
Parenting when you're a foster carer

Summary

- As a foster carer, you are providing a safe and supportive home for a child or teenager who can't live with their family of origin.
 - You may face challenges that affect you physically, emotionally and financially – as well as particular stressors that other parents don't have to confront.
 - Dealing with a child's complex behaviours and needs, maintaining contact with the child's biological parents, helping a child with trauma, and managing financial costs are some of the key challenges foster carers face.
 - Therapeutic parenting is an effective approach you can take to parent a traumatised child.
 - You need to be able to make time to attend care team meetings and therapeutic appointments etc.
 - Support services are available to help you.
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As a foster carer, you are providing a safe and supportive home for a child or teenager who can't live with their own family. You are caring for the child for a period of time – anywhere from one night to many years, depending on the circumstances and your own preferences.

Your role as foster carer is incredibly important, and can be very rewarding – but it can also be particularly challenging.

Some people say being a foster carer is being more than a parent. You can also be a friend, counsellor, advocate and social worker for a child who needs help. You can make a real difference to a child's life, but you may face challenges that affect you physically, emotionally and financially – as well as particular stressors that other parents don't have to confront.

Victoria needs more foster carers, but becoming a foster carer is a major life decision. If you're thinking about becoming a foster carer, it may help to understand the types of foster care arrangements available and the challenges and rewards you may face.

If you're already a foster carer, this information may help you to better understand and cope with some of the challenges you're facing, or to access support services.

Foster care in Victoria

In Victoria, **foster care** is the short- or long-term care of children up to 18 years of age by trained, assessed and accredited foster carers in a home setting.

Children in foster care are some of the state's most vulnerable, often coming from abusive or neglectful circumstances.

Children and young people entering foster care may come from homes that are unhealthy or inadequate. They may be experiencing **family violence** or sexual or physical abuse. Sometimes the child's parents are in jail or suffering from drug abuse issues, mental health issues or intellectual disability.

A child in foster care may be any age from a baby to 17 years old, and come from any cultural, religious and socio-economic background.

Foster carers nominate the length and type of care they wish to provide, and the age and gender of the children they'd like to care for.

Foster carers may provide **kinship care** (when they're biologically related to the child) or **non-kinship care** (when they're not biologically related to the child).

In Australia, about 43 per cent of children in foster care are being cared for by non-kinship foster parents, and nearly 47 per cent are in kinship foster care (with their extended family).

Foster carers are supported by foster care agencies, and they receive a carer allowance and have access to ongoing learning opportunities.

The **[Foster Care Association of Victoria](#)** represents foster carers in this state.

The rewards and challenges of being a foster carer

There are both challenges and rewards in being a foster carer. The challenges fall mostly within three categories: dealing with a child's complex behaviours and needs, helping a child with trauma, and maintaining contact with the child's biological parents and other loved ones.

Foster carers say that the rewards far outweigh the challenges.

Rewards and benefits of being a foster carer

Aside from the personal rewards that are inherent to caring for a child or young person, there are some very specific rewards that come from providing a healing environment and building a trusting relationship with a child or young person recovering from trauma and separation.

As a foster carer, you will become one of the most significant people in the young person's life and be making a difference every day. Your decision-making and the way you parent will have an impact on that child's future – which is both daunting, and immensely rewarding.

Dealing with complex behaviours and needs

One of the main issues for foster parents is managing challenging behaviour, which might be violent, antisocial or sexualised. Some common behavioural problems include:

- **attachment disorder** – disruptions in relationships (with birth as well as foster parents) may result in children withdrawing from those around them. They may appear sad or listless, they may not smile, or they may not be interested in interactive games or toys
- **defying authority** – children may refuse to listen to their foster carer, or intentionally do the opposite of what they were asked
- **violence and aggression** – children may be violent toward birth or foster siblings. They may also behave violently towards friends, school mates, and other authority figures (such as teachers)
- **crying and clinging** – children may become excessively clingy or upset if they have had many changes in caregivers
- **sexualised behaviours** – for example use of inappropriate words or behaviours, sexual threats or violence.
- **other anti-social behaviours** – such as stealing or hoarding food.

Read about **[tools that can help you encourage good behaviour](#)** and deal with difficult behaviour positively and constructively.

You can also find **[tips to encourage good behaviour](#)**.

[Foster Care Association of Victoria](#), or a support agency like **[Fostering Connections](#)**, can also help.

Therapeutic parenting – helping a child with trauma

Most children come to foster care having experienced trauma, detachment, loss or grief. If you are parenting a traumatised child, the most effective approach is to **[learn to parent therapeutically](#)**.

Therapeutic parenting is a form of parenting that gives a child high levels of structure and high levels of nurture. It is intentional parenting designed to create feelings of safety and connectedness in the child so that they can start to heal and attach.

