What's unique about Hanna and Sarah is that they have both a father and a mother who are together (this is usually not the case for CHE's beneficiaries). Even more uncommon is that they live with these parents rather than on the streets.

I was able to visit Hanna and Sarah's home a while ago. I sat under a plastic canopy directly across from the entrance to their home – a plastic house that is about 4 feet tall and covers approximately 6 square feet of space. The smells of what I believe came from rotting food and nearby public toilets were nauseating. With flies swarming around us, the girls sat right beside me in delight as their father explained their family's history. Amidst the stories of living on the streets, fighting with police over places to reside, and other unbelievable events, I heard one thing that gave me hope for the girls – Hanna and Sarah's parents had been together for more than 12 years and all three of their children (Hanna and Sarah have an older brother) lived at home, albeit a plastic one.

Of course, there is much more research and work to be done with Hanna and Sarah's family, but will CHE take the girls away because of poverty? No, rather we will pray and work to keep this family intact as it has been for more than 12 years and also look to provide solutions for their economic crisis.

In America I am quite sure that Hanna and Sarah would have been pulled out of their home after such a visit, but in Ethiopia this is not an option. So, does this change what is important about a family in my mind? I think it has to because of where I live and the kind of work I do here. For me, what is important and necessary for a family is a commitment to care for one another even in the midst of difficult situations, a willingness to do whatever it takes to stay together in the most trying times, and a decision by the parental figures to love their children no matter what. At this point, it appears that Hanna and Sarah's family is well qualified.