



THE CARE FACTOR: REWARDS AND CHALLENGES OF RAISING FOSTER CHILDREN

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For further information

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Executive summary

Anglicare Victoria is the major provider of foster care in Victoria. *The Care Factor: Rewards and Challenges of Raising Foster Children* report highlights findings from a 2010 survey undertaken to obtain information about the demographic profile of Anglicare Victoria foster carers and to understand what carers see as the rewards, motivations and challenges of fostering. The overarching aim of conducting the research was to better understand the demands on carers in providing foster care in order to inform better support to carers and thus reduce the number of carers who exit the system. Information about the rewards and motivations of fostering was also intended to inform the recruitment of new foster carers in order to maintain adequate capacity within the system.

The survey collected information that was comparable to earlier Victorian and national surveys of foster carers in order to understand whether the profile of carers and the rewards and challenges of fostering had changed over the past 5-10 years. The report also explored differences between early- and late-career carers on demographic variables and perceptions of the rewards and challenges of fostering to explore whether any particular group was experiencing 'role strain' and thus needed additional or particular support.

Analysis of the survey data indicated that the typical Anglicare Victoria carer was:

- Female (86%)
- Aged 45-54 years (38%)
- English speaking (99%)
- Had completed a non-school qualification (53%) such as a trade certificate or higher education degree
- Had been fostering for two years or less (29%).

Most commonly, carers households were headed by a couple (rather than a single adult) (56%) and tended to care for a single foster child only (59%) (i.e. no birth children live in the household). Of foster carers living in households with other adults, most (88%) shared fostering duties with at least one other adult. The vast majority of carer households had home internet access (91%) and were usually located in metropolitan Melbourne (72%).

The survey offered valuable insight into the opinions and experiences of Anglicare Victoria's foster carers. Analyses of carers' responses to three subscales measuring 'fostering rewards', 'parenting challenges' and 'system challenges' revealed a significant positive correlation between fostering's rewards and the number of children in the carer household, suggesting that carers whose households comprise more children more greatly felt fostering's rewards. The small difference between male and female carers on 'system challenges' (indicating males felt system challenges applied to them more than females) was also approaching statistical significance.

Carers' qualitative comments about the rewards of fostering indicated that supporting children (41% of responses) and emotional and relationship benefits (26% of responses) were important benefits of fostering. What carers found rewarding was also what motivated them to continue fostering, with the majority (77%) of carers identifying 'supporting children' as their main motivation.

Qualitative findings about fostering's challenges reinforced 'parenting' and 'system' challenges as the key demands of the role. Poor experience with government and non-government agencies (26% of responses) and parenting challenges (25% of responses) were the top two themes relating to fostering's challenges. One in four carers indicated that they had felt at some stage in their fostering career that becoming a foster carer was a wrong decision. Among those who answered this item in the affirmative, most (83%) nominated difficult child behaviour as a reason for feeling this way.

Comparisons between early career carers (those who had been fostering for two years or less) and late career carers (those who had been fostering for 13 years or more) on demographic variables revealed a significant difference on carer age (early career carers were younger) and education level (early career carers had attained a higher level of education). However, there were no differences between early career carers on reports of 'fostering rewards', 'parenting challenges' and 'system challenges'.

Comparisons of the Anglicare Victoria survey and the Department of Human Services' 2005 audit and the Australian Foster Care Association's 2000 survey suggests very little has changed over the past decade or so in terms of the profile of people who take on the role of fostering and reported rewards and challenges.

The current research on the challenges of fostering is helpful in informing the areas where carers may need additional supports. As parenting emerged as a critical challenge for foster carers, strategies that help carers respond to the behavioural, educational and other parenting issues that OOHC children and youth are likely to present with is a logical area for service development. Here, additional training, supervision and support around parenting competencies – including access to positive parenting programs specifically adapted to foster care – may help, particularly if such efforts were focussed within the first year or two of a home opening. It is also important to continue supporting skilful use of the Looking After Children system to ensure the needs and issues of foster children that can challenge the success of a placement are identified and acted on.

Responses from carers in the current research on the rewards of fostering could also be used to promote the many positive aspects of foster care within the wider community, strengthen foster carer recruitment and refresh confidence in this service model. While there is much room for action to address the challenge of recruitment, there is an array of models adopted within innovative agencies as well as alternative government policies that could be used to inform developments in Victoria.

Knowledge of what is likely to galvanise prospective carers and support existing placements should assist agencies and governments alike as they work to ensure vulnerable children and youth who are unable to live at home are able to receive the love and support of a family.

Introduction

Anglicare Victoria: The State's largest provider of foster care

Anglicare Victoria was formed in 1997 when three of the State's largest child and family welfare agencies joined together – the Mission to the Streets and Lanes, the Mission of St James and St John and St John's Homes for Boys and Girls. Combined these well-respected agencies had over 260 years experience in providing care and support to vulnerable and marginalised children, young people and families.

Anglicare Victoria is the major provider of foster care in Victoria.¹ At 30 June 2010 there were 5,469 children in Out-of-Home Care (OoHC). Approximately 40 per cent of these children were in foster care (AIHW, 2011). Anglicare Victoria's 12 foster care programs located in the Yarra Ranges, Box Hill, Knox, Broadmeadows, Preston, Yarraville and Morwell coordinate around 16 per cent of all foster care placements in the State. At any one point in time Anglicare Victoria has 680 committed carers willing to nurture and support vulnerable children and young people who have been removed from their parents.

Declining capacity within foster care

Similar to many other countries in the Western world, foster care in Australia is experiencing a crisis in foster care recruitment and retention. It has been well documented that there are decreasing numbers of individuals willing to foster (McHugh, 2002; Siminski, Chalmers & McHugh, 2005). More households in Victoria are exiting foster care than are commencing foster care (AIHW, 2011). At 30 June 2010 in Victoria there were 907 foster carer households with a placement. In the 2009-10 period 354 households commenced foster care, while 495 households exited foster care (AIHW, 2011). In 2007 the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (2007) reported a decline in the number of enquiries and in the number of foster carers overall. An audit of foster carer in 2003 conducted by the Department of Human Services (DHS) also found that more carers were leaving the system than joining it, with close to 900 foster carers departing the system in 2001-02 (Department of Human Services Victoria, 2005). The audit also found that the number of carers had been declining since 1995-96.

An aging population of foster carers

There is evidence to suggest that a decline in the number of new carers entering the system has led to reliance on older/more experienced foster carers. The rising age of foster carers has been reported in NSW and nationally. The Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA) reports that most carers are in the 45-54 years age cohort (Australian Foster Care Association, 2001:76). Amongst the NSW carer population, the age profile has changed from women aged 25-49 in 1986 to females aged 35-54 years in 2004 (McHugh, McNab, Smyth, Chalmers, Siminski and Saunders, 2004:xi). The trend towards a rising age of foster carers is reflected in the UK statistics as well. According to a 2009 report for The Fostering Network, the average age of a UK foster carer "had risen by seven years since 2000, to from 46 to 53 for women and from 47 to 54 for men" (Clarke, 2009:2).

An aging population of foster carers adds to existing concerns about capacity in the foster care system. There is some evidence to suggest that older/more experienced foster carers may be less flexible about the number and complexity of children they can accommodate. For example, Anglicare Victoria's recent study into the separation of siblings in foster care found that more

¹ Foster care is a home-based care model that provides placements for children and young people up to 18 years of age who are unable to live with their families because of abuse or neglect, or where the parent(s) are unable to care for the child or young person for a short period of time due to illness or other significant family circumstances.

experienced carers were less willing and/or unable to accommodate siblings or sibling groups (Wise, 2011). Older carers may also be less able to foster children in a long-term arrangement, or to provide ongoing support beyond the legal age of wardship, which is 18 years. McHugh's (2002) research revealed that "older carers with young foster children (some with disabilities) were worried about what would happen to their foster children when they were no longer able to care for them" (McHugh, 2002).

Challenges and rewards of fostering

Challenges in the recruitment and retention of foster carers are being driven to a significant degree by the increasing complexity of the role.

Challenges of fostering

The question of who will replace the older, more experienced carers when they retire remains unanswered (Smyth & Eardley, 2008). Indeed, the attraction and retention of foster carers is considered "a high priority across Australia" (COAG, in AIHW, 2011:59). It is therefore important to understand what motivates people to take on the role of fostering with a view to expanding the available number of carers.

It is equally important to maintain carers in fostering. As the large number of households exiting foster care reported above suggests, many foster families find the experience overwhelming and frustrating. Understanding what aspects of the role carers find challenging should also lead to better support for existing carers and improved rates of foster carer retention.

A considerable body of research documents the difficulties that carers face in the OoHC system (Smyth & Eardley, 2008; Elarde & Tilbury, 2007). McHugh's (2006) interviews with foster mothers articulate a range of difficulties faced by carers, including emotional/psychological difficulties, time burdens and opportunity and financial costs. McHugh's research found that "maintenance of the relationships underpinning a fostering service result in a number of emotional and psychological costs for carers", and "for some carers there were often episodes of acute distress, especially in relation to attachment issues with foster children around placement transitions (e.g. to a permanent placement of reunification with own family)" (McHugh, 2006:8). The emotional and relationship challenges to carers of placement transition was also reported in an earlier study by McHugh et al. (2004:98): "For a number of carers, 'letting children go' either back to birth families or other carers (...) was one of the hardest emotional experiences they had ever faced."

The strain of carers' interactions with foster children's birth families is another relational challenge common to fostering. McHugh et al.'s (2004) study emphasised the stress carers feel in having to "deal with" birth parents. Indeed, 'contact with the birth parents' represented 14 per cent of carer responses on the worst aspects of foster caring (McHugh et al., 2004:97).

Fostering's considerable time costs to carers have been observed amongst NSW carer populations. In a NSW survey carers expressed that "they were on duty 24 hours a day with no time to do anything for themselves" (McHugh et al., 2004:97-98). In a more recent study, McHugh (2006:78) observed that "the 'extra' time required for foster children was substantial, on average around an extra three hours per day". This 'extra' time allocation is fairly consistent for foster children in any age group and, when added to "ordinary (non-fostering) day-to-day care" the time costs "are significant" (McHugh, 2006:79).

