



Your Heart, Their Home

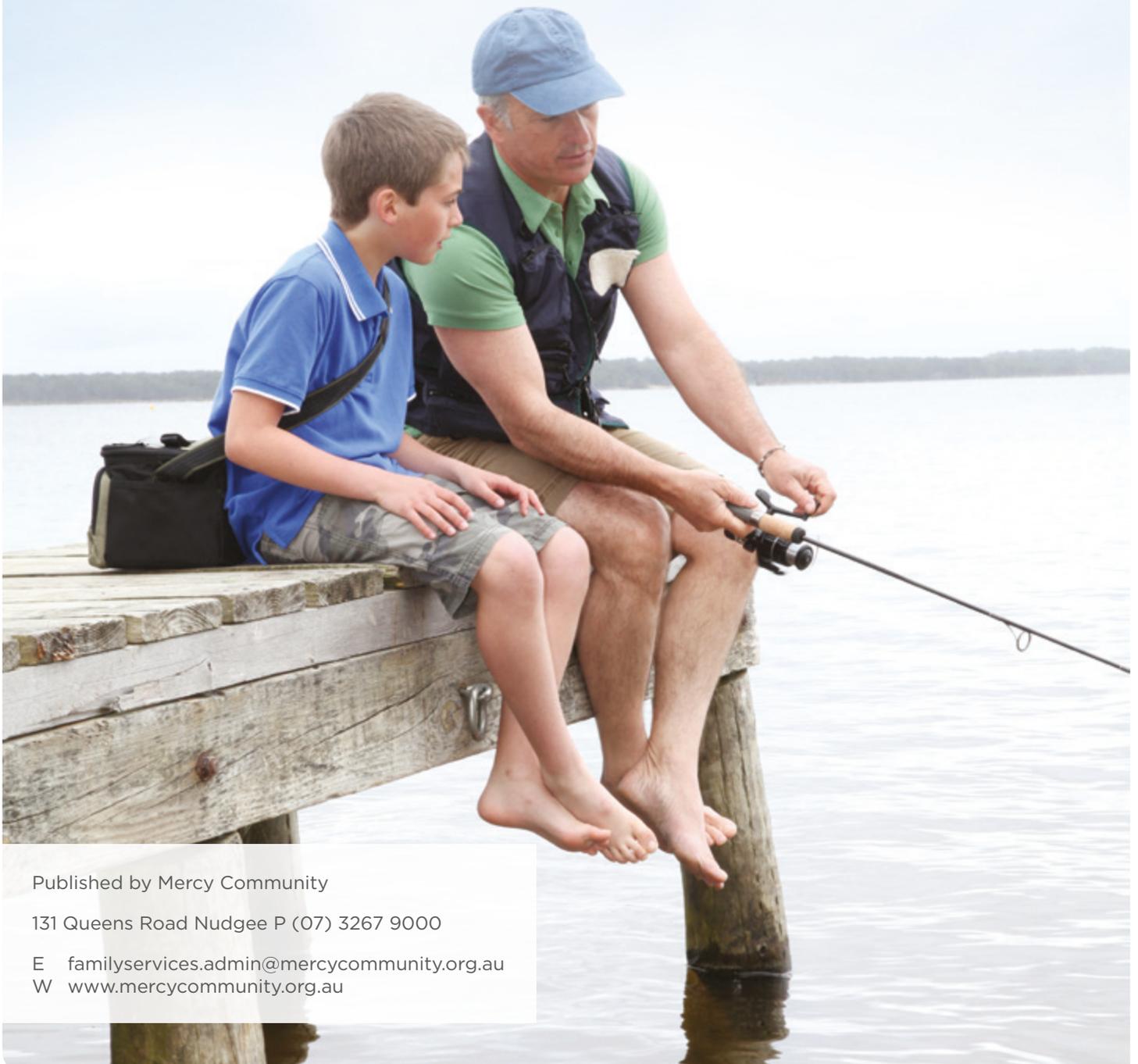
Becoming a Foster Carer Information Guide

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the many valued foster carers with Mercy Community who have shared their lives, energy and experience with children in need of a safe and nurturing home environment. Their insights and wisdom about foster care have enriched our Guide to becoming a foster carer. Thank you also to the Mercy Community Foster Care Quality Improvement Group for their hard work and expertise in compiling this resource.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which Mercy Community operates and pay our respects to the elders past, present and emerging, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and hopes of Aboriginal Australia. We acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to live in spiritual and sacred relationships with this country.

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Welcome

Welcome to Your Heart, Their Home: Becoming a Foster Carer Information Guide.

