

Information for Prospective Foster Carers



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Congratulations on taking the first step to becoming a foster carer!

Every night in Victoria there are children in need of a place to call home. Foster carers are **people in our community** who provide safe, nurturing homes for children and young people who cannot live with their families.

Long-term and short-term foster carers make a difference to thousands of children across Victoria every day – whether that's over a weekend, a month or more.

This booklet will give you some key information to get you started on your journey to becoming a foster carer. You will also receive an information pack from your local agency after they receive your enquiry.

If you have any further questions you can always call **1800 929 181**, or visit www.unitingvictas.org.au/foster-care

Foster care 101

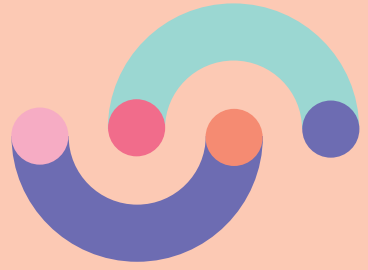
What is foster care?

- Foster care is the temporary care of children and young people by members of the community who become trained and accredited foster carers.
- Foster care is about looking after and supporting vulnerable children and young people between the ages of 0-18 who are unable to live at home or with other family members.
- In most cases, when a child or young person first comes into foster care, the aim is to support the parents to have their child or young person return to their care, as soon as it is safely possible. Foster carers play a key role to support reunification, noting most children and young people return home to their parents within six months.

How long does a placement last?

- Foster carers may care for children and young people for a night, a weekend or longer (including months and years).
- Some carers may choose to provide only one type of care, while others may provide a combination of care arrangements.
- Foster carers play an invaluable role in caring for vulnerable children and young people. Foster carers provide safe, secure, stable environments and positive relationships that are fundamental to healing.





Key words

Agency: the community service organisation (CSO) or Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) that provides services including foster care. Your agency will guide you through the process of becoming a foster carer, provide you with training and support, and organise placements of children and young people in your home once you're accredited.

Agency case worker: this person will support and supervise your foster care placements. They will be your day-to-day contact for support regarding care of the child, and they will coordinate the care team.

Carer: this is you! As a foster carer, you open your home to a child or young person, offering stability, security and support until that child can return to their family. You can care for all types of children, from newborn babies to young people up to age 18.

Care team: a team who communicate about the child to ensure their safety and wellbeing. Often includes the agency case worker, the child or young person's case manager, the carer and parents (as appropriate), the child protection worker, and other significant adults in the child's life such as teachers or therapists.

Case plan: a document that aligns with the current court order. It states all significant decisions made by the department concerning the child or young person's present and future care and wellbeing, including care and contact arrangements. You can expect to receive a copy of the case plan for the child or young person in your care.

Cultural plan: an additional plan written when an Aboriginal child or young person is placed in foster care. This plan supports the child and young person to maintain and develop their Aboriginal identity and encourage their connection to their Aboriginal community and culture.

Department: the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH).

Family reunification: this refers to the goal of safely returning a child or young person to the care of their parent or parents. When a child or young person first comes into foster care, the aim is to support the parents to have their child or young person return to their care as soon as it is safely possible. As a foster carer, you play a key role in supporting reunification.

Placement: when a child or young person is placed with a foster carer.

Foster care 101

Types of foster care

Emergency foster care:

For children and young people who require immediate care due to concerns for their safety. Because these arrangements are urgent, there is usually very little notice before a child or young person is placed with the carer. They often occur in the night.

"I knew we weren't ready for providing longer term care. Often we'll get a few hours notice that there's a child in need, so we give them a special book with pictures of us and a map of our house. For the older kids especially it helps them feel welcome." – Marcus, foster carer

Respite foster care:

Short-term and/or intermittent care provided for children and young people living with full-time foster and kinship carers or parents, often for one or two weekends a month, or for a week during school holidays, or as required.

"Doing respite or really short-term care is about relieving other foster carers and giving them a break so that they're able to sustain long-term placements. [It gives] the child an opportunity to see what other families are like." – Sue Anne, foster carer





Short-term foster care:

For children and young people who require care ranging from overnight up to about six months. Children and young people requiring short-term care are often reunified with their parents, or may be placed with extended family at the end of the foster care arrangement.

“I’ve had a pair of brothers, 6 and 14, with me for the last 2 months. They are such funny kids; they’ve been through a lot but I can see them flourishing as they get more opportunities to settle into school. We have regular contact with their parents, who are so excited to see how well the boys are doing. It may still be a few months before they’re home, but we’ll get there!” – Aisha, foster carer

Long-term foster care:

Care arranged when a child or young person cannot return home for some time. Long-term foster care may cease when a permanent care arrangement is organised, or when the child or young person reaches adulthood and becomes independent.