The financial burden that foster carers carry has been widely reported in Australian research (AFCA, 2005; McHugh, 2002; McHugh, 2006:79-81). McHugh's 2002 study found that the costs of caring for foster children "are on average 52 per cent higher than the costs of [caring for] children not in care"

(McHugh, 2002:5). Likewise, "insufficient funding support" was ranked by Victorian foster carers as the fourth most difficult fostering issue, with over 25 per cent of respondents rating this as an issue of concern (DHS, 2007:37).

Correspondingly, the low rate of carer reimbursements is another area of discontent among foster carers. Currently, Victorian carer reimbursements cover approximately 64 per cent of the costs of caring for a foster child such as food, housing, energy, clothing, insurance, basic health, dental, daily transport, leisure and personal care. This is well below states such as NSW who provide reimbursements equal to approximately 80 per cent of the costs of caring and well below the real costs of care (McHugh, 2002).

The increasingly complex needs of foster children (Ainsworth & Hansen, 2005; Wood, 2008) appears to be a particular challenge for foster carers. Although there is a trend towards fewer children entering OoHC (AIHW, 2011), children are in care for longer periods of time and with increasingly complex needs. Ainsworth and Hansen (2005) detail the unmanageable behaviour of children and youth placed in foster care following a decline in residential care placements. The authors argue that "many foster carers are exhausted and disillusioned" (2005:197) as a result of the placement (2005:195):

"Difficult and disturbed children and young people...whose activities range from disruptive and delinquent acts to serious aggressive and violent behaviours. These behaviours are often linked to mental health (including self harm) and substance abuse problems arising in many instances from abuse and neglect."

Children's challenging behaviours can have a negative impact on carers and their birth children and grandchildren. Some carers have also reported family and friends not wanting contact due to the behaviour of foster children for the fear of what they might do (McHugh, 2002).

Elarde and Tilbury's (2007) interviews with Indigenous carers and agency workers suggest a lack of practical support, such as assistance with clothing and furniture in emergencies, transport and financial assistance.

Other frustrations have also been reported by carers, including a lack of involvement and influence in case planning and case review, lack of access to basic information about the child on entry into their household and problems accessing various health and other therapeutic services to meet the special needs of foster children.

The role of workers and agencies in providing training, support and assistance to foster carers has also been raised in the literature. In Elarde and Tilbury's (2007) study, for example, poor carer-caseworker relationships were felt to be a problem, with caseworkers perceived to be inconsistent, not actively interested in the foster child and not following through with carer-initiated contact and requests.

Support for foster carers when an allegation of abuse or neglect is made against them is another key issue. Carers typically experience substantial hurt, shame and confusion if an allegation of abuse is made against them and in many cases have ceased fostering "because of a lack of support at the time of an allegation" (AFCA, 2001:137-138). Anglicare Victoria's recent submission to the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children (PVVC) Inquiry includes a case study describing the impact of allegations of abuse in care on foster carers. In the words of one carer, "Imagine how it felt to know you're accused of something, you have no idea what it could be. As per the system we were left for days in bewilderment" (Anglicare Victoria, 2011: 28).

Other frustrations have also been reported by carers, including a lack of involvement and influence in case planning and case review, lack of access to basic information about the child on entry into their household and problems accessing various health and other therapeutic services to meet the special needs of foster children (McHugh, 2002). A recent survey of Victorian foster carers found that just over one third (34%) of carers were “a little, very or totally dissatisfied” with information provided about the children in their care (DHS, 2007:35). Victorian carers also felt there was a low regard for their opinions and needs. The group perceived a ‘lack of participation in important decisions’ and ‘consideration about carers’ time and family commitments’ to be the second and third most difficult aspects of fostering, respectively (DHS, 2007:37).

Rewards of fostering

While there are many challenging aspects of fostering, there are a range of positives as well. The literature describes a number of motivations for fostering, including: being able to achieve positive outcomes for children; awareness of children needing families; making a difference in the lives of abused or underprivileged children; and fondness for children (McHugh *et al.*, 2004:48). The benefits of fostering are described by carers as: development or improvement in a child; enhancement of family life for foster carer families; and personal fulfilment for a carer (McHugh *et al.*, 2004:93). Carers also rate being informed, supported and respected by workers as fulfilling aspects of their role (DHS, 2007:3).

Carer populations find the act of supporting children to be a motivating and rewarding aspect of fostering. As McHugh and colleagues report (2004:iv), “Seeing positive changes in the children as a consequence of being with the foster family was extremely rewarding for many carers. Seeing the children respond to being in a secure, safe home was also a positive for many carers”. According to the DHS survey (2007:18) of Victorian carers, “Over 80 per cent of foster carers marked ‘making a difference in children’s lives’ and ‘children deserve to feel safe’ when presented with list of reasons for fostering.”²

Carers also view fostering as a way to support society. A desire to ‘give back’ and ‘contribute to the community’ is felt to be a reward and motivator for many foster carers (McHugh *et al.*, 2004:96). An example of the importance of helping the community through fostering is found in the report of a survey of Victorian foster carers. The survey found that over 60 per cent of carers cited ‘Because I like to help/give back to the community’ as a reason for continuing fostering (DHS, 2007:18).

Carers also rate the personal, emotional and relationship benefits of fostering. McHugh *et al.*’s (2004:95) report on 2003 survey findings observed that “personal fulfilment and growth for carers” was a strong theme in the research. On the same theme, between 20 and 40 per cent of Victorian foster carers mentioned ‘Because it gives me a purpose’ as a motivation for continuing to foster (DHS, 2007:18). Carers see fostering as providing opportunities for “learning about their own strengths and weaknesses, developing strategies to cope, communicating with people, being tolerant and patient, understanding their own limitations, being better organised and less judgemental” (McHugh *et al.*, 2004: 95).

Fostering’s positive benefits to foster families is another widely reported reward of the role. Fostering has been found to draw families together (DHS, 2007:18; McHugh *et al.*, 2004:95; McHugh, 2006:78). Many carers feel that fostering has impacted their birth children by prompting mature, independent and responsible actions and encouraging positive, appreciative and selfless experiences (Bromfield & Osborn, 2007:13; McHugh *et al.*, 2004:95).

² The DHS survey question, “Why do you keep fostering?” contained the following pre-coded response categories: ‘Because someone has to do it’; ‘Because it gives me purpose’; ‘Because I like to give back to the community’; ‘To make a difference in children’s lives’; ‘Because I believe that children deserve to feel safe’; ‘Because it is something the whole family can do together’; and ‘Other (please specify)’.

Other factors influencing decisions to foster

While the role of fostering has changed over the years, society has changed as well. It is generally accepted that the shrinking number of foster carers is related to labour force trends, in particular the rising numbers of women in the workforce and other macro-level demographic shifts such as an increase in the number of single-parent families. Having multiple birth children, the phenomena of 'extended adolescence' (whereby birth children remain at home well into their twenties) and the changing age structure of society all impact on the capacity of adults to take on the role of fostering. Concomitantly, an increase in the number of other groups such as sole person households and same sex couples may present new opportunities for recruitment (DHS, 2007:6).

The Anglicare Victoria survey of foster carer challenges and rewards

The survey of foster carer challenges and rewards was undertaken by the Anglicare Victoria Policy, Research and Innovation unit in October 2010 to profile the population of foster carers across the Agency, to understand how they feel about their role and how they can be better supported into the future. It was designed to provide insight into factors that might contribute to a carers' decision to cease fostering as well as aspects of the role that carers find satisfying and rewarding.

Specifically, the survey aimed to address the following key questions:

- What are the characteristics of Anglicare Victoria foster carers and how has the profile of carers generally changed over the past 5-10 years?
- What do carers see as the rewards, motivations and challenges of fostering?
- Do early career carers differ from late career carers in terms of their demographic profile and/or experience of fostering?

This information is important to Anglicare Victoria as the State's largest provider of foster care. It is necessary to inform recruitment and retention strategies in order to ensure a ready supply of foster carers to meet the demand for flexible and diverse foster care placements into the future. This information is also of relevance to the child and family sector more broadly. The last audit of foster care in Victoria was conducted by the Department of Human Services in 2005 (DHS, 2007). Approximately six years on, Anglicare Victoria's survey of foster carers is an important indicator of the current health of the foster care system in this State.

Research method

The research sample comprised all active full-time foster carer households supervised by Anglicare Victoria at October 2010 (N = 116). This included carer households managed by home-based care programs located in the inner- and outer-Eastern Metropolitan Region, the North-West region and the Gippsland region of Victoria.

Initial contact with foster carers was made by mail, whereby carers were offered the opportunity to opt-out of the research. Carers who did not opt-out were then contacted by telephone to complete a computer assisted telephone interview (CATI). Of the original sample of 116 carer households, eight declined to be interviewed and a further 12 carers were unable to be contacted during the period the project was in-field. A final sample of 95 primary carers completed the survey within the timeframe for the research, representing an overall response rate of 82 per cent.

Measures

The survey collected demographic data on carer age, sex, education level and language spoken at home. Household composition data were also collected, including number of children and adults in the household, number of adults actively caring in the household, the household's postcode and whether or not the household had home internet access. Details about carers' fostering experience were also included on the survey, measured in terms of time spent fostering and number of children fostered.

Open-ended questions about fostering's rewards and challenges and what motivates carers to continue fostering were asked as well. A closed-ended item was also included, which asked carers whether they felt they had ever thought that they had made the wrong decision to become a foster carer.

Carers were also asked to respond to a fostering rewards and challenges scale designed specifically for this survey. The scale comprised 22 items rated on 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree. A full list of items is attached in Appendix A, Table A1.