Caring for a child who is unable to live with their family is rewarding, challenging and satisfying. At Mercy Community, we value the work and commitment of our many foster carers.

The Foster Carer Information Guide contains useful information on how to become a foster carer and what this means for you and your family.

The Guide outlines the support you will receive if you decide to apply to become a carer. It also describes the role of Mercy Community and other agencies who support children and young people and their carers.

In the Guide, you will find details on the assessment and checks that you will go through after you have applied to become a carer. You will also find out about the training that you will receive.

We encourage you and all members of your family to read the Guide carefully, in making the decision to apply to become a foster carer.

More information is available on the websites listed in the Guide.

If you have any questions or would like more details on any aspect of foster care, please contact your nearest Mercy Community Foster and Kinship Care Team.

We look forward to hearing from you!



Our foster and kinship care services

Caboolture

P (07) 5490 8000
E caboolture.admin@mercycommunity.org.au

Greater Ipswich

P (07) 3280 8000
E greateripswich.admin@mercycommunity.org.au

North Brisbane

P (07) 3267 9070
E nudgee.admin@mercycommunity.org.au

South Brisbane, Logan and Gold Coast

P (07) 3340 5600
E logan.admin@mercycommunity.org.au

South West Queensland

P (07) 4617 7600
E toowoomba.admin@mercycommunity.org.au

Useful websites

Mercy Community
www.mercycommunity.org.au

Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women
www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety/child-safety-services

Foster Care Queensland
www.fcq.com.au

Sisters of Mercy
www.mercy.org.au

Queensland Blue Cards/Working with Children Checks
www.bluecard.qld.gov.au

1. What is foster care?

Foster care provides a safe, secure and supportive home for children and young people, from birth to eighteen years, who are unable to live with their families.

Children and young people need foster care for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes, it is because a parent is unwell or has limited personal resources or support. At other times, it is because of poverty, homelessness or serious abuse and neglect. Poor housing, unemployment, ill health and social isolation or disability can also be factors that contribute to a child or young person entering foster care.

Whatever the reason, it is important to recognise that these causes are usually outside the control of the child or their family.

In most cases, the aim of foster care is to reunite children with their families. If it is safe, the best place for a child to be is in the care of their family.

Children and young people can be in foster and kinship care for differing lengths of time. Foster carers can care for children and young people for a few nights, weeks or in some cases years.

Sometimes, it can be until a child reaches adulthood.

As a foster carer, you can provide respite, emergency, short or long- term care. You can also choose the age and gender of children you are willing to care for.

Whatever your choice is, your commitment will be valued.



2. What are the different types of foster care?

There are different types of foster care, based on the needs of foster children and/or their families. These include emergency care, respite care, short-term and longer-term care, kinship care and intensive foster care.

At Mercy Community, we support all of these types of foster care.

Emergency care

Emergency care is needed when there are concerns for a child or young person's immediate safety. Emergency carers provide care at short notice, often after-hours and on weekends, and usually for short periods of time, such as a few days or weeks.

Respite care

Respite carers help for short periods of time, when children and their full-time carers need a break. Ideally, respite care is planned, for example, for a weekend or month or part of the school holidays.

However, if there is an emergency in a carer's household, respite can be needed at short notice.

Respite care can broaden the community of the children or young people, by providing opportunities for positive relational experiences. We aim to arrange respite in a planned way, wherever possible, to ensure continuity in respite carers so that respite is a positive and valuable experience for everyone involved.

Short-term care

Short-term care generally lasts for up to two years and has a strong focus on reuniting the child with their parents or extended family. Carers providing short-term care usually look after children and young people while the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services is working with their families with the aim of enabling the child or young person to return home.

Longer-term care

Longer-term care is needed when a child or young person is not expected to return to their family.

Longer-term care may be arranged when all efforts have been made to return a child or young person to their family's care and it seems unlikely that the child will be able to return home.

Longer-term carers may make a commitment to

caring for a child or young person until they reach 18 years of age or independence.

Kinship care

Kinship care is when a child or young person lives with a relative or someone they already know. While the requirements of kinship carers differ from those of foster carers, we also provide support and supervision for kinship care, where needed.

Intensive foster care

Intensive foster care is for children who have more challenging placement needs. They may have disabilities or complex emotional, behavioural or medical needs, and therefore may require more specialised and intensive level of care from the foster carer household. Specialist support from allied health professionals or in-home support may be part of the care package that is required for the child. Therefore, the foster carer household may be viewed as part of the care team for the child or young person.

