



# Frequently Asked Questions

## What I need to know about Fostering ...

### What is Fostering?

Fostering is an arrangement where a family, or an individual, cares for a child in the care of the Department of Communities (Communities) in their own home. Foster carers are volunteers who are willing and able to provide care to children and young people (from birth until 18 years of age) who are not family members.

### My grandchild has been taken into care. What should I do?

If your grandchild has been taken into care and you would like to care for the child yourself, you will need to contact the Communities District Office to which the child is attached. You may be able to be assessed as a Family Carer. Family carers provide care to children who are related to them, and it is always the preference of Communities to place children with family. Children are placed with foster carers only when there is no family available.

### I am interested in fostering a child I met at my daughter's school. The grandmother told me she can no longer look after her grandson. What should I do?

The grandmother will need to contact Communities for an assessment of her situation. If the child is in care with Communities, you can contact the relevant District Office to indicate an interest. As you do not have a prior relationship with the child, you will need to undertake the full assessment process.

### I am currently looking for work. Is fostering considered a job?

Fostering is voluntary; to be considered you and your partner need to be financially stable. You will be receiving board payments to cover day-to-day living expenses for the child, but this is not an income.



## **Is there a demand for foster carers? Why are some carers not allocated children?**

There is a shortage of foster carers for children in all age groups. The number of children in care continues to rise, but the number of carers is decreasing. This means that carers are often asked to take additional children when they are at capacity. There are several reasons why a foster carer may not have a child in their care at any time. If this applies to you, please contact your local District Office.

## **How long are children in care?**

The length of time varies depending on each child or young person's situation. It can range from overnight to placements that are 12 months or more. Some children and young people remain in care for many years or until the age of 18 years, if they are unable to return home.

## **When are you told how long the placement will be?**

Placement length can be quite unpredictable; however, you will be told the likely length of the placement when initially asked to care for the child. A planning forum is held for each child when the child enters care and then every 12 months, or more frequently if necessary. The issue of placement and how long the child is likely to remain in care are key topics for discussion at these forums.

## **Can I nominate the age and gender of the child I would prefer?**

You can give your preference about the age and gender of a child you think would fit best with your family and lifestyle.

## **Can I foster a child permanently? It will be less disruptive for my family.**

Some children require permanent care arrangements with foster carers but, if the birth family members can provide a safe placement, Communities will work with the family to place the child or with the parents to reunify the child to them.



## **I would like to foster but don't want to be upset when the child returns home.**

A child leaving a placement can certainly raise a lot of feelings and emotions for the carers and their family. Before a child returns to family, a safety assessment and parenting capacity assessment is conducted to ensure the child will be safe. There are support services available through Communities which carers can access.

## **Is Communities the only provider of foster care?**

All children who are placed in care are the legal responsibility of Communities. As Communities is unable to provide all care arrangements, it funds the Community Service Organisations (CSO) to provide placements. Some CSOs provide specialist placements. Your support will be provided by the CSO worker. You will need to contact the CSO that best meets your expectations.

# **The Child and Trauma...**

## **What may foster children have experienced that has led to them being in care?**

Most foster children have experienced some form of trauma, which can be a one off-event or ongoing. Communities will bring children into care when harm (physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and/or neglect) is occurring or there is evidence that potential for harm can occur.

## **What is the impact of trauma on the children?**

Foster children who often come from traumatising situations are experiencing grief, loss and dislocation, and are dealing with confused loyalty issues. The degree to which trauma impacts depends on the severity and duration of the trauma, support received, personality and age. Trauma affects children in all areas of development: brain changes, emotional disorders, thinking, social problems and physically.



## How can I help the child overcome the trauma he/she has experienced?

A foster carer has a very important role in helping a traumatised child learn to manage his/her situation by providing positive relationships through physical and emotional safety. The child learns to trust through reliable, consistent and predictable parenting.