Exploratory factor analysis of the 22 rewards/challenges items was performed. While many of the items were negatively skewed, the data showed sufficient variation on individual items for this analysis.³

The final three-factor factor solution included 18 items⁴. The three sub-scales were interpreted as "rewards" (six items) "parenting challenges" (seven items) and "system challenges" (five items).⁵ Reliability analysis showed a high level of internal consistency for each of the three sub-scales as measured by Cronbach's alpha (Alpha = .74 for "rewards", Alpha = .71 for "parenting challenges" and Alpha = .69 for "system challenges"). The item structure and factor loadings are presented in Table 1.

³ Of the 22 items in the scale, 14 had values of two standard errors of skewness or more ($ses = .494 - .506$), representing a significant degree of skewness. Of these, 13 were negatively skewed. The items were a mixture of rewards and challenges statements. The skewness on these items shows a tendency in how Anglicare Victoria's carers respond to rewards and challenges – namely, foster carers feel challenges and rewards very strongly and respond to these items with scores at the extreme of the possible range.

⁴ Four items were removed due to cross-loading.

⁵ The three factor solution explained 47 per cent of the variance. The first factor explained 21 per cent of the variance, the second factor 16 per cent of the variance, and a third factor 10 per cent of the variance.

Table 1*Item structure and factor loadings for foster carer rewards and challenges scale (N = 95)*

	Rewards	Parenting challenges	System challenges
It's very satisfying being a foster carer	.82		
There are a lot of good things about being a foster carer	.79		
Being a foster carer is personally rewarding	.73		
Being a foster carer makes you feel good	.68		
Fostering is a good way of giving something back to the community	.43		
Foster carers can change a child's life for the better	.37		
It's hard to keep foster children safe		.66	
Foster carers aren't valued as part of a caring team		.64	
Looking after foster children is very stressful		.63	
Foster children take up a lot of time and attention		.60	
It's tough looking after foster children		.59	
You have a lot of bad experiences with foster children		.57	
Foster carers get left out when important decisions are made for children		.44	
You have to sacrifice a lot to be a foster carer			.89
It's difficult when foster children have access and contact with parents and family			.85
Foster carers are monitored too closely			.74
Foster care allowances are not enough			.64
It's hard sharing decisions with others			.28

Analysis

Descriptive analyses were performed on all carer demographic data and measures of foster carer experience. Where possible, a difference of proportion calculation (z-test) was conducted to determine whether there was any statistically significant difference between the current sample of carers and carers included in other recent studies carried out by the Department of Human Services (DHS, 2007), the Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA, 2001), the Queensland Foster Parents Association (McHugh et. al., 2004; Smyth & McHugh, 2006), the Social Policy Research Centre (McHugh, 2002; 2006) as well as data published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2011). Details of these data sources are presented in Table 2, following. Comparative analyses were designed to test whether the profile of carers had changed over the past 5-10 years.

A thematic analysis of all qualitative responses on fostering rewards and challenges was also conducted to identify sub-themes and issues related to these aspects of the fostering role.

Chi-square analysis, t-tests and regression analyses were also conducted to determine whether there was any statistically significant difference between early career carers and late career carers on specific demographic characteristics including age, education and number of children fostering as well as quantitative measures of fostering rewards and challenges. These statistical tests were also employed to determine whether there was any difference between early and late career carers on the experience of fostering rewards and challenges.

Table 2

Sources of comparative data

Foster carer population	Sample size (n)	Methodology	Author (date)
Victoria	697	Quantitative survey	DHS (2007)
New South Wales	450	Quantitative survey	McHugh et al. (2004)
New South Wales	30	Qualitative in-depth interviews	McHugh (2006)
New South Wales	450	Quantitative survey	Smyth & McHugh (2006)
Queensland	45	Quantitative survey	FPAC, in AFCA (2001)
Australia*	812	Quantitative survey	AFCA (2001)
Australia*	159	Qualitative focus groups	McHugh (2002)
Australia*	8,049 households as at 30 June 2010	Quantitative dataset: AIHW Child Protection Collections 2010	AIHW (2011)

* Data were collected for this population group from carers living in all Australian States and territories.

Findings

Characteristics of Anglicare Victoria foster carers

This section presents demographic data for Anglicare Victoria's community of primary foster carers. Characteristics including sex, age, education level, cultural background, and household composition are described and compared with a larger sample of carers in Victoria (DHS, 2007) and NSW (McHugh *et al.*, 2004), as well as data on foster carer households for all States and territories collected by AFCA (2001) and the AIHW (2011).⁶

Sex

The majority (86%) carers who completed the foster carer survey were female. This finding is consistent with that for Victorian and NSW foster carer populations, in which women "continue to account for the bulk of foster carers" (DHS, 2007:2; McHugh *et al.*, 2004:v).

Age

The age profile of Anglicare Victoria's foster carers echoes the Victorian and Australian foster carer populations. There were strong representations of carers in the 'middle years' age cohorts: 35-44 years, 45-54 years and 55-64 years (see Table 3). The median age for Anglicare Victoria's foster carers was 49 years.

A point of difference between Anglicare Victoria's carers and Victorian carers more generally relates to the higher proportion (15%) of foster carers in the 18-24 year bracket in the 2005 foster care audit conducted by the Department of Human Services. However, this is explained by the fact that young carers in the DHS audit were "adult children of carers who have not left home, rather than...people of that age group living independently and offering care" (DHS, 2007:8). Due to the cross-sectional nature of the survey we are unable to determine whether the median age of carers is rising.

Table 3

Age profile of foster carers

Age cohort	% Anglicare Victoria foster carers (2010)	% Victorian foster carers (2005)	% Australian foster carers (2000)
18-24 years	0%	15%	Not available
25-34 years	6%	13%	9%
35-44 years	29%	23%	30%
45-54 years	38%	27%	38%
55-64 years	22%	16%	16%
65+ years	5%	4%	4%
No response	0%	0%	1%
Total	100%	100%	98%

Data source: Australian Foster Care Association [AFCA] (2001, p.76); DHS (2007, p.8).

Note: Percentages may not total 100 per cent due to rounding.

⁶ On the topic of home internet access there was no available comparative data for foster carer populations and so ABS (2009) data was used.

Household composition

Adults

More than half (56%) of Anglicare Victoria's foster carers were part of an adult couple household, while some households contained three adults (17%) or four adults (7%). Of foster carers who were living in households with other adults ($n = 76$), most (88%) shared fostering responsibility for the foster child/ren with at least one other adult (see Table A2, Appendix A).

One-fifth (20%) of Anglicare Victoria's carer households comprised a single adult carer living on their own. These findings reflect broader trends for the Victorian foster carer pool, in which the adult composition of the majority (79%) of foster carer households was a couple and almost one-quarter of foster households contained a single female adult (DHS, 2007:2). The findings also mirrored those for NSW. Here, a 2003 survey of NSW carers found that "single female foster carers represented around one-quarter of all foster families (McHugh *et al.*, 2004: xi).

Foster and birth children

More than half (59%) of Anglicare Victoria's carer households comprised foster children only. Of all foster carer households, 37 per cent had one birth child and 17 per cent had two birth children. The greatest number of foster children placed in one household was four (2% of all foster care households). Table A3 in Appendix A summarises these data.

There was a moderate negative correlation between the age of Anglicare Victoria carers and the number of children in the household ($r = -.389, p = .000$), indicating that the number of children in the household decreases as foster carers age (see Appendix A, Table A4). These findings speak to a similar trend in the Victorian foster carer population, in which an increasing proportion of carers "appear to be 'empty nesters' in their late forties and fifties, whose children have grown up and left home" (DHS, 2007:2).

Table 4 (below) presents the number of foster children placed per household for Anglicare Victoria, Victorian and Australian carer populations. Across all three samples, the majority of households had only one foster child in the household. However, the proportions of Anglicare Victoria carer households with one foster child placed were significantly larger than the proportion for the Australian population of carer households, but equivalent to Victoria in 2005. The Anglicare Victoria sample also had significantly fewer (5%) households with three foster children than Australia (13%). However, once again, no differences were observed between the Anglicare Victoria sample and Victoria in 2005.

Table 4

Foster carer households with a placement, by number of foster children placed

No. foster children placed per household	% Anglicare Victoria foster carers (2010)	% Victorian foster carers (2009-2010)	% Australian foster carers (2009-2010)
1 child	59.0%	59.2%	48.0%
2 children	31.6%	28.4%	27.8%
3 children	5.4%	8.6%	12.7%
4 children	2.1%	2.0%	6.2%
5-8 children	0.0%	1.8%	5.2%
9+ children	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
Missing data	1.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Total households with a placement	99.2%	100.0%	100.0%

16 Source: AIHW Child Protection Collections 2010, in AIHW (2011:60)
Note: Percentages may not total 100 per cent due to rounding.

Anglicare Victoria's carers were asked how many children they'd cared for during their total time fostering. The mean number of children cared for by Anglicare Victoria carers was 26.3 children. Notably, three Anglicare Victoria carers had cared for between 200 and 350 children during their time fostering. This finding corresponds to the Victorian carer population, in which "a small number of carers have fostered more than 200 children over a long period and one carer as many as 400 children" (DHS, 2007:21).

Language other than English

As an indicator of cultural background, the survey included a question relating to the language spoken. English was almost uniformly spoken in carer homes, with 99 per cent of the sample responding that they spoke English at home.

Education

Over half (53%) of Anglicare Victoria foster carers had completed a non-school qualification such as a trade certificate or higher education degree. This was similar for the Victorian and Australian samples (56% and 50% respectively) (AFCA, 2001:78; DHS, 2005:11). When non-school qualifications were broken down by type, a greater (22%) and statistically significant proportion of Anglicare Victoria carers had a trade or vocational qualification compared to the Victorian (12%) and national (11%) samples (AFCA, 2001:78; DHS, 2007:11).

Home internet access

Anglicare Victoria's foster carer sample were asked whether they had access to a computer with an internet connection at home. Home internet access is considered an important resource for lifelong learning, decision-making, accessing and sorting information and participating in online communities. Around one in ten carer households were without home internet access. However, significantly more Anglicare Victoria carer households had home internet access than the general population of Australian households, which was 72 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009).