3. What is the legal framework for foster care?

Foster care is not adoption. Adoption is a legal process leading to a permanent change of identity. A foster child keeps their own identity and continues to be the legal child of their parents. The overall responsibility for a foster child rests with the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disabilities Services.

For a child to enter foster care, an application is made to the Children's Court, which hears and determines whether the child is in need of care and the type of child protection order required. Although there are some restrictions on the Court, it can impose a time frame on orders.

The Department cannot place a child in foster care without legal permission from parents or an order from the Children's Court.

4. What services support foster carers?

Foster care programs are delivered by non-government agencies and by the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services. Foster care agencies and the Department recruit, train and assess foster carers.

Foster care services embrace the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, in particular Principle 6:

The child, for the full harmonious development of his personality, needs love and understanding. He shall, wherever possible, grow up in the care and under the responsibility of his parents, and in any case in an atmosphere of affection and of moral and material security; a child of tender years shall not, save in exceptional circumstances, be separated from his mother.

5. What are foster children like?

Children and young people in foster care are just like other children, except they are likely to have experienced abuse and harm and as a result they are often traumatised. They need patient and caring adults and family members who can offer them support and understanding.

A foster child may not respond immediately and positively to being removed from their home. They often remain attached to their own family and may not settle easily into foster care. The child may have experienced many sudden changes in their life, leading to confusion and distrust. They may express their feelings about separation and loss in different ways, including over-compliance, aggression and attention seeking.

Children and young people coming into foster care may also be part of a sibling group. They may have cultural needs related to their background, disabilities or developmental delays. Their needs and responses to foster care may also vary according to their age.

6. What is involved in the placement of foster children?

Assessment

The Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services completes an assessment of the child and their family, with the aim of maintaining the child within the family network. If the child cannot remain within the family network, the Department will place the child in foster care.

The Department is responsible for explaining all aspects of foster care and its implications to the child's family.

Case planning

The agencies and people who support the family meet and develop a case plan for the child, setting out the goals, actions and outcomes for the child while in foster care. The roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in the foster care of the child, including the foster carer, are clearly defined. Foster carers receive documentation around their care role as part of their placement agreement negotiated with the Department.

The parents may be allowed to take part in discussions about the selection of the foster family, as well as arrangements for contact and plans for the child's future. This is usually in a separate meeting between the family and their child safety officer.

The aim of case planning is to ensure that a positive decision is made as soon as practicable about the child's right to a secure and stable future. Case planning also ensures that information about the child, the family and visiting arrangements are clear to everyone involved and is documented.

Matching

In matching a child with a foster family, the needs of the child are the priority. Some of the factors considered in the process of matching include the child's cultural background, socio-economic and geographical factors and the child's educational needs.

Placement follow-up and support

All placements are given follow-up and support to ensure that, in the context of the case plan, both the child and the carers' needs are met. This support may include a referral to counselling and other therapeutic services.

Placement disruption

Sometimes, a foster care placement is disrupted, which is difficult for everyone involved, especially the child in care.

Placement disruptions are generally unplanned and can occur because unexpected or unpredictable circumstances have emerged or the child and the carers do not match sufficiently. However, while disruptions are unplanned, the move to another placement needs to be carefully planned and negotiated to ensure that the child's interests continue to be met. The requirements of the respective carer households are also met whenever possible.

The child is helped as much as possible to understand why the disruption has occurred and is reassured about their future. The child will need time to adjust to the change. Often, the child feels that they are to blame, which can reinforce any feelings they may have about not being worthwhile. The role of the foster carer is to help minimise these feelings as much as possible. The foster carer may also feel angry or guilty that a child in their care is upset and confused once more about the meaning of 'home' and 'family'.

A foster care review is undertaken when a placement is disrupted. The review considers a detailed history of the child's life, together with a report on the placement. The purpose of the review is not to allocate blame for what has occurred but to focus on understanding why the placement has been disrupted and what is the best course of action. The review also enables the foster care team to better understand the child's needs and how these can be met.

Contact with the child's family

It is important for a child to maintain a relationship with their family. Contact is encouraged and may include personal visits. Carers may be involved in transporting the child to a meeting with their family to facilitate the relationship. The nature and frequency of contact will be addressed in case plans and placement meetings and are reviewed regularly.

Leaving foster care

All children and young people are helped to prepare for leaving care throughout the time of their placement. Preparation for leaving care includes activities such as journals and life diaries, access to personal files, opportunities for developing and practising life skills and help in developing support and social networks in the community.