Foster carer applicants are required to attend training as part of their assessment. All carers are strongly advised to continue to participate in training and take advantage of other opportunities to learn more about responding to the needs of a traumatised child.

## Providing Care...

The decision to foster involves the support of all members of the family as well as a network of family and friends who can support you when the going gets tough. It is very important to consider the views of your own children before you embark on the fostering journey as caring for a foster child will have an impact on the family dynamics.

### What types of care can I provide?

There are two types of care which reflect the child's legal orders:

**Temporary foster carers** provide care for up to two years where no final decision has been made for the child's legal care future. This includes emergency care or short-break support care.

**Permanent foster carers** provide care to a child where a legal decision has been made for the child to live permanently out of his/her parents' care until the age of 18 years.

Carers will be able to provide both temporary and permanent care for children. In some cases, carers may begin as a temporary carer for a child and subsequently become the child's permanent carer. Most carers are supported by a local District Office located in their geographic region.



## **What is emergency care?**

Emergency care is a type of care which is required when a child requires immediate care. This need may arise when a child is first taken into the care of Communities or if the care arrangement that they are in breaks down and another placement is needed immediately. This program suits carers who are very flexible and willing to support the child for brief periods to enable Communities to explore other placement options.

## **What is short-break care?**

Short-break care is care that is provided for a short period of time on a regular basis. This type of care is often suited to foster carers who work full or part-time and would be able to offer regular weekend care (for example, one weekend each fortnight or month) in their own home. Carefully planned and regular short-break support allows positive relationships to be formed and supports the primary carer and placement.

Foster carers who only provide short-break care in the metropolitan area are supported by a specialist team that match the skills and experience of the carer with the needs of the child

## **What is pre-adoptive care?**

In this program Foster carers mainly care for newborn babies while the birth parents are considering relinquishing the child for adoption, or the adoption process is under way. The period of care can range from a few days to several months and, occasionally, up to two years. Foster carers providing pre adoptive care are expected to provide full time care to the child and therefore this requires that the carer (if a single carer) or one carer in a couple is not employed outside the home.

# **Can my partner and I provide foster care?**

## **Are there any citizenship, residency or visa requirements?**

You **and** your partner must be an Australian Citizen, Australian Permanent Resident or hold a New Zealand Special Category visa – subclass 444.



## **What qualities do I need to have to foster?**

Carers come from all walks of life. Consideration is given to a person's maturity, health, lifestyle and an ability to promote the child's wellbeing in a safe and nurturing home environment.

## **Do I need to be married or have a partner? What if I am a single parent?**

Foster carers can be single, partnered or married, with or without children.

## **I am LGBTI+. Can I apply to foster?**

Yes, we welcome applications from all members of the community. The important factor is your capacity to provide a safe and nurturing home environment for a child or children.

## **Am I able to still work either full time or part time?**

Foster carers can work full time, part time or not at all, but it will affect the type of placement that is made. Communities would not normally place a very young child with a carer who works full time. A school-age child or weekend short-break care may suit carers who work full-time.

## **Does it matter how old I am?**

Foster carers must be over 18 years of age, preferably at least in their early 20s. Your age may affect the decision about which child is placed with you; for example, we would not normally place a teenager with a carer in their early 20s or a baby in long-term care with a retired person.

## **I have never had children of my own. Does this mean I can't parent a foster child?**

Foster carers do not have to have parenting experience. What is important is that you can relate well to children and young people and be capable of meeting their needs.



### **I have shared custody of children from a previous relationship. Can I still foster when my own children stay with me on the weekend?**

Many children's lives are enriched by having a foster child in the family. You will need to consider the impact of the foster child on your family functioning and the impact of your children on the foster child. It is your role to discuss this with your children as fostering involves the whole family. The assessor can help you with any questions you may have.