Location

Anglicare Victoria survey respondents were asked to provide their postcode as an indicator of geographic location. Almost three-quarters (72%) of Anglicare Victoria's foster carer households were located in metropolitan Melbourne. The 28% of respondents residing outside metropolitan Melbourne were largely clustered within 150 kilometres of the city in Sunbury, the Yarra and Dandenong Ranges, the southern Hume region, and Gippsland, including the South Gippsland region. This reflects the location of Anglicare Victoria foster care programs discussed in the Introduction.

Time spent fostering

Anglicare Victoria survey respondents were asked how long they had been fostering with any Agency. Figure 1 (below) shows that approximately one-quarter of Anglicare Victoria's carers had recently commenced fostering. Specifically, 16 percent of foster carers had been fostering for one year and 13 per cent had spent two years fostering. This is comparable with the broader sample of Victorian foster carers, in which "approximately one third of primary carers have fostered for 0-2 years" (DHS, 2007:20). The median time spent by Anglicare Victoria carers in a fostering role fostering was 7.0 years.

A further 16 per cent of Anglicare Victoria's carers had fostered for 3-5 years, one-quarter had fostered for 6-10 years and just under one-third (29%) had fostered for 10 years or more. By comparison, just over 20 per cent of Victorian primary foster carers had fostered for 3-5 years, 6-10 years and more than 10 years respectively (DHS, 2007:20). Eight per cent had over 20 years' fostering experience.

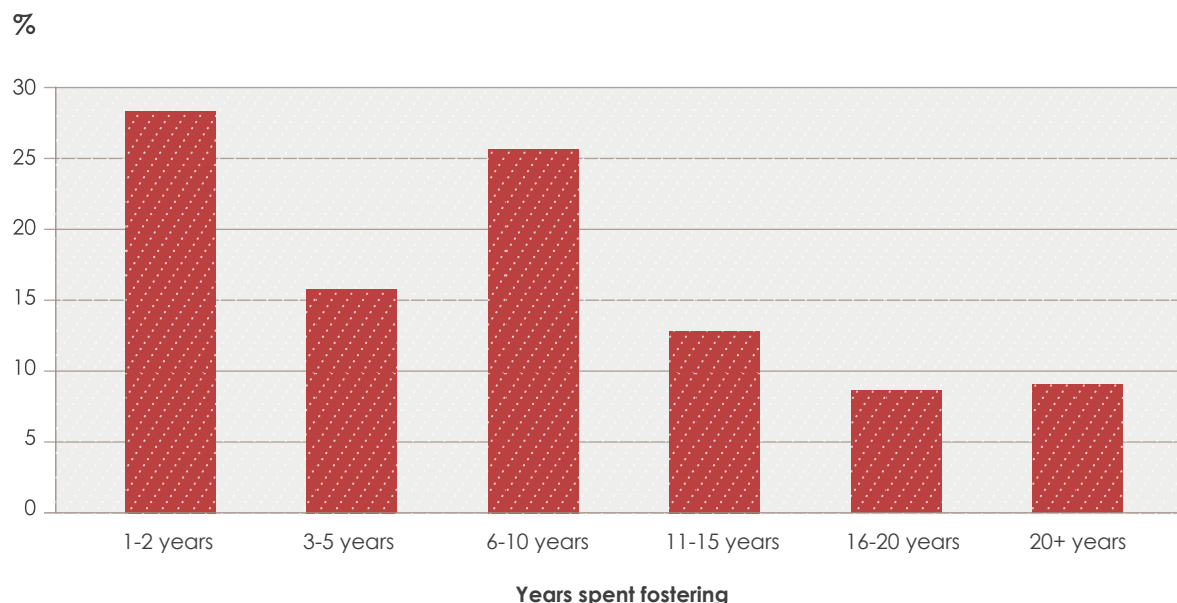


Figure 1. Number of years spent by Anglicare Victoria carers in a fostering role

Number of children fostered

In line with the other foster carer samples, data on the number of children carers had fostered over time was also considered on an annual basis. Amongst Anglicare Victoria's foster carers, a moderate positive correlation was observed between the number of children cared for and the number of years spent fostering ($r = .538, p < .01$), indicating that the number of children fostered increases with the length of time fostering. The mean number of children cared for by Anglicare Victoria carers was 3.3 children per year. Similarly, the mean number of children cared for per year by the Victorian foster carer sample was "between 2.5 and 4.0 children per year" (DHS, 2007: 3).⁷

How Anglicare Victoria foster carers feel about their role

This section offers insight into the feelings and experiences of Anglicare Victoria's foster carers. It presents carers' responses to a range of questions about the rewards and challenges of fostering, carers' coping strategies and their motivation to continue fostering.

Rewards, motivations and challenges of fostering

Quantitative analysis

Information about fostering's rewards and challenges was measured on three sub-scales – "rewards", "parenting challenges" and "system challenges" – described in the Measures section above. Analyses were conducted to determine whether carers differed on fostering rewards and challenges on key characteristics. There was a weak positive correlation between "rewards" and the number of children in the household ($r = .28, p < .01$). The small difference between male (3.67) and female (3.26) carers on "system challenges" was also approaching statistical significance ($F(1, 91) = 3.16, p = .08$).

Qualitative analysis

The survey also collected carers' feedback about the rewards and challenges of fostering through an open-ended question "Are there any other comments you would like to make about the rewards and challenges of being a foster carer?" The question prompted a high response rate (97%) and carers' responses tended to contain several key ideas. These ideas were sorted according to whether they

⁷ The median number of children cared for by Anglicare Victoria's carers was 1.9 children per year, which was somewhat lower than that for the Victorian sample, which reported "about three children per year" (DHS, 2007:21).

related to rewards or challenges. The content of responses was equally split between rewards (43%) and challenges (43%). The remaining 14 per cent of statements did not relate to either rewards or challenges and were not included in this analysis.

Carers' ideas about the rewards of fostering fell into five themes (see Table 5, following):

- Supporting children
- Emotional and relational benefits
- Job satisfaction
- Agency support and
- Giving back.

In general, what carers found rewarding about fostering was also what they found motivating. The question '*Is there anything in particular that motivates you to keep fostering?*' had a similarly high response rate (99%). Responses were organised into four general themes (see Table A5 in Appendix A):

- Supporting children
- Emotional and relational benefits
- Giving back and
- Agency support.

The reporting of carers' responses about fostering's rewards and their comments about what motivates them to continue fostering has been combined due to the overlap in content between these two items. A selection of participants' direct quotes indicating repeating ideas about fostering's rewards is included as Table B1 in Appendix B; direct quotes demonstrating key motivation ideas are presented in Table B2 of Appendix B.

Table 5

Themes relating to the rewards of fostering

Theme	Repeating idea	Proportion of 'rewards' responses (n = 61)
Supporting children	Safety and wellbeing of the child Child's positive change and development Making a difference in children's lives Children achieve a permanent placement	25(41%)
Emotional and relationship benefits	Personal fulfilment Being thanked and recognised by others Learning Friendship Love that the job generates Positive impact on foster family	18(30%)
Job satisfaction	Love of the job itself	7(11%)
Agency support	Anglicare Victoria's high quality treatment and support of foster carers Anglicare Victoria's programs for foster carers	7(11%)
Giving back	Giving back to the community, doing good	2(3%)

Supporting children

On the topic of fostering's rewards, 41 per cent of "rewards" responses spoke to the theme 'Supporting children'. Four repeating ideas contributed to this theme, including:

- Seeing a child's positive change and development (23% of responses)
- Making a difference in children's lives (10% of responses)
- A child's achievement of a permanent care placement (5% of responses) and
- The safety and wellbeing of the child (3% of responses).

By comparison, 77 per cent of carers' responses about what motivates them to continue fostering also spoke to this 'Supporting children' theme. Motivating factors for carers were a combination of new ideas and reiterated 'rewards' ideas:

- Love of children and the joy of caring for children (23% of responses)
- Meeting children's needs and helping children (19% of responses)
- Making a difference in a children's lives (14% of responses)
- The safety and wellbeing of the child (11% of responses) and
- Seeing a child's positive change and development (10% of responses).

Regarding a child's positive change and development, carers spoke of witnessing children's 'progress', their beginning to 'grow and thrive' and to take small and large developmental steps as both rewarding and motivating:

"The reward is in how the children progress – in just overcoming quite a few challenges when they come into care and seeing them grow."

"When we find they are comprehending something, they have a eureka moment, when they take another step in their life, it's immensely satisfying."

"Kids learning to say 'please' and 'thank you'. And small milestone achievements like learning to use a fork and knife are all part of day-to-day rewards."

One person can't change the world, but I can change the world for one person.

Carers' language about rewards and motivations spoke directly of 'making a difference' in children's lives and also emphasised that fostering was an opportunity to show children 'how life can be' and to give children an example of 'a better life'. As one carer remarked:

"Ultimately making a difference. One person can't change the world, but I can change the world for one person."

Carers also expressed feelings of success and reward when foster children achieved a permanent placement:

"I find this very rewarding, watching children go to a permanent place."

"Rewards? Keeping the children in one home for a very long time."

On the aspect of the safety and wellbeing of the child, a child's ability to 'feel safe' and establish trusting relationships, and to have 'normality in their life' and 'a safe place to live' was emphasised as rewarding by foster carers. A child's safety and wellbeing was also raised as a motivation by carers, comprising 11 per cent of responses:

"The children need safe places to go where they are well looked after and cared for. I guess that's why I keep doing [it] and I like it."

"Just to feel [that] he feels happy and safe. Otherwise I don't think I would be doing it."

"It's just for the kids. Supplying a safe and nurturing place for them as long as they are with us."

Love of children and the joy of caring for children was the primary motivating factor for carers. Carers expressed pure enjoyment, appreciation and affection in their day-to-day interactions with foster children as a driving force behind their continued fostering:

"The children. The joy of having the children around outweighs the problems."

"All the things I can't put into words. The hugs you get from them and the kids and the smiles."