Transition to independence

Making the move to living independently is an important part of the life of a young person in foster care. In some regions, Mercy Community has other programs that offer opportunities for young people to make that transition while continuing to receive support from people they know. Young people are helped with planning their education and employment and negotiating and managing successful independent living.



7. Who can be a foster carer?

Anyone who is over the age of 18 years, an Australian citizen or permanent resident, in good health and able to offer a stable and secure home for a child or young person can apply to become a foster carer.

As a carer, you may be:

- single, married or in a de facto or same-sex relationship
- renting, buying or owning your home
- working (full- or part-time) or not in paid employment
- from any cultural background and with a diverse range of life experiences
- a parent or childless. While experience with children and young people helps, you do not need to have parented children yourself. Your life experiences other than parenting may put you in a good position to foster. It is most important that you have a strong interest in caring for children and young people.
- younger or older. Age requirements are flexible as long as your health, energy, maturity and desire to foster are appropriate.

It is best for children in care to live with foster carers who reflect and understand the child's heritage, ethnic origin, culture and language.

An important part of foster caring for a child or young person is providing them with a safe and secure place to live. Before applying to become a foster carer, carers must be established in suitable accommodation, either owned or rented, that can offer a comfortable, welcoming environment for a child coming into their care.

Being a foster carer is a challenging and demanding role. If you are thinking about becoming a foster carer, it is important that you are not experiencing significant personal or family problems of your own and that your family members support your plan to become a foster carer and will help you in this valued role.

8. How do I become a foster carer?

Becoming a foster carer involves a series of assessments, checks and training.

Expression of interest and assessments

After you have expressed interest in becoming a foster carer and the initial risk assessment of your home has been completed, you will be invited to training for foster carers. If you live in a spousal relationship, it is mandatory that you both attend this training. Training is offered at a variety of times to make it as easy as possible for you to attend.

Application to become a foster carer

Once you have attended training and met the required competencies for foster carers, you will be invited to complete a formal application to become a foster carer. This gives us and the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services detailed information about you and the people you share your home with and also gives your consent for the necessary checks for fostering.

A qualified foster care worker will meet you and the members of your household, in your home, to gather information needed to demonstrate your capacity to foster. The number of meetings varies from household to household, depending on the information relevant to the household and the number of people within it. For most carers, there are between three and six visits to applicants' homes before their assessment to become a foster carer is completed.

After these visits are completed, the foster care worker completes a report which is forwarded to the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services for a decision on whether approval as a foster carer is appropriate. Before the report is lodged, you will be offered a copy and can discuss any queries with your foster care worker and add your own comments to the report.

While this phase is often referred to as the assessment phase, we also use this period to continue to prepare prospective carers for the task ahead. Wherever possible, we aim to involve an experienced foster carer in training, to help you link with carers who are actively involved with children and young people in care and with the Department. We aim to make the assessment as enjoyable and informative

as possible, discussing not only your individual and household circumstances, but also using case studies and scenarios typical to fostering to help get ready for providing foster care.

We recognise that fostering will have an impact on everyone in your home. Therefore, we aim to ensure everyone has a chance to ask questions and to consider what fostering will mean for them.

Checks

The assessment process includes criminal history, child protection, traffic and domestic and family violence checks. The physical safety of your home will also be assessed, with any issues identified as early as possible so that these may be addressed.

All foster carers and every adult household member must have a valid Blue Card, which is a check on the applicant's suitability to work with children.

It is an offence for a disqualified person to apply for a Blue Card. Penalties of up to five years imprisonment or a fine of up to \$37,500 may apply. Ask your Foster Care Worker if you have any questions or need further information about applying for a Blue Card.

Training

We recognise the importance of giving carers the latest information on caring for children and young people in foster care. Training is offered before and following approval to become a carer.

Training includes mandatory face-to-face training modules on positive behaviour support, caring for children who may have experienced sexual abuse, self-care and advocacy, as well as advanced modules which can be tailored to the needs of the carer and the children or young people for whom they care.

Training is offered at varying times (for example, weekdays, weekends and evenings) so that it is easy to attend. Online training, which carers can complete in their own time, is also available.