### **I have a young baby. Can I care for another baby?**

Communities has a duty of care to both your youngest child and the foster child and for a healthy attachment to develop. For this reason, you should wait until your youngest child is two years of age before you commence your fostering journey. The demands of fostering are significant, and your baby requires you to focus on his/her development. A foster child has very high needs and, as the focus for the foster baby will be on reunification, contact is frequent. It will be very difficult to meet the needs of both babies.

### **Do I have to own my house?**

You do not have to own your home but, if you are renting, you will need to check with your landlord about any restrictions on your tenancy agreement. If you are planning to move house soon, it is preferable for you to wait until you have moved and settled before you commence the assessment process.

### **Can I share a house with other unrelated people? What if I live with my parents? What if I am a boarder? What about Airbnb?**

A foster carer needs to either own the property or be named on the tenancy agreement. It is preferred that you are in a stable household because the impact of fostering will affect all members of the household. If you live with your parents, they should be encouraged to apply to foster.

You cannot be considered if you are boarders in the household or have Airbnb guests in the house.



### **My partner and I are undertaking IVF treatment. Can we still be carers?**

You will need to wait until 12 months after the last cycle of treatment before you can be potentially assessed as a foster carer.

### **I have some Department history in Child Protection. How will that affect the application?**

All applicants are screened by Communities' Screening Unit. You should discuss past involvement with the Department with your assessor early in the application process.

### **I have previously been involved with the police. How does a criminal history affect my chances?**

Communities' Screening Unit will undertake an extensive criminal record search throughout Australia and, if applicable, internationally. A criminal history does not necessarily prevent you from being approved as a foster carer. You will need to discuss your history with your assessor during the application process.

## **Safety Considerations**

### **Can the child share a bedroom with my own child/ren?**

A foster child may not need a separate bedroom. You will, however, need to consider shared bedrooms very carefully as the foster child may have experienced significant trauma and have very different life experiences to your child. You are less able to supervise the children when they are sharing a bedroom. It may be appropriate if the children are of similar age, but the needs of the foster child, as well your own child, must be considered. This is something to discuss with your assessor.

### **I don't have a spare room in the house. Can the baby or toddler share my bedroom?**

Carers cannot share bedrooms with children in care. The only exception is for a baby where the SIDS guidelines recommend babies to *sleep* in the same room where you *sleep* but not the same bed for at least six months, but preferably up to 12 months of age.



## **I have a swimming pool. Is that a problem?**

Your swimming pool must comply with the legislative requirements for pool fencing. This will be checked by the assessor during a visit to your property, and you will need to provide your current compliance certificate.

If you have other bodies of water on your property (for example, dams or lakes in regional areas), there are other special provisions you may need to consider. These will need to be discussed during the Initial Home Visit or Initial Interview.

## **I have pets at home, is that ok? What about my large dog?**

When the assessor visits your house, they will enquire about any pets as part of the assessment to ensure they would be safe around children. Access to pets may be a wonderful opportunity to teach the child about caring for an animal. You should always supervise a child interacting with any pets, particularly dogs and cats in order to ensure both are safe from each other.

# **The Process ...**

## **How do I become a carer?**

The process of becoming a carer involves [several steps](#) to ensure safety for the child and the applicant/s being able to demonstrate that they are able to meet the criteria or competencies. You can [read more about fostering on the website](#).

## **What will the assessor ask?**

The assessor will get to know you and your family through a series of interviews to assess your suitability to foster. The assessor is looking for evidence that you are able to care for children in the care of Communities. The questions relate to your family background, parenting and other child-care experience, and other skills that show that you can care for children safely. This will be fully explained on the first home visit.



## **How soon can I foster?**

The process of becoming a carer involves several steps and can take several months, as Communities needs to assess safety and competency to foster. Applicants are required to complete Preparation training.