"I just love kids, my parents were foster parents and my grandparents were too, so we've always had kids around and I've always enjoyed looking after them."

"I keep doing it 'cause there [are] two hearts here... it's not 'cause of Angicare... it's 'cause of the two little hearts that are in my house."

Helping children and meeting children's needs was also a key motivating factor. Carers perceived both a lack of available foster carers and an increasing incidence of children requiring care. The following comments by carers represent this general sentiment:

"Just the kids, you just know that there is someone out there who needs you."

"The children. I have the capacity and there is the need so I feel I can give something to that."

"Just that there are so many kids out there who need help and not enough foster carers to go around. That's what motivated us in the first place, that's what got us into it in the first place."

Emotional and relationship benefits

Around one-third (30%) of responses about fostering's rewards related to the theme 'Emotional and relationship benefits'. Repeating ideas grouped within this theme were:

- Personal fulfilment (8% of responses)
- Learning (8% of responses)
- Positive impact on foster family (5% of responses)
- Friendship (3% of responses)
- Love that the job generates (3% of responses) and
- Being thanked by others (3% of responses).

The 'Emotional and relationship benefits' theme was also spoken to by 14 per cent of carers in relation to what motivated them to keep fostering. Motivating factors for carers again largely reiterated 'rewards' ideas:

- Personal fulfilment (9% of responses)
- Positive impact on foster family (3% of responses) and
- Fostering has become habitual, part of my and my family's life (2% of responses).

It makes you a better person. You just learn a lot of patience and how other people live.

The emotional and relationship benefits of fostering were important to carers irrespective of the duration of their fostering experience. Carers whose responses spoke to this theme were long-term, very experienced carers (43%) and also carers within their first five years of fostering (36%).

On the subject of personal fulfilment, carer sentiments focused on positive impacts to self:

"It makes you a better person. You just learn a lot of patience and how other people live."

One carer described the personal satisfaction and positive change derived from fostering thus:

"It's the hardest thing I have ever done in my life, it's the best thing I have ever done in my life. Because to do it well, it can't but change you."

Another carer described the love that the role of fostering manifests:

"I think it's just a sense of love that's generated within us, and the delight that two little boys can give you."

Some carers felt that the learning curve provided by fostering was rewarding. In the words of one carer: "I've learnt more from these kids than (...) they've learnt from me." Here, carers mentioned the importance of training sessions to their encouragement as a foster carer.

Anglicare Victoria carers who spoke to the positive impact of fostering on the foster family described feelings of familial fulfilment and pride. One carer described her own (non-foster) children developing perspective, empathy and compassionate understanding of their own and others' life situations. Another carer described her birth child's pride at being part of a foster family:

"When my kids explain to others why we are foster carers, they are proud of being able to share their family. My older son is very proud of having other kids come in and participate and be with the family."

Some Anglicare Victoria carers expressed that making many and life-long friends through fostering was an important reward. Other Anglicare Victoria carers felt that "being thanked by other people" and receiving formal recognition of their fostering role (eg. by obtaining an award) contributed to the sense of reward.

Job satisfaction

A love of the work of fostering was nominated by carers as a reward. This job satisfaction idea accounted for 12 per cent of responses by Anglicare Victoria's carers. In the words of one carer: "I love doing it and like different children coming through." Job satisfaction was not raised by carers as a motivating factor in their decision to continue fostering.

Agency support

Ideas by Anglicare Victoria carers on the theme 'Agency support' represented 11 per cent of responses about the rewards of fostering. These ideas included:

- Anglicare Victoria's high quality treatment and support of foster carers (7% of responses) and
- Anglicare Victoria's support of CIRCLE and TrACK programs (5% of responses).

One carer suggested that agency support was not only rewarding but essential: "the support of your social worker can make or break a placement in some cases."⁹ Carers who were part of the CIRCLE and TrACK therapeutic programs were obvious in their praise of the Agency. In relation to the TrACK program, one carer expressed: "without these people I couldn't continue."

Ideas about support from the agency's staff and programs were less frequently mentioned as a motivation for continuing to foster (2% of responses).

⁹ In a separate survey question, Anglicare Victoria's foster carers were asked to provide feedback about areas where the agency was 'doing well' and areas where it 'could improve'. The results feature in a separate report to the agency (Wilks & Wise, forthcoming) and offer an expansion of those reported in this section. The report found that carers' ideas about where the agency was doing well were primarily related to staff (their friendliness, approachability and cultivating good relationships with carers; their helpfulness and supportiveness; their provision of good communication support; and their excellent treatment of carers), but were also linked to the therapeutic foster care programs.

Giving back

For both the question about fostering's rewards and the question about what motivates foster carers, a small proportion of responses spoke to the theme 'giving back to the community' (3% and 4% of responses, respectively). In the context of fostering's rewards, one carer expressed: "I feel like I'm using my gift to help other people, other kids." For a few carers, knowing that they were 'giving back to the community' or 'doing good' was a primary motivating factor.

Carers' comments about challenges

Anglicare Victoria carers gave a wide range of responses on fostering's challenges. As with carers' responses on the topic of rewards, repeating ideas about fostering's challenges were organised into groups consistent under a broader theme. Quotes demonstrating each repeating idea are presented in Table B3, Appendix B. In the case of the 'Financial costs' item there was no other idea of a similar topic and so this idea became its own theme. Table 6, following, presents the seven organising themes and contributing ideas relating to carers' challenges. The seven themes relating to challenges were:

- System challenges
- Parenting challenges
- Emotional and relationship costs
- Low regard for carers' opinions and needs
- Poor quality fostering information
- Time costs and
- Financial costs.

Qualitative findings about fostering's challenges reinforced the separation of "parenting" and "system" challenges identified through the factor analysis of responses on the fostering rewards and challenges scale. System challenges included negative interactions with child protection workers, inadequate agency support, frustration with the Court system and unreliable access agreements. These themes were grouped together under the heading 'System challenges'. 'Parenting challenges' formed its own qualitative theme, comprising challenging foster child behaviour and increasing parenting demands.

Table 6

Themes of foster carers' comments about fostering's challenges

Theme	Repeating idea	Proportion of 'challenges' responses (n = 61)
System challenges	Negative interactions with DHS Frustration with Court system/decisions Inadequate agency support Unreliable access agreements	16(26%)
Parenting challenges	More challenging behaviour by foster child Parenting demands	15(25%)
Emotional and relationship costs	Carer burn-out Tension with the foster child's birth family Having to 'let go' of foster children	7(11%)
Low regard for carers' opinions and needs	Carers' needs aren't prioritised Not having a voice as a foster carer	6(10%)
Poor quality fostering information	Poor quality information for carers Lack of information about fostering in the public	5(8%)
Time costs	Time management Putting one's life on hold	5(8%)
Financial costs	Inadequate financial assistance	4(7%)

System challenges

On the topic of fostering's challenges, just over one quarter (26%) of responses by Anglicare Victoria foster carers spoke to the theme 'system challenges'. Repeating ideas within this theme included:

- Negative interactions with DHS (10% of responses)
- Frustration with the Court system/decisions (7% of responses)
- Inadequate agency support (7% of responses) and
- Unreliable access agreements (3% of responses).

One carer commented:

"It's not the kids, it's the system. [We] haven't had any good experiences from DHS".

Another carer expressed disagreement with decision-making procedures:

"I find that I don't agree that the children are bounded in the court system to sort out what is to be happened (*sic*) with the children in the long term."

In contrast to comments about agency support as a rewarding or motivating aspect of fostering, some carers expressed a frustrating lack of support.¹⁰ For one carer, poor quality agency support prompted second thoughts about continuing to foster:

"When three children we had went wrong we didn't have any support from the agency, we were considering stopping caring. It was only when the foster child's brother called that we decided to stick with it."

Parenting challenges

One-quarter (25%) of Anglicare Victoria carers' comments about the challenges of fostering related to 'Parenting challenges'. This theme incorporated two repeating ideas:

- More challenging behaviour by foster children (16% of responses) and
- Heavy parenting demands that foster carers experience (8% of responses).

The 'Parenting challenges' theme speaks to the complex needs and challenging behaviours of foster children. It also refers to the fact that foster carers today are expected to be more than 'ordinary parents'. As Smyth and McHugh note "...in addition to 'good' parenting skills, most foster carers are now expected to be competent in a number of [other] areas" (Smyth & McHugh, 2006:13).

Carers felt that a higher level of parenting skills was required in dealing with some foster children:

"You face a lot of stuff you don't necessarily deal with in your day-to-day parenting."

"Trying not to argue with the children is a challenge and trying to stay calm and responsible in my behaviour around them, being consistent."

Some comments conveyed the range of behavioural problems foster carers are required to respond to, including aggression, verbal and physical abuse and lying:

"Challenges like the behaviour problems on a day-to-day basis. Getting truthful answers like deception. Getting counselling support for the children."

"A young girl I looked after for three years, she was very abusive towards me verbally and physically...She displayed that behaviour only towards to me. She ended up going to a therapeutic program later. It was personally challenging to (*sic*) me."

¹⁰ Carer feedback on areas where Anglicare Victoria could improve (Wilks & Wise, forthcoming) also articulated poor quality support by agency staff, including: staff provide poor communication support to carer; the agency is understaffed and/or has a high staff turnover; agency staff are underpaid; and agency staff lack relevant experience in relation to their role. Carer feedback also raised the agency's role as an advocate and information source, and the distances carers must travel to access the agency, as other issues.

For one carer, complex child behaviour led to a feeling of not being able to continue fostering:

"It's just challenging. There was an instance where I had a little boy that was very aggressive towards me and he couldn't get along with me and he had to move on and then I felt I failed him. That made me feel that I don't think I can do fostering any more."

Low regard for carers' opinions and needs

One in ten responses about fostering's challenges fell under the theme 'Disregard for carers' opinions and needs'. Responses that expressed carers' feelings of being undervalued or ignored contributed to this theme. Key ideas were:

- Carers needs aren't prioritised (5% of responses) and
- Not having a voice as a foster carer (5% of responses).

