

fostering

CONNECTIONS



Information for
Prospective Carers

Congratulations on taking the first step to becoming a foster carer – enquiring.

Every night in Victoria over 1400 children are in need of a place to call home. Foster carers provide safe, nurturing homes for children and young people who cannot live with their family. Whether it is long term, short term or one weekend a month, foster carers make a difference to thousands of children across Victoria.

This booklet will give you some key information to get you started on your journey to becoming a foster carer. You will also receive an information pack from your local agency after they receive your enquiry.

If you have any further questions, you can always call us, Fostering Connections, on **1800 013 088**, or email us at fcenquiry@cfecfw.asn.au.



What is in this booklet?

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Eligibility



Who can become a foster carer?

You can become a carer if you are over 21, have room in your home and of course, care for and about children.

Foster carers come from all backgrounds and life stages. Foster carers are singles, couples, same sex couples, families and come from all age groups. They may be renting or living in their own home; employed, studying or retired and come from diverse cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds.

Foster care involves everyone in a household. If you live with a partner or have children of your own, it is important to discuss it with them before applying. You will all need to feel comfortable and ready to take the next step.

Can I work and be a foster carer?

Yes! Many foster carers work full or part-time.

Some children need a full-time stay-at-home carer, like babies and children under five. You can talk to your agency about the kind of care that is suited to your circumstances and work commitments. If you are working full time you may choose to focus on respite or emergency care. If your circumstances change, you can always change the kind of placement you take on.

Do I need a spare bedroom?

This depends on the agency.

Some agencies ask that a child or sibling group have their own room, while others are happy for children to share rooms as long as there is enough space for them to do so comfortably. If you give us a call, we can ensure you are referred to an agency that is appropriate for your circumstances.

If I have a police record, am I still eligible to become a foster carer?

Some offences, like sexual or physical abuse (particularly towards a child) will rule out approval, while other offences may not.

All foster carers undertake Police and Working with Children Checks as part of their accreditation process. Agencies are required to ensure the safety and welfare of the children.

It is important to discuss any criminal history with your agency upfront. Minor historic issues may not impact your eligibility to be a carer, so please discuss your circumstances with your agency early on.



I am Aboriginal and interested in fostering children. How do I know which agency is right for me?

If you are Aboriginal, you may prefer to foster with an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO).

ACCOs are organisations governed by traditional owners, offering services needed within their local communities. Across Victoria, Aboriginal children in foster care are being transferred to ACCOs to ensure they get the best care possible and their cultural needs are fulfilled. If you would like to work with an ACCO, let us know and we will refer you to your local Aboriginal foster care agency.

If you are Aboriginal, you are not required to foster Aboriginal children. However, Aboriginal foster carers have specific knowledge and a unique understanding of culture that can often benefit Aboriginal children and young people in their care.

I am not Aboriginal, am I eligible to foster Aboriginal children?

Yes. Foster care agencies welcome all carers who are committed to keeping Aboriginal children connected to their culture.

You will be offered extra training and support to make sure you have all the skills you need to keep your foster child connected with their community.

Across Victoria, Aboriginal children in foster care are being transferred to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to ensure they get the best care possible and their cultural needs are fulfilled. If you are interested in fostering Aboriginal children, let us know and we will refer you to your local Aboriginal foster care agency.

I have only lived in Australia for a few years, am I eligible to foster?

There are no specific visa requirements or laws regarding who can be a foster parent, but some agencies may have policies regarding residency.

Agencies are most concerned with your ability to provide a safe, stable home for a child. If you are intending to stay in Australia long-term and can provide that stability, it is very likely you will be eligible to foster.

Children of all cultural backgrounds may be placed in foster care, and it is of huge benefit to these children if they can be placed with a family who can provide them with a familiar culture while they are settling in to a new home. A gesture as simple as a familiar meal for dinner can make a big difference to a child feeling safe and secure, so have a chat with your agency about how your cultural background can help support the children in your care.

The process

Step 1. First contact with an agency



After you submit an enquiry, you will be contacted by a worker from your local agency. This is a great opportunity to ask questions and provide the agency with information about your household.

Step 2. Information session



You will be invited to attend an information session or exchange held either at the agency or in your own home.

Step 3. Paperwork and checks



You and all adults in the household will have to complete a Health Check, Police Check, a Working with Children Check and referee checks. You will also be asked to write your life story. Your agency will provide support in completing these.

Step 4. Training



To help you prepare you will undertake 16 hours of compulsory training, offered at various dates and times that suit your schedule.

Step 5. Home visits and assessments



A representative from the agency will come to your home to confirm that it is safe, secure and has enough space for a child.

Step 6. Accreditation panel



A report of your training and assessment is sent to an accreditation panel for approval. The panel is made up of staff from your foster care agency and at least one representative from The Department of Health and Human Services.