“I’ve had two long-term placements, one who recently turned 18, the other who is 12. The 18-year-old is part of our family, and regularly checks in and comes for dinner, or to play Xbox with the 14-year-old and our two biological children. She came to us with a fair few problems, so to see her flourish and connect over time has been so rewarding.” – Jasvinder, foster carer

Foster care 101

Foster care myths

Myth	Fact
You cannot provide foster care while working	Many foster carers work full- or part-time. Some children need a full-time stay-at-home carer, such as babies and children under five. You can talk to your agency about the kind of care that is suited to your circumstances and work commitments. If your circumstances change, you can always change the kind of care you provide.
You need to be married to be a foster carer	Foster carers can be married, single, or in de facto relationships. They can be any sexuality, gender, or gender identity. We need foster carers from a wide variety of backgrounds to support children and young people in out-of-home care.
You need to have a big house and own your own home to be a foster carer	Foster carers can rent or own their own home. Some agencies ask that a child or sibling group have their own room, while others are happy for children to share rooms if there is enough space for them to do so comfortably. Agencies require that sleeping arrangements be age appropriate and meet the child's individual needs. If you give us a call, we can ensure you are referred to an agency that is appropriate for your circumstances.
You need parenting experience to be a foster carer	Children and young people in foster care need stability and support – anyone can provide this. If you have concerns about your experience with children just remember that you will be provided training to ensure you are well equipped and prepared to welcome a child into your home.
You can't be a foster carer if you have children still at home with you	We need foster carers from all different backgrounds, including those who have children. Children and young people in out-of-home care can have complex needs requiring time and attention, which may mean that some placements will not be appropriate for those with children in the home. However, many children and young people will benefit from other children with whom they can socialise and develop, and these can provide additional strong relationships. Speak to your agency about what will work best for you and your family, and ensure you take the time to talk to your children about potential foster care placements.



Myth

Fact

Foster care is the same as adoption

Adoption is where you become the permanent, legal parent of a child or young person. As a foster carer you will care for a child or young person for a fixed period, with the common goal to reunite the child or young person with their birth family where possible. In foster care the child's guardian is defined through the court orders and is often the Department or birth family.

Children and young people in foster care are too challenging

Children and young people in out-of-home care are likely to have faced challenges, however they are also just like other children; it is critical you approach fostering with an open heart and a willingness to try to understand their needs. As a foster carer it is your role to show them support, boundaries, safety, and help guide them through different stages and challenges. Persistent and consistent care is critical, and your agency will provide you support with this.

You have to commit to having a child or young person living with you for years at a time

Some people enter long-term care arrangements, but many others undertake care for as little as one or two weekends a month. The type of care you are best suited to provide will depend on your personal circumstances, and may change as your situation changes. For example, you may start out offering respite care for other foster placements before moving on to short- or long-term care, or vice versa.

Parents who have children in foster care are bad

Parents with children in foster care are human and are likely to have experienced challenges as well. By providing a safe and stable home for children whose family situation is not safe, you are allowing parents to get help and support in the hopes that this will improve. Foster carers play a crucial role in supporting relationships with parents and extended family, ideally so the child can eventually return home. Some children will never be able to return home, but retaining connection to their family, including any siblings, is a crucial part of supporting their identity and growth.

One person can't make a difference in a child's life

Having a stable, safe space where a child can be a child is the most important thing a foster carer can provide. Your care can be crucial in supporting a child and family through difficulty, whether that child is home after a few days or ends up on a long-term placement.

Can I be a foster carer?

Who can become a carer?

- You can become a carer if you are 21 or over, have room in your home and of course, care about children and young people.
- Foster carers come from all backgrounds and life stages. Foster carers are singles, couples, same-sex couples, families and come from all age groups. They may be renting or living in their own home; employed, studying or retired; and come from diverse cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds.
- Foster care involves everyone in a household. If you live with a partner or have children of your own, it is important to discuss it with them before applying. All household members over 18 will be involved in the assessment process and undergo background checks. You will all need to feel comfortable and ready to take the next step.

How long does it take to become a foster carer?

- On average it takes four to six months to become an accredited foster carer.
- However, everyone's circumstances are different. This process is a collaboration between you and your agency, who will schedule visits, organise training and assessments at a pace that suits you.

Will I be interviewed or assessed before becoming a foster carer?

- Yes, the process involves several different assessments. These will give you and your agency time to discuss your circumstances and make sure you are well prepared to become a carer.
- During this process, recruitment workers from your foster care agency will visit your home to:
 - conduct a home environment check
 - ask you to write your life story from birth to present
 - complete reference checks
 - interview you and members of your family.

Can I be a foster carer for Aboriginal children?