Comments on this topic reflected carers' desire to have their opinions and concerns valued and to 'be heard', have 'input' and be 'treated as part of a team'. One carer stated: "Carers are not asked for any input and they are the ones who know the children."

Emotional and relationship costs

The theme 'Emotional and relationship costs' represented 11 per cent of foster carers' comments about the challenges of fostering. Three repeating ideas contributed to this theme:

- Tension with the foster child's birth family (5% of responses)
- Carer burn-out (3% of responses) and
- Having to 'let go' of foster children (3% of responses).

The following comments by Anglicare Victoria carers exemplify, respectively, these three ideas:

"I have [had] many challenges regarding birth family access visits, especially with mothers, which has caused me a great deal of headache."

"I'm considering not continuing long term care after [foster child] leaves 'cause I'm so exhausted. I'm just getting too old with that lack of sleep. I'm 52. Not enjoying my life at all."

"The most challenging thing is when they go home to their birth families, because of the attachments you make, they become your own children so therefore it's very hard."

Poor quality information

The theme 'Poor quality of fostering information' constituted eight per cent of carers' comments about the challenges of fostering. The theme emerged from repeating ideas about:

- Poor quality information about children (5% of responses) and
- Lack of public information about fostering (3% of responses).

One Anglicare Victoria carer commented that: "Challenges come when we don't know enough about their [foster children's] history."

Time costs

Challenges grouped under the theme 'Time costs' made up a smaller proportion (8%) of content from Anglicare Victoria foster carers. The 'Time costs' theme included the following key ideas:

- Time management (5% of responses) and
- Putting one's life on hold (3% of responses).

Carers expressed the challenge of having to portion limited time, with one carer noting the added time pressure of caring for a teenage foster child:

"People think that the beginning part of childhood is really difficult. Now that I am in the teenage years I need to be here now more than ever."

Other carers felt they had to put their life on hold to make time for the demands of fostering and had no relaxation time for themselves:

"Lack of down-time from my side as a carer sometimes, that is the only drawback."

Financial costs

The smallest proportion (7%) of Anglicare Victoria carers' comments about the challenges of fostering related to 'Financial costs'. Carers spoke of the financial burden of fostering and felt that the carer reimbursements were insufficient to meet the real costs of foster caring:

"The assistance financially doesn't make it."

"During the two years I had long term placements and I was never paid anything until he was there with me for two years. This is my only income, so it was stressful. When you try to get things done they don't seem to care about how hard it is, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week we care for them and what they pay us is insulting. It's peanuts."

"The comment I want to make is financially. I don't truly believe we are compensated enough."

Coping with fostering's challenges and demands

Anglicare Victoria carers were asked whether they had ever felt that becoming a foster carer was the wrong decision, or had felt like they couldn't go on fostering. This question taps whether the demands of fostering have ever felt overwhelming or unmanageable. More than one-third (42%) of foster carers reported that they had felt this way at some point in time.

Nothing emerged in the analysis to suggest certain carers were more likely to feel this way than others. However, the rather large difference between foster households headed by single-parents (61%) and couple households (29%) was approaching significance ($\chi^2 (1, N = 92) = 2.83, p < .1$), suggesting single parents may feel role strain more so than carers in couple relationships.

Among foster carers who answered this item in the affirmative, most (83%) nominated difficult child behaviour as a significant contributing factor. Other reasons carers frequently gave for feeling this way were their health and wellbeing (55%), legal proceedings (50%) and the health and wellbeing of other family members (48%). More than one-third (40%) answered that allegations of abuse were a factor in feeling like they had made the wrong choice to become a foster carer.¹¹ Figure 2, following, shows the sample's main categories of response to this question.

¹¹ Anglicare Victoria's recent submission to the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry presents an illuminating case study of one foster carer household's challenging experience of abuse allegations (Anglicare Victoria, 2011:28).

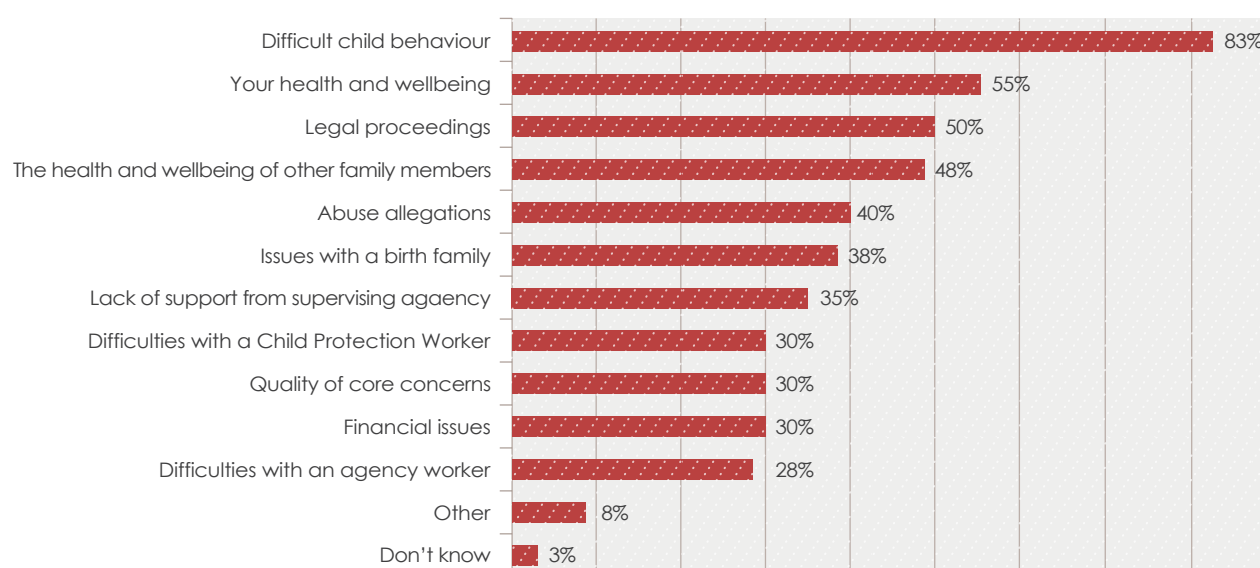


Figure 2. Carers' reasons for feeling that becoming a foster carer was the wrong decision, or that they can't continue to foster

Comparison of early and late career carers

In order to understand whether there were any differences between carers who had recently commenced fostering and more experienced carers, a new variable was constructed which categorised years fostering by quartiles; that is, each group represented one-quarter of the sample. The lower quartile represented early career carers, who had been fostering two years or less; the upper quartile comprised late career carers, who had been fostering for 13 years or more.

Carer characteristics

The profile of early career carers ($n = 27$) was no different to late career carers ($n = 21$) on measures including sex, home access to the internet, couple status and number of foster children. However, as expected, the mean age of early career carers ($M = 42.2$ years, $SD = 9.1$) was significantly less than late career carers ($M = 59.4$, $SD = 7.4$) ($t(46) = -7.008$, $p < .001$). Early career carers also had attained a higher level of education than late career carers ($t(46) = 3.11$, $p < .01$).

Fostering rewards and challenges

Independent samples t -tests were also conducted to compare early and late career carers on "rewards", "parenting challenges" and "system challenges". Table 7 shows there was no difference between early and late career carers on "rewards" or "system challenges". However, the small difference between early and late career carers on "parenting challenges" was approaching significance ($p < .1$).

Table 7

Differences between early and late career carers on rewards and challenges

	Early career carers M(SD)	Late career carers M(SD)	t -value, p -value
Rewards	4.61(.57)	4.70(.42)	$t(46) = -.62$, ns
Parenting challenges	3.23(.80)	3.61(.69)	$t(46) = -1.77$, $p < .1$
System challenges	3.17(.78)	3.33(.62)	$t(44) = -.71$, ns

Discussion and implications

The Anglicare Victoria survey of the rewards and challenges of foster care was undertaken to explore changes in the profile of carers over the past 5-10 years, to understand what carers today regard as the primary rewards and challenges of the role and to determine whether early and late career carers differ in terms of their demographic profile and/or experience of the fostering role. This information is critical to recruiting new carers and maintaining current carers in the fostering role. The information also helps shed light on whether late career carers are experiencing role strain due to the lack of new carers entering the system.

The profile of Anglicare Victoria foster carers

This report presents findings from a recent data collection about the experiences of Anglicare Victoria's foster carers. It demonstrates that the typical Anglicare Victoria carer is:

- Female
- Aged 45-54 years
- English speaking
- Has completed a non-school qualification
- Has been fostering for up to two years
- Has home internet access
- Lives in metropolitan Melbourne
- Part of an adult couple household
- Actively shares fostering responsibilities with at least one other adult in the household;
- Cares for a single foster child; and
- Not looking after birth children aged less than 18 years.

Overall, Anglicare Victoria's foster carer population appears very similar to other foster carer samples. While significantly more Anglicare Victoria foster care households than Australian households generally had home internet access, the Agency's foster carers shared demographic traits with foster care populations including majority proportions for sex (female); age (middle-aged); education (possess a non-school qualification); adult household composition (adult couple, but also some single female adult carers); and fostering history (concentration of carers who had been fostering for less than two years and 10 years or more as well as a few carers whose 20 years plus fostering histories have seen them care for more than 200 children). While there were some differences between the current sample and the national study of foster carers conducted in 2000 on number of foster children in the household (suggesting fewer foster children per Anglicare Victoria carer household) these results were no different for the Victorian audit of foster carers conducted in 2005. Overall, these findings suggest that the profile of foster carers has changed very little in the past 5-10 years.

Rewards of fostering

Carers' qualitative comments about the rewards of fostering articulated a number of themes important to their experience. The top two themes within fostering's rewards were: supporting children and emotional and relationship benefits. 'Supporting children' was also identified by the majority of carers as a main motivator in their decision to continue fostering. Anglicare Victoria's foster carers raised as many other issues as other carer populations about the positive aspects of fostering and what motivates them to keep fostering.