## **I will be the primary carer. Does my partner have to undertake training?**

Preparation training (19 hours) is *compulsory* for you and your partner in order to be approved as foster carers. Preparation training is offered flexibly so that even FIFO or shift workers can complete the training via a self-paced package if unable to attend in person. Owing to the COVID-19 restrictions, some restrictions may apply. Your assessor will be able to provide you with all the details you need in order for you to enrol in the training.

## **Who has the final say as to whether I can become a carer?**

Once the assessment report and all checks have been completed, the assessor will submit the report to the approval committee /panel with a recommendation to Communities about whether you should be approved as a foster carer. If you are approved, you will receive a letter, a certificate and a worker from the local District will contact you to sign an agreement with Communities and start your fostering journey.

## **Now that I am an approved carer...**

### **How often can I expect contact or a visit from a worker?**

Once you have a child placed with you, you will be contacted by the child's worker and a worker who will support you as a carer. The child's worker is required to see the child every four months. Communities requires that all foster carers must undergo a review annually. Your workers and you may have much more frequent contact depending on the complexity and needs of the placement and the level of support you need as a carer.

### **How many foster children can I take on at once?**

Your capacity to care for any number of children and your ability to meet the needs of each child is determined through the assessment process in discussion with your assessor. There is a great need for carers who can provide care for sibling groups.



## **I don't think children should return to the parents' care if they have abused and/or neglected them**

A child's best place is with their family, and Communities needs to assess the child's parents' capacity to care for the child again. In some cases, the Children's Court may extend or vary legal orders to ensure that the child's safety is maintained. Communities engages with the parents to support reunification processes if this is determined to be in the best interest of the child. Foster carers have a role in supporting this work.

## **How do we manage contact with parents?**

The child's wellbeing is the central focus of work, the best outcomes for children occur when foster families and birth families can work together with Communities.

The child will usually have contact with his/her parents at a separate venue to your home, but close work between the foster carer and birth parents is expected. Department workers will supervise contact when the child is at risk of harm by the parent. All carers are asked to use the Communication Book which is passed between the carer and the parents when the child goes for contact visits.

Experienced, confident and skilled foster carers have been involved with birth parents, and there are many examples of how this has benefited the child. Newly approved foster carers need support, knowledge and skills in undertaking this type of work.

## **Will the families know where I live?**

For your privacy, your address is not given to the child's family unless you have given permission. You need to be aware that the child may disclose your address and other personal information to others including their families.



## **I am not Aboriginal. How can I best meet the cultural needs of an Aboriginal child?**

As over half of children in care are Aboriginal, it is very likely that you will be asked to care for an Aboriginal child. As a foster carer you will be expected to maintain cultural exposure which will be guided by the child's cultural plan, supporting family connections, return to country (as relevant and appropriate), attending local events and relevant training. Each District has access to an Aboriginal Practice Leader who will be able to provide support and guidance.

## **Can foster children change schools to attend the local school which my children attend?**

This will depend on the length of the care arrangement and the needs of the child. If the child is staying with you for a short period of time, there will be no change of school so the child can continue to have contact with familiar people and places. For a long-term care arrangement, a move to a local school may be supported.

## **What if there are long distances involved to travel to and from school?**

As a foster carer, you will be asked to transport the child to school. Additional money for mileage may be claimed if the school is not in the local area. If transport cannot be managed, please discuss your concerns with the child's worker.

## **Can the foster child attend the same private school as my children?**

Most children in care attend government schools. A private school may be supported if the foster care arrangement is long-term or if there is another significant reason why the child cannot attend a government school. A decision would be made based on the best interests of the child, but this is not the usual practice.



## **Can I take the foster child on family holidays – intrastate, domestic and international?**

Foster children may benefit greatly from a family holiday. You will need to seek permission from Communities via the child's worker before you make any bookings. If there are any travel restrictions in place, other arrangements for the foster child will need to be organised. Plans for any overseas travel need to be discussed with a case worker well in advance, as it can be a very long process to obtain a passport for a foster child.