Step 7. Accreditation and review



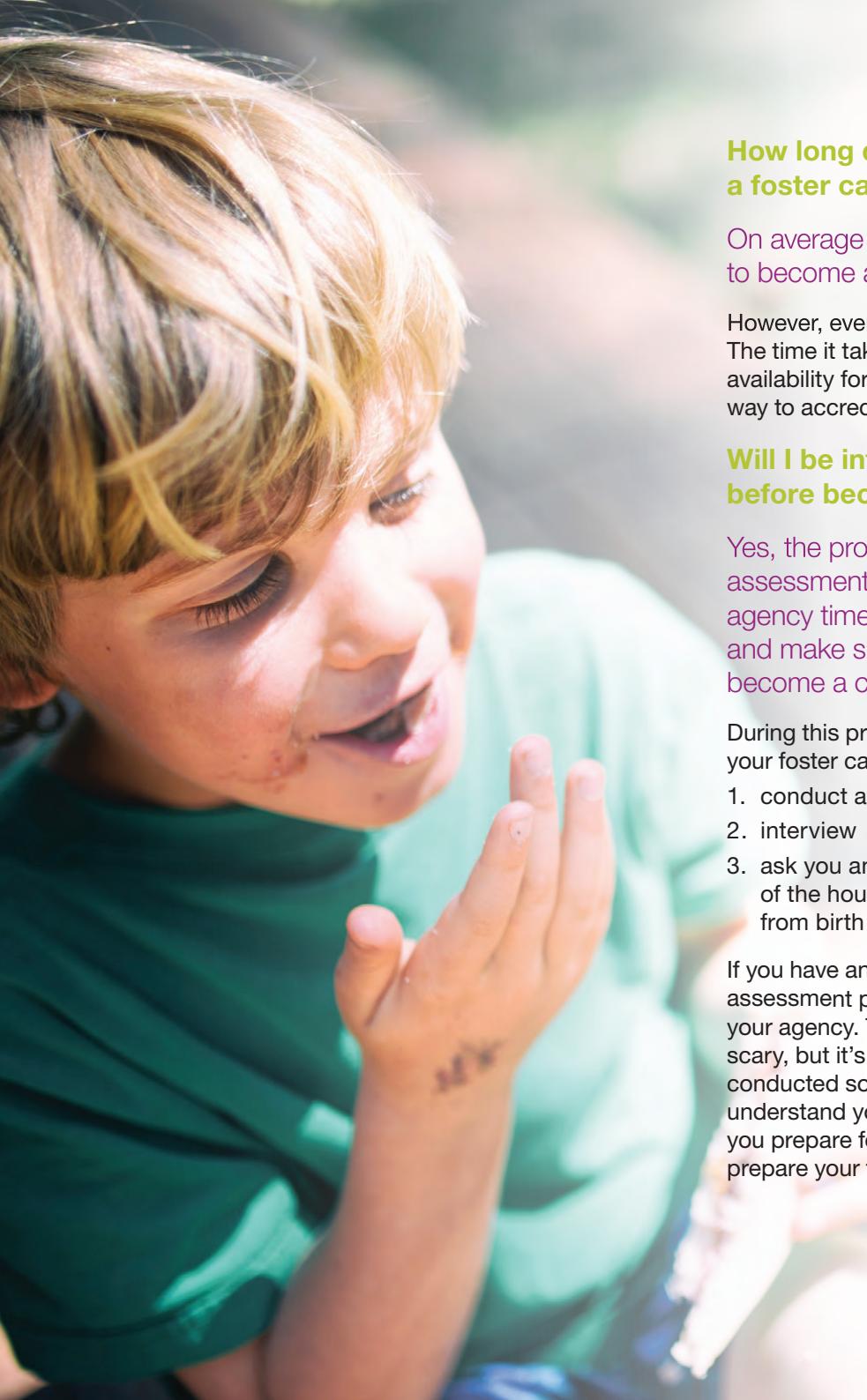
Approval is granted by your foster care agency and you will be asked to sign a code of conduct agreement. You will then be accredited for an initial 12 month period. Your accreditation is reviewed annually.

Step 8. Placement



Your agency will contact you to ask if you're able to have a child, young person or sibling group stay with you. This final step is known as placement.





How long does it take to become a foster carer?

On average it takes four to six months to become an accredited foster carer.

However, everyone's circumstances are different. The time it takes you will depend on your availability for training and other milestones on the way to accreditation.

Will I be interviewed or assessed before becoming a foster carer?

Yes, the process involves several different assessments. These will give you and your agency time to discuss your circumstances and make sure you are well prepared to become a carer.

During this process, recruitment workers from your foster care agency will visit your home to:

1. conduct a home environment check
2. interview you and members of your family
3. ask you and all other adult members of the household to write your life stories from birth to present

If you have any questions or concerns about the assessment process, you can always talk with your agency. These assessments can sound scary, but it's important to remember that they are conducted so the agency can get to know you and understand your circumstances. They also help you prepare for placements and give you time to prepare your family and your home.

What type of training will I receive before becoming a foster carer?

All foster carers complete 16 hours of compulsory training, provided by your agency at no cost to you.

Your training will prepare you for the day-to-day responsibilities and challenges. It covers all aspects of a placement, from welcoming a child into your home, through common daily experiences, right through to what it's like to say goodbye.