The responses of Anglicare Victoria carers on the theme of 'Supporting children' share similarities with those from NSW foster carers surveyed in 2003. Witnessing development or improvement in a child and ensuring a child's safety and wellbeing were key aspects of NSW carers' responses to an open ended survey question about the benefits of fostering. Supporting children was also a strong theme in the findings of the Victorian audit of foster carers (DHS, 2007).

Sentiments expressed by Anglicare Victoria's carers about the benefits of fostering for carers themselves were similar to those articulated by NSW foster carers. Personal fulfilment was a strong theme in the responses of NSW carers (McHugh *et al.*, 2004:95). Learning opportunities was likewise raised in other surveys of foster carers. Anglicare Victoria carers tended to link the reward of learning to training programs they'd attended and things they'd been taught by foster children. By comparison, NSW carers expressed attitudes toward the self-learning benefits that fostering provides them (McHugh *et al.*, 2004:95).

Anglicare Victoria carers' comments about the positive impact of fostering on their family also echo the statements of NSW carers (McHugh *et al.*, 2004:xi) and reiterate findings from previous studies by McHugh (2006), Nuske (2004, in Bromfield & Osborn, 2007:13) and DHS (2007:18). For example, between 35 and 45 per cent of Victorian foster carers mentioned, 'Because it is something the whole family can do together' as a reason behind their continuing to foster (DHS, 2007:18). Importantly, these previous studies acknowledge that while fostering has positive impacts on foster families, these benefits tend to occur in conjunction with particular familial challenges. Interestingly, Anglicare Victoria's foster carers did not raise such costs to the foster family in their comments about the challenges of fostering.

Finally, Anglicare Victoria carers' comments about giving back to the community mirror those of both NSW and Victorian foster carer populations (McHugh *et al.*, 2004:96; DHS, 2007:18).

Challenges of fostering

This research also makes clear that fostering is a challenging role. It highlights both the parenting and professional challenges faced by carers. Carers' experience of increasingly complex child behaviour was a major contributing idea to the theme 'Parenting challenges'. Similarly, among Anglicare Victoria carers who felt they had made a mistake in becoming a foster carer, many nominated difficult child behaviour as a significant contributing factor. Ensuring a balance between the positive and negative parenting, emotional and relationship aspects of fostering is especially important to carers and contributes significantly to their want to continue fostering. The challenges that Anglicare Victoria carers articulated and their feelings about coping also shared similarities with that of other carer populations.

That Anglicare Victoria carers are experiencing challenges associated with a more complex and challenging OoHC population "is not specific to Australia, but is consistent with trends throughout the western world" (Smyth & McHugh, 2006:13). The proportion of Anglicare Victoria carers who reported challenging behaviours as a negative aspect of fostering was similar to the proportion (12%) for the NSW carer population (McHugh *et al.*, 2004:xi).

Anglicare Victoria carers' frustration with the child protection and Court systems also repeats findings from other surveys of foster carers. For over 300 NSW foster carers who provided responses about the worst aspects of fostering, "the dominant response (mentioned by 53, or 15.5%) was a lack of support from the Department" (McHugh *et al.*, 2004:xi). A national study of foster carer perceptions (AFCA, 2001:24) of the adequacy and appropriateness of support in Australia also found that almost half (46%) of respondents received "'very little support' from the relevant State/Territory department". Of a similar tone is the finding by DHS that 43 percent of Victorian carers surveyed agreed that the most difficult aspect of fostering was "decisions the Department or Courts make" (DHS, 2007:37).

The responses of Anglicare Victoria carers about the emotional and relationship costs of fostering reiterate those from McHugh's (2006:8) qualitative study of NSW foster carers, in which carers reported the removal of children from their care to be a particularly difficult aspect of fostering. Findings for Anglicare Victoria carers on this issue also reflect those from a separate, quantitative study of NSW foster carers (McHugh *et al.*, 2004:98). Anglicare Victoria carers' comments around the stress of interacting with birth parents similarly mirrored the language of NSW carers (McHugh *et al.*, 2004: 97).

Anglicare Victoria foster carers raised the idea of lack of information about the foster children in their care as a challenging aspect of fostering. This idea was also raised by the Victorian carer population as a factor about which they were least satisfied (DHS, 2007:35). In the same way, Anglicare Victoria carers' sentiments about the neglected voice and needs of carers also reiterate those for the Victorian foster carer population (DHS, 2007:37).

Anglicare Victoria carers' statements about the burden of time and financial costs of fostering were also akin to those of other foster carer populations in Australia. The considerable time costs of fostering has been raised by NSW-based foster mothers (McHugh, 2006:78), while the challenge of receiving little financial assistance for fostering duties has been highlighted in research on Victorian (DHS, 2007:37) and other Australian carer populations (AFCA, 2005; McHugh, 2002; McHugh, 2006:79-81).

A main aim of the current survey was to investigate differences between early career carers and late career carers to determine whether older carers experience greater role strain. Findings suggested that carers who had been fostering for 1-2 years differed significantly from carers who had been fostering 13+ years on dimensions of age and education level, with more experienced carers (of 13 years or more fostering experience) tending to be older and of a higher education level. However, more experienced carers did not experience greater challenges than less experienced carers, and more experienced carers also perceived a similar level of reward from fostering as less experienced carers. While this puts paid to the idea that older carers are showing the strain of a foster care system in crisis, there is still the need to actively recruit younger carers who can replace older carers when they eventually exit the system.

With the exception of the number of children in carer households, no demographic or care characteristics emerged as significant in their impact on carers' experience. This suggests that all foster carers experience the rewards and challenges of fostering irrespective of their particular life situation. A significant positive correlation exists between fostering's rewards and the number of children in the carer household, suggesting that carers whose households comprise more children more greatly feel fostering's rewards. This quantitative finding was echoed by qualitative comments by carers about fostering's benefits to the whole family, in which carers spoke of the familial pride and compassion expressed by birth children since taking on a foster child.

Carers' ability to cope

The proportion of Victorian foster carers who had not seriously considered giving up fostering (60%) was similar to that for Anglicare Victoria's carer population (55%) (DHS, 2007:47). Although Victorian carers' reasons for considering giving up fostering were not reported on, data from a study of Queensland foster carers provides comparative data (FPAQ, in AFCA, 2001:82). The reasons given by Anglicare Victoria carers for considering giving up fostering are similar to those given by Queensland foster carers. In particular, the health and wellbeing of other family members, difficult child behaviour and allegations of abuse were reasons reported by both carer groups.

Revitalising foster care

Currently, the number of carers who are leaving the foster care system in Victoria are not being replenished by new homes and the average age of foster carers appears to be rising as a result. This reflects a trend right across the Western world, influenced in large part by the increasing numbers of women in the workforce and changes in the structure and functioning of modern families. The increasing complexity of the fostering role has also been connected to challenges in the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

Ensuring a sustainable foster care system into the future requires alternative strategies to increase the number of available foster homes. This includes approaches to recruit new foster carers into the system as well as strategies to support existing homes.

The current research on the challenges of fostering is helpful in informing the areas where carers may need additional supports. Strategies that help carers respond to the behavioural, educational and other parenting issues that OOHC children and youth are likely to present with is a logical area for service development. Here, additional training, supervision and support around parenting competencies – including access to positive parenting programs specifically adapted to foster care – may help, particularly if such efforts were focussed within the first year or two of a home opening. It is also important to continue supporting skilful use of the Looking After Children system to ensure the needs and issues of foster children that can challenge the success of a placement are identified and acted on.

Responses from carers in the current research on the rewards of fostering could also be used to promote the many positive aspects of foster care within the wider community, strengthen foster carer recruitment and refresh confidence in this service model. While there is much room for action to address the challenge of recruitment, there is an array of models adopted within innovative agencies as well as alternative government policies that could be used to inform developments in Victoria. These include the One Child Per Home model developed by the Child Welfare League of Canada, which is based on the premise there will be a more favourable response to becoming a foster carer with a view of welcoming one and only one child (or sibling group) and following through with raising or maintaining a relationship with that child/sibling group through to adulthood (Lemay, 2011).

Conclusion

Anglicare Victoria's 2010 survey of foster carers provides contemporary information on the profile of foster carers and the rewards and challenges of the fostering role at a critical time in terms of the limited capacity of the OoHC system to meet the demand for foster carer placements.

Findings reveal that the profile of carers has changed little in the years since the Department of Human Services' 2005 audit and the Australian Foster Care Association's 2000 survey. The average Anglicare Victoria foster carer was female, 49 years old, English speaking, tertiary educated and commenced her fostering career less than two years ago. She was more likely to be in a couple relationship and to share the fostering responsibilities with her partner. More often than not foster care households did not contain other dependent children (non-foster). The typical foster carer resided within Metropolitan Melbourne and had home access to the internet.

Fostering's rewards and challenges reported by Anglicare Victoria's carers were similar to that reported by other samples of foster carers. Rewards of the role reported by Anglicare Victoria carers included witnessing positive change in children, seeing children's achievements and helping to improve children's safety and wellbeing. The emotional and relationship benefits of fostering were also important motivators of fostering as reported by Anglicare Victoria carers. In line with earlier research, Anglicare Victoria carers found 'system' and 'parenting' challenges the most difficult aspects of the role. Parenting challenges in particular were related to feelings among some Anglicare Victoria carers that they had made the wrong decision to become a foster carer.

Rewards and challenges of fostering did not vary by key demographic characteristics. The only exception to this was that carers with more dependent children in the household felt the rewards of fostering more than carers with fewer dependent children in the household.

Carers who had been fostering for 1-2 years (early career carers) were significantly younger and had significantly more education than carers who have been fostering 13 or more years (late career carers). However, early career and late career carers did not differ in terms of the extent to which they experienced the rewards and challenges of fostering.

The current research on the challenges of fostering is helpful in informing the areas where carers may need additional supports. Responses from carers on the rewards of fostering could also be used to promote the many positive aspects of foster care within the wider community, strengthen foster carer recruitment and refresh confidence in this service model. Knowledge of what is likely to galvanise prospective carers and support existing placements should assist agencies and governments alike as they work to ensure vulnerable children and youth who are unable to live at home are able to receive the love and support of a family.