## **Can I take the child to my church/place of worship?**

You are encouraged to include the child in all your family outings and interests. In most instances you can take the child along to any family activities; however, if the birth parents have a strong objection to a particular activity, the parents' wishes would be considered and attendance at the activity be negotiated. An older child's views must be considered.

## **I work. Can the child attend day care? Who pays?**

Communities may pay for some day care; however, it may not be in the child's best interest to attend. The child's age and other needs will be considered. If day care is supported, carers are expected to apply for any government child-care rebates.

## **What will children bring with them and what do I need to have at home?**

### **Does Communities provide cots, car seats, etc?**

You are expected to have sufficient equipment to care for the child in your nominated age group. Sometimes, especially in emergency situations, you can be supported with equipment.

## **Do I need to let Communities know when family and friends come to visit or stay overnight?**

If family or friends are staying at your house for a period of time, they are considered part of your household and must have a Record Screening Check. Once you are aware that your visitors will be staying, you must inform the child's worker.



### **My foster child is invited to a sleepover. Can I accept?**

It is in the best interests of the child to experience age-appropriate activities. If this experience will benefit the child and there are no risks involved, you will need to advise your child's worker.

### **Will I be paid to care for the child?**

Foster carers are volunteers and are paid a contribution to the cost of caring in the form of a fortnightly subsidy. The amount of the subsidy depends on the age and needs of the child/young person. This subsidy is not taxable as it is a reimbursement for expenses that you have incurred. It is not an income but covers costs for items such as food and gas/electricity.

### **Will I get a break?**

Foster carers sometimes need regular breaks to maintain a placement; however, owing to the shortage of carers, this arrangement may not always be possible. It is recommended that the carers source someone in their network who may be interested in fostering a child who is placed with you. They will also need to undergo the assessment process. Children can also attend camps during school holidays which are provided by approved community organisations. These and other arrangements need to be discussed with the child's worker prior to arrangements being made.

### **Is any ongoing training offered?**

Carers are invited to ongoing training each year which is offered by their District and the Learning and Development Division. A training calendar is sent out to carers to advise them of the topics for the year. Training is offered in the daytime and evenings.

### **How much input will I have with Communities?**

The Care Team Approach outlines how Communities works with carers. Carers are supported to formally participate as a team member in assessment, planning and review of the child, and to participate in other child-centred decision making based on the best interests of the child.



## Who will support me?

You will be primarily supported by the child's worker and a worker who will support you as a carer from the child's Care Team. You will be invited to regular functions by the Districts, such as coffee mornings so you can meet other carers.

Foster Care Association of WA (Inc) provides an advocacy service for all foster carers through a 24-hour phone service, giving support and advice to individuals. Members receive newsletters and invitations to special events.

Communities has contracted a state-wide counselling service to support carers. Sessions are free and confidential.

## Other Legal Arrangements

### I would like to take on parental responsibility for the child.

Permanent foster care arrangements may be possible if:

- The child is in the CEO's care via a protection order (time-limited or until 18).
- Carers have had the continuous care of the child for at least two years from the time the protection order (time limited or until 18) was granted.

### What is a Special Guardianship Order (SGO)?

An SGO is an order of the Children's Court transferring parental responsibility to a specific person until the child turns 18. This may be an option if you would like to make a commitment to caring for the child permanently. You may make an application to the Children's Court after the child has been in your care for a minimum of 2 years.

Communities may also apply for an SGO on your behalf and will be involved in the Court process as well. You or Communities may also apply to the Court for a payment to be made which is of similar amount to the subsidy you receive for the child.



## **Am I able to eventually adopt the child I care for?**

Adoption is very different to fostering and it is guided by a separate Act, the *Adoption Act*. Interested people should make enquiries through the child's worker.

The focus for any child is reunification with family, however, in very few cases, where the family has agreed to relinquishment, carers may be supported to apply to adopt the child they are fostering.

**Last updated 17 June 2020**