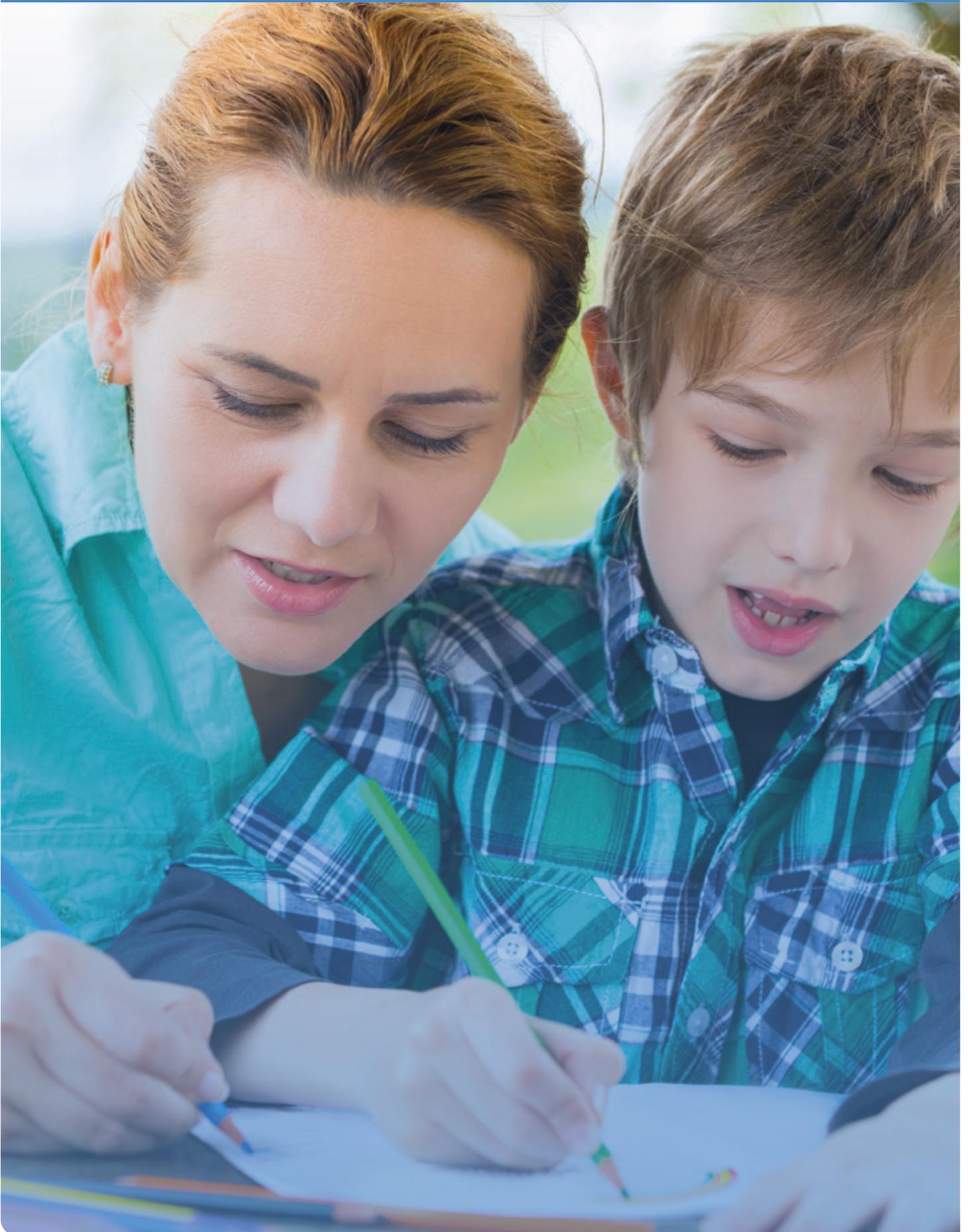
Agency support

At Mercy Community, we offer after-hours on-call support to all carers, as well as an allocated worker with whom you can build a professional relationship. We also offer regular carer gatherings to give foster carers opportunities to link with more experienced carers.

Allowances

Foster carers receive an allowance that is a contribution towards the cost of caring for children and young people placed by the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services.

The steps in the process of becoming a foster carer are described in detail in the following diagram.





Initial Visit

- Household Safety Study completed with a household safety pack provided giving guidelines about how to ensure your home environment meets the minimum required standards.
- 'Get to know you' chat - we share some information and discuss foster care and MC values and principles
- The meeting is an opportunity to learn more about becoming a foster carer and also to understand what to expect when caring for a foster child. The meeting will help inform your decision about whether or not foster caring is right for you and your family at this point in your lives.



Pre-Service Training

- The Quality Care Pre-Service Training Course has been designed by the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services and is standard across Queensland.
- The course helps you to understand what is involved in fostering.
- Training is offered several times a year at a variety of venues. It is facilitated on various times/days to suit the differing needs of attendees and is designed to be an informal and supportive place to learn.
- If fostering with a partner, it is a requirement that both attend training.
- The course is competency-based and attendees will need to return completed worksheets at the end of the course (although help is offered with this).