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Appendix A: Additional data tables

Table A1

Question 41 items from Anglicare Victoria's foster carer survey

	SD				SA	NA	DK	Refused
It's hard to keep foster children safe	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
Foster carers get left out when important decisions are made for children	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
Foster carers can change a child's life for the better	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
You have to sacrifice a lot to be a foster carer	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
Foster carers are monitored too closely	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
Foster care allowances are not enough	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
It's tough looking after foster children	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
It's hard to get support when you need it	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
Fostering helps you to be a better parent	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
Being a foster carer is personally rewarding	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
It's hard sharing decisions with others	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
Foster carers learn a lot about children and parenting	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
Foster carers aren't valued as part of a caring team	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
Foster children take up a lot of time and attention	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
It's difficult when foster children have access and contact with parents and family	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
There are a lot of good things about being a foster carer	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
It's very satisfying being a foster carer	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
Foster carers receive a lot of professional support	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
Fostering is a good way of giving something back to the community	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
You have a lot of bad experiences with foster children	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
Being a foster carer makes you feel good	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99
Looking after foster children is very stressful	1	2	3	4	5	6	98	99

Table A2*Adults aged 18 years or more in carer household*

No. adults in carer households (actively caring/ not actively caring)	No. of households	% of households
<i>1 adult</i>	19	20%
1 adult carer	19	20%
<i>2 adults</i>	53	56%
1 adult carer, 1 adult non-carer	6	6%
2 adult carers	47	49%
<i>3 adults</i>	16	17%
1 adult carer, 2 adult non-carers	3	3%
2 adult carers, 1 adult non-carer	7	7%
3 adult carers	6	6%
<i>4 adults</i>	7	7%
1 adult carer, 3 adult non-carers	0	0%
2 adult carers, 2 adult non-carers	3	3%
3 adult carers, 1 adult non-carer	1	1%
4 adult carers	3	3%
Total carer households	95	100%

Table A3*Children aged 17 years or under in carer households*

No. children placed per household	No. of households	% of households
<i>1 child</i>	35	36.8%
1 foster child only	35	36.8%
<i>2 children</i>	21	22.1%
1 foster child, 1 birth child	5	5.3%
2 foster children only	16	16.8%
<i>3 children</i>	16	16.8%
1 foster child, 2 birth children	7	7.4%
2 foster children, 1 birth child	7	7.4%
3 foster children only	2	2.1%
<i>4 children</i>	8	8.4%
1 foster child, 3 birth children	4	4.2%
2 foster children, 2 birth children	1	1.1%
3 foster children, 1 birth child	1	1.1%
4 foster children only	2	2.1%
<i>5 children</i>	10	10.5%
1 foster child, 4 birth children	5	5.3%
2 foster children, 3 birth children	4	4.2%
3 foster children, 2 birth children	1	1.1%
<i>6 or more children</i>	4	4.3%
Missing value	1	1.1%
Total carers	95	100.0%

Table A4*Number of children in carer households by carer age*

Age of carers	No. of children in household							TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
25-34 years	0.0%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%	16.7%	0.0%	100.0%
35-44 years	22.2%	7.4%	25.9%	11.1%	22.2%	7.4%	3.7%	100.0%
45-54 years	47.2%	27.8%	11.1%	11.1%	2.8%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
55-64 years	42.9%	28.6%	23.8%	4.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
65+ years	60.0%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%

Table A5*Themes of carers' motivations to keep fostering*

Theme	Repeating idea	Proportion of "motivation" responses (n = 103)
Supporting children	Love of children, joy of caring for children Helping children, meeting children's needs Safety and wellbeing of the child Child's positive change and development	79(77%)
Emotional and relationship benefits	Personal fulfilment Positive impact on foster family Fostering has become habitual, part of my and my family's life	14(14%)
Giving back	Giving back to the community, doing good	4(4%)
Agency support	Support from AV staff and programs	2(2%)

Note: 2 per cent of all responses offered 'No comment'; a further 2 per cent of ideas did not fall into these categories and so became 'Other'.

Appendix B: Selected direct quotes by participants

Table B1

Repeating ideas in foster carers' comments about fostering's rewards

Repeating idea	Example
Safety and wellbeing of the child	<i>"Giving them a safe place to live. Somewhere to sort out there problems and some parental guidance, domestic skills and having normality in there life."</i>
Child's positive change and development	<i>"The rewards are the joy of seeing a child grow and develop knowing that you have had an influence on that child."</i>
Making a difference in children's lives	<i>"It's more rewarding than I ever imagined, I just couldn't imagine how fulfilling and just how good sometimes it makes you feel that you can make a difference to someone else's life."</i>
Children achieve a permanent placement	<i>"I find this very rewarding, watching children go to permanent place."</i>
Giving back to the community, doing good	<i>"I feel like I'm using my gift to help other people, other kids."</i>
Personal fulfilment	<i>"There is fulfilment, personal achievement and the success of (...) being a family, having someone to love and someone [who] loves you."</i>
Being thanked and recognised by others	<i>"My reward is the hope and thank you that you get from other people."</i>
Learning	<i>"I think it's a great learning curve."</i>
Friendship	<i>"I have made many life long friends out of foster carers, they are large part of friend circle. We share with each other and support each other."</i>
Love that the job generates	<i>"I think it's just a sense of love that's generated within us, and the delight that two little boys can give you."</i>
Positive impact on foster family	<i>"When my kids explain to others why we are foster carers, they are proud of being able to share their family."</i>
Love of the job itself	<i>"It's great being a foster carer." "I just love it."</i>
Anglicare Victoria's high quality treatment and support of foster carers	<i>"I find Anglicare Victoria and all their staff extremely helpful and supportive."</i>
Anglicare Victoria's programs for foster carers	<i>"I think the Circle program is fantastic, great support."</i>

Table B2*Repeating ideas in foster carers' motivations to keep fostering*

Repeating idea	Example
Love of children, joy of caring for children	<p><i>"The children. The joy of having the children around outweighs the problems."</i></p> <p><i>"The only thing (sic) I keep doing it is 'cause there [are] two hearts here (...) it's 'cause of the two little hearts that are in my house."</i></p>
Helping children, meeting children's needs	<i>"Just that I know there's children out there that need people."</i>
Safety and wellbeing of the child	<i>"Knowing that he is in a good, safe home and he is happy is rewarding enough."</i>
Child's positive change and development	<i>"When you are being told that you have been given a child that can't do this and that, but with a little patience and love they can do it. When they tell you they are developmentally delayed, milestones that will be hard for them to reach, but you find when they are not neglected but loved and given attention... that brings them along."</i>
Making a difference in children's lives	<i>"Showing them a different way of life... maybe they can get out of the revolving welfare door and their kids will never see the other side of foster care."</i>
Giving back to the community, doing good	<i>"I thought I had good parenting skills and thought [I should] give it back to the community. I have a good passion about what I am doing."</i>
Personal fulfilment	<p><i>"A sense of purpose."</i></p> <p><i>"Personal and spiritual gains."</i></p>
Positive impact on foster family	<i>"My family love it too, they come to have lunch with the kids."</i>
Fostering has become habitual, part of my and my family's life	<i>"I think you just get into the habit of doing it, it becomes part of your life."</i>
Support from Anglicare Victoria staff and programs	<i>"The therapeutic Track team (...) without these people I couldn't continue."</i>

Table B3

Repeating ideas in foster carers' comments about fostering's challenges

Repeating idea	Example
Frustration with Court system/ decisions	<i>"I find that I don't agree that the children are bounded in the court system to sort out what is to be happened (sic) with the children in the long term."</i>
Negative interactions with DHS	<i>"It's not the kids, it's the system (...) [We] haven't had any good experiences from DHS."</i>
Unreliable access agreements	<i>"The access agreements. They don't let me know about the cancellation and I am the last person to know, nobody lets you know."</i>
Inadequate agency support	<i>"When three children we had went wrong we didn't have any support from the agency, we were considering stopping caring."</i>
Carers' needs aren't prioritised	<i>"They don't consider us at all, they consider everybody before they consider us, the kids come just before us and everyone before that. We should be treated as part of the team because without us, the team doesn't exist."</i>
Not having a voice as a foster carer	<i>"The carers are not asked for any input and they are the ones who know the children."</i>
Poor quality information for carers	<i>"The problem is the lack of relevant info for carers in terms of carers' rights and courts and legal proceedings."</i>
Lack of information about fostering in the public domain	<i>"I don't think there is enough info of (sic) what it is foster parents actually do, what kids go through and getting support for people."</i>
More challenging behaviour by foster child	<i>"It's just challenging. There was an instance where I had a little boy that was very aggressive towards me and he couldn't get along with me and he had to move on then I felt I failed him."</i>
Parenting demands	<i>"Trying not to argue with the children is a challenge and trying to stay calm and responsible in my behaviour around them, being consistent."</i>
Carer burn-out	<i>"I'm considering not continuing long term care after [foster child] leaves 'cause I'm so exhausted. I'm just getting too old with that lack of sleep, I'm 52. Not enjoying my life at all."</i>
Tension with the foster child's birth family	<i>"I have [had] many challenges regarding birth family access visits, especially with mothers, which has caused me a great deal of headache."</i>
Having to 'let go' of foster children	<i>"The most challenging thing is when they go home to their birth families, because of the attachments you make, they become your own children so therefore it's very hard."</i>
Time management	<i>"Trying to allocate time accordingly."</i>
Putting one's life on hold	<i>"I think you put your life on hold, especially when you have kids of your own."</i>
Inadequate financial assistance	<i>"I think the comment I want to make is financially...I don't truly believe we are compensated enough."</i>

A photograph of a concrete wall with plants growing over the top, and a dark asphalt road in the foreground. The wall is made of dark, textured concrete blocks. The plants are thin, brownish stems with small, dried flowers. The background is dark and out of focus, showing some architectural elements. The foreground is a dark, textured asphalt road.

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