

Permanent care - issues to consider

For various reasons, some parents can't care for their children. In Victoria every year, the permanent care program places around 100 children with new permanent families. The Department of Human Services, in conjunction with community service organisations, helps place children in need with supportive and loving alternative families.

Caring for a child is rewarding, but is not without its challenges and there are various issues that need to be carefully considered.

Traumatic backgrounds

Although children in permanent care come from a range of family backgrounds, most have experienced significant family problems often including some kind of abuse or neglect and all have experienced being separated from their own family. Typical backgrounds include:

- Parents with drug or alcohol dependency
- Many different caregivers
- Parents with mental illness or intellectual disability.

Additional needs

Permanent care teams are sometimes asked to place a number of children from one family. In such cases, it is usually in the children's best interests to keep them together. Some children who need permanent care have a disability or developmental delay. They may have a specific disability such as Down syndrome, spina bifida or cerebral palsy or the cause of the disability may be unknown.

Broken trust

Many children from troubled family backgrounds have experienced previous disappointments. The child in your care may behave in ways that test you and your commitment, because they doubt that you or your family is really permanent and will always be there for them. You need to be flexible enough to accept a child who is not related to you and who may behave in ways you find unusual, difficult or challenging. It will take time, love and encouragement before the child will gain trust and feel like they are part of a real family.

The birth family

A child's family forms part of their identity. Many children in permanent care remember living with their birth family and have ongoing contact with them. A child needs to know that their birth family still exists and is interested and concerned about them. Sometimes, contact with their birth family can be difficult in the short term. However, the permanent family can help the child to form a realistic understanding of their birth family.

A worker from the permanent care team attends access visits until the birth parents and permanent parents feel comfortable about managing the arrangements themselves. For other children who have no contact with their birth family, new parents will need to help them gain an understanding of their personal background, and to cope with feelings of loss and confusion.

Unsuccessful placements

The vast majority of permanent care placements are successful. However, adolescence can be an especially testing time for permanent care families. Sometimes, a young person may even want to live elsewhere for a time, or may wish to try living with their birth family again. The permanent care family can ask the permanent care service to be involved and to provide support and assistance. If the young person moves out, the relationship with the permanent care family can continue to offer a point of contact, acceptance and stability over the long term.

Where to get help

- Department of Human Services:
 - Northern Metropolitan Region Tel. (03) 9304 0799
 - Western Metropolitan Region, Anglicare Western Tel. (03) 9396 7400
 - Southern Metropolitan Region, Connections UnitingCare Tel. (03) 9271 0800
 - 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

- Children who can't live with their birth parents can be found new and permanent families through permanent care services delivered by the Department of Human Services and community service organisations.
- Caring for a child is rewarding, but is not without its challenges.
- It takes time, love and encouragement to help a child gain trust and feel like they are part of a real family.

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

DHS - Children Youth & Families

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