Assessment

- Once worksheets have been completed and you have met the required competencies, you are invited to make a formal application to become a foster carer.
- This application initiates personal history checks which include traffic history, criminal history, domestic violence and child protection.
- Medical and personal refer checks are also required (as well as employment references if you work or volunteer in a child-related field). You will need to apply for a Blue Card.
- The assessment is conducted in your home over a number of sessions by a Foster Care Worker.
- The assessment includes topics such as:
 - Motivation to foster;
 - Parenting style, relationships and childhood history;
 - Stress Management strategies;
 - Anticipated impact upon your family, health and well-being;
 - Cultural Awareness;;
 - Ability to work as part of a team.
- The assessment will help you and the Foster Care Worker to determine the age range, number of children and level of children's needs that you and your family are best suited to meeting.
- The assessment is designed to explore your suitability to become a foster carer and also to let us know how to best support you once you are an approved foster carer.



Approval

- The Foster Care Worker will provide you with the opportunity to read through the Assessment Report to ensure the content is factually correct.
- The Foster Care Worker presents the report to the Foster Care Panel on your behalf. The Foster Care Panel includes a Manager plus other staff from Child Safety Services and also a representative from Foster Care Queensland.
 - Approval is valid across Queensland.
 - You will now be ready to provide valuable care for the most vulnerable children in Queensland. Welcome to Foster Care!

9. Who is Mercy Community?

Our Identity:

Mercy Community is a Catholic ministry finding inspiration in the Gospel, the charism of Mercy, the life of Catherine McAuley and the traditions of the Sisters of Mercy.

Our Culture:

Mercy Community values the human dignity of every person and is committed to enhancing the quality of life and wellbeing of those who access our services, believing that through actions of merciful love, Mercy is given and received.

Our culture reflects the ethos of the Sisters of Mercy and promotes service, mercy, humility, diversity, transparency, open accountability, collaboration and cooperation, flexibility and adaptability, fearlessness and growth.

Our Mission:

To support and inspire people in need to live healthy, connected lives within inclusive communities.

Our Vision:

A world where people, families and communities are strong in spirit, healthy and connected.

Our Values:

All our work is driven by our core values of:

-  **Mercy:** We act compassionately and courageously, open to others and to their needs, nurturing hope and joy.
-  **Acceptance:** We embrace unconditionally the uniqueness and diversity of people, fostering quality and fairness in relationships.
-  **Excellence:** We are committed to quality, continuous learning and improvement.
-  **Dignity:** We treat all people with respect, accepting their right to spiritual, emotional and physical safety and care.
-  **Empowerment:** We assist and advocate passionately for and with people, enabling them to make life enhancing choices and to gain control over life shaping decisions.
-  **Integrity:** We act ethically, justly and honestly.

Our policy commitment to child protection

We are committed to the protection and safety of children, through service delivery practice and through our organisational processes. While child protection is everybody's responsibility, Mercy Community, as a reputable provider of child protection services, implements and maintains accountable, transparent, preventative and client-focused practices across all service streams.

Our policy commitment to duty of care

We are committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of our clients, their families and carers, our employees, contractors and volunteers and the members of the community who come into contact with our organisation, by showing due diligence and implementing appropriate policies and procedures.

We recognise that a higher standard of care is expected from a person responsible for the care of someone who is not able to fully care for themselves or is not able to fully understand the implications of behaviour that may place themselves or others at risk. All Mercy Community staff are responsible for exercising the best possible degree of care and balancing this with a client's dignity and right to explore risk.

Our policy commitment to meeting the Statement of Standards

We recognise the Statement of Standards of Care, outlined in section 122 of the Child Protection Act 1999 (Qld), as the statutory standard for licensed out-of-home care services, whether directly delivered by the organisation or delivered by carers supported by the organisation. At Mercy Community, we are committed to complying with these standards in full.



10. Frequently asked questions

What makes a good foster carer?

While there is no such thing as a 'perfect' foster carer, the following help a great deal.

Patience, energy and a sense of humour

These qualities can go a long way towards helping children and young people in foster care. Children in foster care often need a great deal of emotional support. They may be distressed and need help managing strong emotions. These qualities help carers to take it in their stride when things do not go as planned, to 'hang in there' with the children in their care.

Flexibility

As a carer, you will be looking after children who have had experiences that may be very different from your own and those of your family. Learning about these experiences and supporting children accordingly requires acceptance and a non-judgemental approach.