Across Victoria, Aboriginal children in foster care are being transferred to ACCOs to ensure Aboriginal children in care and their carers are receiving culturally-safe support. Maintaining connections with family, Country and culture are vital in building Aboriginal children and young people in care's sense of identity as Aboriginal.

I am Aboriginal and interested in fostering children. How do I know which agency is right for me?

Prospective foster carers can choose any agency within their local government area, this can be a CSO or an ACCO. An ACCO is a non-government organisation that is controlled and operated by Aboriginal community. It is governed by an Aboriginal Board which is elected by members of the local Aboriginal community or communities where it is based. ACCOs deliver services that build strength and empowerment within local Aboriginal communities and people.

If you are Aboriginal, you are not required to foster Aboriginal children. However, Aboriginal foster carers have specific knowledge and a unique understanding of culture that can often benefit Aboriginal children and young people in their care.

I am not Aboriginal, am I eligible to foster Aboriginal children?

Yes. ACCOs welcome carers from all backgrounds who are committed to caring for Aboriginal children. You will be offered extra training and support to increase your knowledge of Aboriginal culture, so you are best placed to care for an Aboriginal child and support them to explore and learn about their culture and cultural connections.

If you are interested in learning more, please check out our Information for Prospective Carers of Aboriginal Children and Young People.

The process

The accreditation process

Step 1. First contact with an agency

After you submit an enquiry, you will be contacted by a worker from your local agency. This is a great opportunity to ask questions and provide the agency with information about your household. They may also send you an information pack.

Step 2. Information session

You will be invited to attend an information session or exchange held either at the agency or in your own home.

Step 3. Paperwork and checks

You and all adults in the household will have to complete a Health Check, Police Check, a Working with Children Check and referee checks. You will also be asked to write your life story. Your agency will provide support in completing these tasks.

Step 4. Training

To help you prepare you will undertake 16 hours of compulsory training, offered at various dates and times that suit your schedule.

Step 5. Home visits and assessments

A representative from the agency will come to your home to confirm that it is safe, secure and has enough space for a child. Together you will work through all the assessments needed to become a foster carer.

The agency will inform you of their recommendations and discuss any concerns prior to the next step.

Step 6. Accreditation panel

A report of your training and assessment is sent to an accreditation panel for approval. The panel is made up of staff from your foster care agency and at least one representative from the Department of Health and Human Services. You will receive a copy of the report beforehand.

Step 7. Accreditation and review

Approval is granted by your foster care agency and you will be asked to sign a code of conduct agreement. You will then be accredited for an initial 12 month period. Your accreditation is reviewed annually.

Step 8. FCAV membership

FCAV (Foster Care Association of Victoria) provide foster carer advocacy, training, information and support when you need it. Your agency offers free membership as soon as you're accredited.

Step 9. Placement

Your agency will contact you to ask if you're able to have a child, young person or sibling group stay with you. This final step is known as placement.

Throughout the process you will be supported by your agency, and you can always call Fostering Connections or FCAV with any questions you may have.

The process



What type of training will I receive before I become a foster carer?

- All foster carers complete 16 hours of compulsory training, provided by your agency at no cost to you. Your training will prepare you for the day-to-day responsibilities and challenges. It covers all aspects of a placement, from welcoming a child into your home, through common daily experiences, right through to what it's like to say goodbye.
- The training covers:
 - your responsibilities as a foster carer
 - common challenges and characteristics of children who are placed in foster care
 - experiencing and processing grief and loss
 - how to support children and young people that have experienced abuse or trauma
 - working with birth families
 - working with your foster care team
 - maintaining a child or young person's cultural connections
 - managing the end of a foster care placement.
- If you are preparing to care for Aboriginal children, you will receive additional training to ensure you are equipped with the skills you need, so you are best placed to care for Aboriginal children and support them to explore and have an emerging knowledge of their culture and cultural connections.
- Once accredited you will also have access to training through your agency and other organisations (see page 18).

Frequently asked questions

What will I learn about a child or young person before accepting a placement?

- You can always ask for information about a child or young person which will help you prepare for the placement, including information on their medical needs, routine, behavioural needs, placement history, and the reason for their current placement. You'll also be told the child's family details, contact arrangements, and how to best support them culturally.

Can I choose the age of the child or young person who is placed with me?

- Yes. Carers are accredited for the ages and genders of children. During the assessment process, you can discuss the age of the child or young person that best suit your circumstances.
- Many carers prefer to care for foster children the same age as their own biological children; some prefer to care for children younger than their youngest child; others enjoy working with school-age children or teenagers.
- Your agency will always want to match you with a child who is a good fit for your family. However, it is worth noting that the more specific you are about the type of child best suited to your circumstances, the longer it may take to find an appropriate match.

Can I say no to a placement?