Like any parenting style, you will need to adapt therapeutic parenting to suit your special circumstances, but generally this approach focuses on:

- safety, both physical safety and 'felt' or perceived safety of the child and others in your family
- high structure/high nurture, which every child needs, but particularly the traumatised child who may have difficulty trusting you and will need consistent boundaries held in place with lots of love and respect so they can learn to feel safe again

- connected parenting in which you look past the child's behaviour to what the child is trying to communicate. Being **playful, accepting, curious and empathic** – staying attuned to your child – are all important tools
- intentional parenting in which you have a purposeful parenting plan in place (knowing why you're using specific parenting tools and strategies)
- the long-term, because healing may take a long time
- self-care, so you stay physically and mentally strong for as long as the child needs you.

Read more about **therapeutic parenting** and helping children cope with **traumatic events**.

If you need more information about therapeutic parenting, or you're having a hard time dealing with the behaviours or special needs of a child in your care, contact **Foster Care Association of Victoria**, or a support agency like **Fostering Connections**, for help.

And remember, as a foster carer you're playing a crucial role in a child's life. Watch these real-life stories of rewarding foster caring experiences:

Looking after yourself when fostering a child who has experienced trauma

When caring for a child who has experienced trauma, remember to look after yourself as well:

- Don't take the child's behaviour personally. It's about their past experiences, not you. Remember, they may be acting out of fear or shame, or a range of other emotions.
- **Eat well** and get plenty of **rest** and **exercise**.
- Be as patient with yourself as you are with the child in your care.
- Stay calm and positive.
- Seek counselling for yourself if you think you need it.
- Seek support from other foster carers and associations.
- Take breaks away from the child and family life.
- Use the carer assistance program offered by your foster care agency.

Read more about **looking after yourself as a carer**.

Maintaining contact with biological parents

Children in foster care need to maintain contact with their biological parents when possible. In fact, the most important factor influencing outcomes for children in foster care is the quality and amount of contact they have with their biological parents.

This contact helps the child develop their identity and **resilience** (a key building block in mental health), plus their perception of security and stability. If they're going to be reunited with their biological parents, continuity of contact paves the way.

As a foster carer, part of your role will be helping to maintain the child's significant relationships, such as those with their birth family, foster families, friends, role models and other extended family.

If the child in your care is school age, you will need to take the child to school, preferably their current school, so that they don't lose all connections with their teachers, peers and other school community members.

Meeting the child's birth parents can be helpful to foster carers as it can help dispel any myths that may have developed (for either party).

Maintaining these lines of contact may be quite difficult or confronting for you and the child in your care. Some common challenges include:

- deciding how often the child sees their birth family, and whether this contact is supervised or unsupervised (Note: The conditions around the child seeing their birth family could be specified by a court order – for example who should have contact, the type of contact, how often it will occur and if visits need to be supervised or not.)
- knowing what to do if the child feels torn between you and their birth family
- staying neutral to any animosity or mixed feelings between you and others in the child's life

- knowing how to help the child if they blame themselves for being removed from their parents' care
- knowing how to help the child deal with further rejection if their birth parents don't attend contact visits
- helping the child to understand why they can't return home yet
- helping the child prepare to return home.

The Foster Carers Association of Victoria has **fact sheets** on a range of topics, including how to prepare for a placement, and legal requirements. If you need support to maintain relationships in the life of the child in your care, see **Foster Carers Association of Victoria** or your agency.

Dealing with your emotions and needs as a foster carer

Parenting can be challenging for every parent, but many foster carers also face feelings of isolation and frustration. For example, you may:

- not know who to talk to about the complex needs of the child in your care, or who to call if a crisis arises
- feel like you're not sufficiently trained or supported to deal with the specific needs or behaviour of the child in your care
- feel frustrated that you can't access information about the behaviour or health problems of the child in your care
- have mixed feelings about the biological parents of the child in your care
- feel emotionally attached to the child in your care and not know how to deal with these feelings – or not know how to deal with the child's feelings towards you, which may be mixed
- feel frustrated or unsettled by the uncertainty around the care arrangements, such as not knowing how long the child will be in your care (some foster arrangements are only a couple of days long while others are long term or permanent)
- feel frustrated dealing with social and government agencies.

The **Foster Care Association of Victoria** supports and assists foster carers. Support agencies like **Fostering Connections** can also provide support and assistance.

Managing finances as a foster carer

Foster carers in Victoria are paid a **care allowance**, which is a fortnightly contribution towards the everyday costs of caring.

The care allowance isn't a payment for being a foster carer, and it isn't considered income. So you're not taxed on it, and it won't affect your eligibility for Australian Government allowances or bank loans.

Despite the care allowance, you may still find the costs of providing care difficult, especially for a child with special needs. It's important you consider these financial costs before becoming a foster carer, particularly if the costs will affect your own life or retirement plans.

As in any parenting situation, **money management** and **budgeting** may help you manage household costs.

Where to get help

- **Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, Families and Children**. Tel. 1300 650 172
- **Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, Care Allowances Helpdesk**. Tel. 1300 552 319
- **Foster Carers Association of Victoria**. Tel. (03) 9416 4292
- **Fostering Connections**. Tel. 1800 013 088 (also called Foster Care Hotline)
- **Kinship Carers Victoria**
- **Permanent Care and Adoptive Families**. Tel. (03) 9020 1833
- Local foster care agency.

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