The training covers:

- ✓ your responsibilities as a foster carer
- ✓ common challenges and characteristics of children who are placed in foster care
- ✓ experiencing and processing grief and loss
- ✓ how to support children and young people that have experienced abuse or trauma
- ✓ working with birth families
- ✓ working with your foster care team
- ✓ maintaining a child or young person's cultural connections
- ✓ managing the end of a foster care placement

If you are preparing to care for Aboriginal children, you will receive additional training to ensure you are equipped with all the skills you need to keep a child connected to their culture.

Being a carer



Who is involved in foster care placement?

All foster carers are part of a child or young person's placement 'care team'.

You will be part of a group of people who share all the parenting responsibilities for a child or young person in foster care.

A care team includes:

- ✓ child or young person
- ✓ child or young person's foster carer(s)
- ✓ care manager (leads care team) - can be from the foster care agency or DHHS
- ✓ child's case manager at the foster agency
- ✓ child's parents (unless there is a very good reason not to include them)
- ✓ any **other adults who play a significant role** in caring for the child.

Your team will work together to provide the best care for your foster child. If you are caring for an Aboriginal child, this will include a Cultural Care Plan to help keep them connected to their culture.

Can I choose the age and gender of the child or young person who is placed with me?

Yes. It is common for carers to ask their agencies to match them with children within an age range or of a specific gender.

Many carers prefer to care for foster children the same age as their own biological children; some prefer to care for children younger than their youngest child; others enjoy working with school-age children or teenagers.

Your agency will always want to match you with a child who is a good fit for your family. However it is worth noting that the more specific you are about the type of child best suited to your circumstances, the longer it may take to find an appropriate match.

Do I receive financial reimbursement as a foster carer?

Yes. You will be reimbursed for the ordinary, day-to-day expenses that come with caring for any child or young person. This includes food, incidental clothing, household items, gifts, pocket money and entertainment.

Reimbursements are not income, so they are tax free, and they are received through DHHS. In general, payments start at just over \$375/fortnight, paid pro-rata to emergency and respite carers.

This payment increases depending on the age of the child or young person and the complexity of their needs.

This might sound hard to calculate, but your agency will provide guidance and extra support when it comes to understanding reimbursements, and you can also read more information on the DHHS website.

Can I say no to a placement?

Yes, you can always say no.

Be open and honest with your agency about when you can and cannot accept placements. Many foster carers take breaks for periods of time and then return to caring once they are ready, and many carers decide that a specific placement is not right for their family for any number of reasons. Your agency will be able to support you through these decisions.

What information about a child or young person can I request before accepting a placement?

You can always ask for information about a child or young person which will help you prepare for the placement.

You can ask for information the following:

- their family details and contact arrangements
- if they have a Cultural Care Plan and how they are culturally supported
- if they have medical needs , and how to take care of them
- their current routine : whether they attend child care, kindergarten, school or work
- their behavioural needs and support they may require
- their past placement history : how many foster homes they have lived in, whether they are in short-term care or waiting for a longer-term placement
- the reason for their current placement

Do I get support and reimbursement for daily routines, like school pickup or child care?

Carers will usually be responsible for their foster child's daily activities, like transport to and from school. That said, you are not alone – many carers tell us that when there have been emergencies or the unexpected pops up, their agencies have been very active in offering extra support.

Depending on the age and needs of the child or young person you are caring for, older young people may also be able to take public transport or walk to school, and some agencies do have resources available to organise a staff member or transport agency to bring the child to and from school and other activities if you are unavailable.

Child care arrangements will depend on the needs of the child. In general, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) approves and reimburses child care on a case-by-case basis. Your agency will be able to guide you on how to arrange this.



Do children in foster care have contact with their family?

Yes. Contact plans are determined by the Children and Family Courts. The young person's safety is always the priority and each situation is assessed individually.

The majority of children in foster care have contact with their family unless there is a very good reason not to. Most children in foster care enjoy seeing their families and family contact is an important way to keep them in touch with their culture and community.

Children in foster care get a lot of benefit out of seeing a positive relationship between their foster carers and their birth family, and your agency will help facilitate this in any way that is appropriate for your placement.

For Aboriginal children it is especially important to ensure they have contact with their families and communities, especially if they are placed with a non-Aboriginal carer. Aboriginal children who maintain their family and community relationships while in foster care grow up healthier, happier and stronger. If you are caring for an Aboriginal child, they will have a Cultural Care Plan which ensures they have access to everything they need to maintain those ties.

Adoption

Is adoption the same as foster care?

No. Adoption is where you become the permanent, legal parent of a child or young person.

As a foster carer, in most cases you care for a child or young person for a fixed period of time, with the common goal to reunite the child or young person with their birth family where possible.

Decisions about a child's placement are made by the child's whole care team, which includes the birth parents.

Can I adopt a foster child I have been caring for?

In some cases, foster carers can apply for permanent care.

Permanent care is where a foster parent becomes the permanent guardian of a child until they reach 18. Permanent care placements are granted in situations where a child or young person can't be reunited with their birth family.

Permanent care is granted on a case by case basis, and will include extensive consultation with your care team.



Have more questions?

You can always call us on **1800 013 088** or email us at fcenquiry@cfecfw.asn.au