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## Permanent care

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### Summary

- Many children in permanent care have a history of abuse or neglect.
  - It may take some time for a child to settle into a permanent care family and start to feel secure.
  - Working together with the child's school teacher is vital if the child is to adjust happily to their new environment.
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Sometimes, for many different reasons, children need to be raised by a family other than the one they were born into. Permanent care provides children who are unable to grow up safely with their birth family, with a safe, stable and loving home. It also gives them relationships for life, which are permanent, secure and nurturing.

Children placed in permanent care come through child protection services. The Department of Human Services and the courts make decisions about the safety of children and whether children will be placed with a permanent care family.

### Permanent care can be challenging

Children placed in permanent care often come from disrupted backgrounds, and may have experiences of neglect, abuse and rejection. Sometimes, they have a physical or intellectual disability. They may have had many changes of carers, schools and living arrangements. Their birth parents may have struggled with a mental illness, or alcohol or drug addiction.

This can lead to challenging behaviours and difficulties in forming trusting relationships. The children may behave in ways that test the patience and confidence of the permanent carers. The permanent care family needs to be prepared to manage any challenges until the child starts to trust the new family environment.

### Period of adjustment in permanent care

After experiencing trauma associated with abuse, neglect or disruption, many children are slow to put their trust in other people. A permanent care family needs patience, a good understanding of the child's background and experience, and the confidence to parent in a way that can respond to the child's experiences of trauma, understands and manages the child's behaviour, and meets the child's needs.

Children in permanent care need:

- stability, certainty and structure
- emotional support and understanding
- a feeling of unwavering acceptance and commitment
- the opportunity to build on their strengths and increase their abilities.

While there are general parenting principles for children placed in permanent care, each child is different and some techniques might need to be emphasised more than others.

### Behavioural difficulties in permanent care

Each child reacts in their own way to their unique circumstances, but some possible behavioural difficulties include:

- anger and aggressive behaviour
  - low self-esteem
  - bed wetting
  - emotional immaturity
  - high levels of anxiety
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- inappropriate sexual behaviour.

### **Fear of change in permanent care**

The child may have experienced insecurity and instability from their earliest memories, so any change, no matter how small, can feel threatening. Permanent care parents can help by introducing predictable family routines, with consistency, structure and security. It is important to inform the child well in advance of any unexpected event, such as an outing.

### **Problems at school with permanent care**

Children in permanent care families may face special challenges at school, including:

- a history of disrupted schooling if they have moved around a lot in earlier years
- difficulties adjusting to the structured classroom environment
- difficulties forming friendships
- being seen by peers as different.

### **Working with the child's teachers**

The child's permanent care parent(s) and school teachers can work together to help the child adjust. Some strategies to consider include:

- It is important to discuss what information is appropriate to pass on to the staff when settling a child into a new school.
- Maintain close contact with the school and support the child with positive behaviour at school as well as at home.
- Ask the teachers to establish a familiar classroom routine for the child, including telling the child in advance of any changes, such as excursions.
- Make copies of old school reports available.
- Be open to suggestions regarding assisted learning programs.
- Work together to develop ways to teach the child how to play and make friends.

### **Professional help and counselling for permanent care**

The Department of Human Services is a good place to start for information and referral. There is an Adoption and Permanent Care Team in each Department of Human Services region.

Services include:

- applicant assessment
- placement of children
- post-placement supervision
- counselling.

Contact your Adoption and Permanent Care team for further information. If you are unsure which team covers your area, your Department of Human Services Division can assist you in several offices.

### **Where to get help**

#### **Adoption and Permanent Care Services**

- **West:**
  - Western metropolitan suburbs Tel. (03) 9396 7400
  - Geelong, Warrnambool, Portland, Hamilton Tel. (03) 5226 4540
  - Ballarat, Horsham, Stawell and surrounding areas Tel. (03) 5337 3333
- **North:**
  - Northern metropolitan suburbs Tel. (03) 9479 0558

- Bendigo, Maryborough, Castlemaine, Echuca, Swan Hill, Mildura and surrounding areas Tel. (03) 5440 1100
- **East:**
  - Eastern metropolitan suburbs Tel. (03) 9843 6413
  - Shepparton, Seymour, Benalla, Wangaratta, Wodonga and surrounding areas Tel. (03) 5832 1500
- **South:**
  - Southern and bayside metropolitan suburbs, Dandenong, Frankston, Mornington Peninsula and surrounding areas Tel. (03) 9521 5666
  - Central and eastern Gippsland Tel. (03) 5133 9998
- **Statewide:**
  - Aboriginal statewide permanent care: Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) Tel (03) 8388 1855
  - CatholicCare Tel. (03) 9689 3888

### **Things to remember**

- Many children in permanent care have a history of abuse or neglect.
- It may take some time for a child to settle into a permanent care family and start to feel secure.
- Working together with the child's school teacher is vital if the child is to adjust happily to their new environment.

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DHHS - Child protection

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