Being committed to returning children to their parents' care

When deemed safe by the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, foster care focuses on returning children to their parents and/or family's care. The foster carer's role is about maintaining a child's family connections. Therefore, it is crucial that foster carers are able to work towards children being returned to their families.

Being a team player

It is important to be a team player, as you will need to share in the care of a child with other people, including Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services staff, children's birth families, therapists, teachers and medical professionals. Family participation in planning and decision making for children is encouraged and you will also contribute to plans for the children in your care.

Being able to work well with others is invaluable.

Being open to new learning

We know the impact of trauma has far-reaching effects and it is important that carers understand this. We provide training to carers to enable them to understand these issues, before becoming a carer and ongoing while providing foster care.

Being able to ask for help

Fostering is both highly demanding and rewarding. It is important that you are able to recognise and speak up when you need support, information and help.

We aim to provide a high level of support to our carers to aid them in their invaluable role. You will be supported by skilled and experienced staff who appreciate the challenges and joys of fostering.

Cultural sensitivity

Children from a variety of different backgrounds require foster care and, if you feel able to meet their needs, you may care for a child from a different background from yours.

Being committed to helping children maintain connections with their families

The Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services must maintain family relationships and be supportive of individual rights and ethnic, religious and cultural identity or values.

Carers need to actively support children in maintaining a relationship with their birth family and/or their community, whether the children are able to go home or not.

It is not unusual for people interested in fostering to initially feel anxious about what is referred to as 'contact'. However, training and support around contact are available. Despite earlier life

experiences, most children and young people want to maintain contact with their family and this is an important part of fostering.

A stable home

Stability is one of the most essential qualities in looking after children in foster care. Change can be difficult for children and young people, especially as they may have lived in unpredictable family environments previously. It is important to carefully consider whether you can offer placed children and young people a stable and secure home environment.

The ability to say goodbye

Also important is the ability to say goodbye when the time comes for the child to be reunited with their family. Foster carers offer children and young people a place in their homes and lives, so saying goodbye can be painful. We aim to provide carers and those within their households support at these times.

Experienced carers report that, while they have been saddened when children have moved from their care, this has been lessened by the rewards of seeing a family succeed in parenting their children.

What do foster carers do?

In a practical way, fostering involves supplying children in care with warmth, shelter, food, clothing, educational support and medical attention. A child in care, like any other child, also requires parenting. In other words, a child in care requires a sense of family life and belonging within your household and a sense of place within the broader social context. You may already be a parent or grandparent or you may yet to have experienced the challenges and joys that parenting brings, but most people who have parented understand that caring is the same to parenting as a house is to a home.

THE TRUE REWARDS OF FOSTERING
COME FROM SEEING A CHILD GROW PHYSICALLY
AND EMOTIONALLY IN YOUR CARE AND
KNOWING THAT YOU ARE PLAYING A
VITAL ROLE IN THEIR FUTURE.

To be a foster carer is to be a person who cares, to open up your own family and home, to have the strength and conviction to be there for the child through the good times and some of the harder days, to be able to see the child and not the behaviours and, if possible, to be open and loving of the child—all the while realising that positive child-focused parenting is crucial to children who are in care.

Foster care is educational – a child continues to mature physically and emotionally while they are in care and foster carers must provide appropriate opportunities for such growth.

Foster care is emotional – all too often a child comes with little but their memories, which are precious to them.

A child has a right to their past, good, bad or indifferent though it may be.

Being a foster carer is about relationships, but not just with a particular child. It is also about relationships with foster care workers, child safety

officers, therapists, community workers, doctors, other foster parents and possibly other professionals who come together to form a team to help support, nurture and plan for the child in the carer's home.

Often fostering brings a relationship with the child's own family. This may be delicate and tentative initially, but can be vital in the child's links with their past and the full development of their future.

Fostering takes great emotional strength. It also challenges relationships within your own family because it involves everyone. Fostering is not an activity that can be isolated from the whole of family life. It is in the centre of the family right from the start.

Fostering is a demanding way of life, but it can be rewarding as well. The rewards come not from the gratitude of a foster child, even if they are old enough to have this degree of understanding. The true rewards of fostering come from seeing a child grow physically and emotionally in your care and knowing that you are playing a vital role in their future.

Reward also comes from seeing a child returning to their family, once the family is able to care for the child again, and knowing that you were there when the child and their family needed help.

If I have previous convictions, would this prevent me from fostering?

