

Permanent care explained

For various reasons, some parents can't care for their children. Permanent care places children who can't live with their birth parents with supportive and loving alternative families. A permanent care order is granted by the Children's Court and means that the new parent is the child's legal guardian. In Victoria every year, around 100 children are placed in new permanent homes.

Permanent care differs from foster parenting and adoption. Foster care is a temporary placement of a child in another family while the birth parents work towards resuming care. Adoption means that the new parent becomes the child's legal parent, recognised with a new birth certificate.

Every child needs a loving family environment

Older children from abused backgrounds were once placed in institutions, but society now recognises that every child needs a loving family environment. Once the courts decide that a child can't live with their birth parents, the Department of Human Services and other community service organisations work to find them a new and permanent home. Permanent care parents are responsible for day-to-day care of the child and also long-term decisions about things like education, changes in residence, health and employment.

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Troubled home life

All parenting is challenging. However, permanent care can present some challenges other families never have to face. Most children who are placed in permanent care are less than 12 years old. Their home lives have usually been troubled and some have experienced trauma such as family violence or abuse. These children need extra love and attention to help them overcome their emotional, social, physical or developmental difficulties.

Some of these children have siblings who need permanent care too. Siblings are generally placed together in the same permanent care family.

Permanent care families

Permanent care parents come from a variety of backgrounds. The main qualities of a permanent care family are:

- A love of children
- The ability to provide a loving, stable home.

Permanent care parents may be of different ages, single, married or unmarried, with or without children of their own. Whether you have the potential to meet the needs of children needing a permanent care family is much more important than your personal circumstances.

Couples who have undergone fertility treatment need to have completed the treatment for at least six months.

The application and assessment process

If you are interested in becoming a permanent carer, you will be invited to attend information and education sessions. If you choose to go ahead, you will fill out a detailed application form that asks for personal history details including background, relationships, experience with children and your motivation to become a permanent carer. A health check and a police record check are also required.

Your application is then assessed by the permanent care team, which may be run by the Department of Human Services or a community service agency. Assessment includes visits to your home and interviews to explore issues of parenting and to help decide on the type of child who may benefit from joining your family. Approved applicants are then considered for links with children needing placement. The process from written application to approval takes around six months on average.

Guardianship of the child

When a child is first placed, the permanent care service has custody or guardianship responsibilities. After approximately two years, depending on the needs of the child and the wishes of the permanent carers, an application is made by the Department of Human Services for a permanent care order to be granted by the Children's Court. This transfers legal custody and guardianship rights and responsibilities to the permanent family.

Financial support

The permanent care service offers ongoing financial support.

Emotional support

Following placement, members of the permanent care team have ongoing contact with families to provide support and assistance. They will help the child settle in with your family and discuss any difficulties that arise. The worker will also link you with appropriate community support services in your local area, including specialised supports relevant to the child's care and development.

In the early stages, contact is at least weekly. The contact becomes less frequent as the family adjusts and bonds.

Where to get help

- Department of Human Services:
 - Northern Metropolitan Region Tel. (03) 9304 0799
 - Western Metropolitan Region, Anglicare Western Tel. (03) 9398 7400
 - Southern Metropolitan Region, Uniting Care Connections Tel. (03) 9530 0666
 - Eastern Metropolitan Region Tel. (03) 9843 6413
 - Barwon South Western Region Tel. (03) 5226 4540
 - Gippsland Region, Anglicare Gippsland Tel. (03) 5133 9998
 - Hume Region Tel. (03) 5832 1500
 - Loddon Mallee Permanent Care Tel. (03) 5440 1100
 - Grampians Region, Child and Family Services Ballarat Tel. (03) 5332 1434
- Statewide, Centacare Family Services Tel. (03) 9419 5633
- Adoptive Families Association of Victoria

Things to remember

- For various reasons, some parents are unable to care for their children.
- Once the courts decide that a child can't live with their birth parents, the Department of Human Services and other community service organisations work to find them a new and permanent home.
- Interested families can apply to their regional permanent care team to become permanent carers.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

DHS - Children Youth & Families

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