- Yes, you can always say no.
- Be open and honest with your agency about when you can and cannot accept a child into your home. Many foster carers take breaks for periods of time and then return to caring once they are ready, and many carers decide that a specific placement is not right for their family for any number of reasons. Your agency will be able to support you through these decisions.

Frequently asked questions

I have only lived in Australia for a few years, am I eligible to foster?

There is a requirement that non-permanent residents or non-Australian citizens can only be accredited to provide respite care or emergency care. This doesn't affect New Zealand citizens subject to a Special Category Visa (SCV) due to the special provisions enabling them to visit, live and work indefinitely in Australia provided they are assessed as being settled.

In addition, non-Australian citizens or non-permanent resident carers may be considered to provide longer term care for a particular child (excluding permanent care) if it is in that child's best interests; for example, if the carers intend to stay in Australia and are from the same cultural background as a child requiring placement.

Do children in foster care have contact with their family?

Yes. Contact plans are determined by the child or young person's Case Plan or the Children's Court. The child or young person's safety is always the priority and each situation is assessed individually. The majority of children in foster care have contact with their family unless there is a very good reason not to. Most children in foster care enjoy seeing their families and family contact is an important way to keep them in touch with their culture and community. Children in foster care get a lot of benefit out of seeing a positive relationship between their foster carers and their birth family, and your agency will help facilitate this in any way that is appropriate for your placement.

For Aboriginal children it is especially important to ensure they have contact with their families and communities, especially if they are placed with a non-Aboriginal carer. Aboriginal children need to remain connected to their family and community to ensure a sense of belonging and development of their cultural identity. If you are caring for an Aboriginal child, they will have a Cultural Care Plan, which ensures they have access to everything they need to maintain those ties.





If I have a police record, am I still eligible to become a foster carer?

All foster carers undertake Police and Working with Children Checks as part of their accreditation process. Agencies are required to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the children in their care. Some offences, like sexual or physical abuse (particularly towards a child) will rule out approval, while other offences may not. It is important to discuss any criminal history with your agency upfront. Minor historic issues may not impact your eligibility to be a carer, so please discuss your circumstances with your agency early on.

Do I receive financial reimbursement as a foster carer?

Yes. You will receive a care allowance. This allowance is not a 'payment' for being a carer, but is intended to contribute to a range of day-to-day expenses incurred in the provision of care. This includes food, clothing, basic personal items, transport, pocket money and entertainment. A care allowance is not income, so it is tax free, and is provided by DFFH.

In general, payments start at just over \$400/fortnight, paid pro-rata to emergency and respite carers. This payment increases depending on the age of the child or young person and the complexity of their needs. This might sound hard to calculate, but your agency will provide guidance and extra support when it comes to understanding the care allowance, and you can also read more information on the [DFFH website](#).

Do I get support for daily routines, like school pick-up or child care?

Carers will usually be responsible for their foster child's daily activities, such as transport to and from school. That said, you are not alone – many carers tell us that when there have been emergencies or the unexpected pops up, their agencies have been very active in offering extra support.

Older children or teenagers may be more independent and be able to take public transport or walk to school unaccompanied. Some agencies do have resources available to organise a staff member or transport agency to bring the child to and from school and other activities if you are unavailable.

Specific child care arrangements will depend on the needs of the child. All carers are eligible for the Child Care Rebate and some may be eligible for the Child Care Benefit. After you have applied for any rebates you are eligible for, DFFH will pay the gap to cover additional child care costs. Your agency will be able to guide you on how to arrange this.

Support and further information

What support will I be offered?

Caring for a child or young person who is in out-of-home care can be rewarding, but it can also be challenging. You will be offered a range of supports to ensure you are able to provide the best care possible, including:

- emotional support and advice from your agency
- professional training through the accreditation process
- specialist training if you will be looking after Aboriginal children
- financial support from DFFH to help cover the costs that come with being a foster carer (this includes food, clothing, basic personal items, transport, pocket money and entertainment)
- Carer KaFE for training and development opportunities, and the chance to connect with other foster carers.

Where can I find more information?

- [Victorian Handbook for Foster Carers](#)
- [Education Guide for Carers of Children Living in Out-of-Home Care](#)
- [Foster Carers Association Victoria](#)
- [Carer KaFE](#)

If you'd like this information in another language, please contact Fostering Connections **1800 929 181**, or visit www.unitingvictas.org.au/foster-care



With thanks to Berry Street, OzChild, Baptcare, Uniting Vic.Tas, Upper Murray Family Care, Life Without Barriers and VACCA for contributing their FAQs and information packs to develop this guide.

**LIFE
WITHOUT
BARRIERS**



Uniting



VACCA
Connected by culture

Baptcare



Uniting

Have more questions?

You can always call us on

1800 929 181



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