Not necessarily, as this would depend on the nature of the conviction and its circumstances. It is important that any information about criminal history is shared with your foster care worker, so that it can be considered at an early stage. This information will be kept confidential but it may also need to be documented in your final assessment in becoming a foster carer. We encourage prospective carers to speak openly about criminal convictions, as this may not be a barrier to becoming a carer. We would much rather explore this with you than lose the opportunity for you to become a foster carer.

If I would like to become a foster carer but my partner is unsure, is this okay?

For fostering to be successful for both the children concerned and the carers themselves, it is important that all members of a household are supportive of fostering.

When two people live together in a spousal relationship, both must be approved as foster carers together. Both applicants must also be involved in the training and assessment process and have the checks described earlier carried out.

What are the children and young people like who need foster care?

Children and young people in foster care are just like other children and young people in the community. However, they also may have experienced abuse, neglect and separation from their families, which often includes disrupted attachments.

These experiences often leave children confused and distressed and they may also be affected by earlier trauma. Children and young people in foster care need carers who are understanding and supportive of them. They need a great deal of patience and acceptance from their carers and they need carers who can accept support in order to meet their needs.

Can I choose the children I will look after?

During the preparation and assessment for becoming carers, we help you consider the types of children and young people you would be able to care for. You can decide the number, gender and ages of children and/or young people you would prefer to care for. We will then discuss caring for children and young people with you with these preferences in mind.

How often you are approached to care for children and young people will depend on the needs of the children and young people who need foster placements. There is a greater need for foster carers who are able to care for older children and/or sibling groups.

You can also indicate the type of foster care you would like to provide, be it respite, emergency, short-term or long-term. However, if there is an emergency, we do not always know how long a child will need to stay with foster carers.

Can I work and be a foster carer as well?

While there is no definitive answer to this question and we recognise the need for carers to work outside the home, it is important to consider the needs of children and young people in foster care.

Children and young people in foster care have often experienced disturbed attachments and may not trust adults because of their previous experiences. It is very important that they have the opportunity to experience their carers as safe adults and in order to do this they often need a great deal of their carers' time and attention.

Many carers do work, although this has to be matched with the needs of the child or young person placed with them. For example, it would not be typical to place a baby or young child with carers who worked full-time. Young children in care need

close and constant access to their carers to have opportunities for optimal physical, emotional and social development.

Can a child or young person share a bedroom with my child?

This will depend on the needs of the child or young person placed with a foster carer and on the views of the carer's child.

While children and young people sharing bedrooms may not be a problem, all household members, including a placed child or young person, will need enough physical and emotional space within your home to ensure their need for private time and privacy is respected.

Is it OK to use smacking with a child or young person I look after as a foster carer?

Child protection legislation says that no form of physical punishment, or any punishment that humiliates, frightens or threatens a child or young person or is likely to cause emotional harm is acceptable.

Smacking may have a very different meaning for a child or young person who has experienced abuse and may cause further trauma.

Foster carers are given training on the impact of abuse and harm, as well as alternative ways of supporting children with challenging behaviour, to enable them to feel confident with this requirement of fostering.

What is the difference between being a foster carer with Mercy Community and with the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services?

Foster carers are approved by the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, whether they are affiliated with a foster care agency or not. Agencies such as Mercy Community work in partnership with the Department to provide safe and secure placements for children and young people. While the Department concentrates on working with the child and their family, the agency focuses primarily on supporting the carer and helping them to meet the child or young person's needs and to work well within the foster care system.

When a carer is affiliated with an agency such as Mercy Community, this ensures the carer household has a source of support and guidance independent of the Department.

11. Some questions to ask yourself

Becoming a foster carer is a huge decision. Before becoming a foster carer, you should ask yourself, and your family, these questions.

- How will your family adjust to having other children in your home? What changes or compromises would your family members have to make? Have you discussed foster care as a family unit?
- Do you have enough room to ensure all children will have sufficient privacy?
- How will your family deal with children who behave differently or unacceptably? Can you accept a child as they are?
- Can you be firm but kind?
- Do you have patience and can you listen?
- How do you feel about families with different ideas or lifestyles from your own?
- Can you understand what separation might mean to the child and their parents?
- How will you deal with hurt or anger in relation to a foster child and/or their family?
- Can you respect confidential information given to us about the child and their family?
- How will you cope with the uncertainty about how long the child will stay?
- How will you cope with the sadness of saying goodbye?
- Can you ask for help when you need it?
- How will you cope if you make mistakes? Can you accept them and learn from them?
- How will you feel about discussing personal or painful issues with a Mercy Community foster care worker and/or a departmental child safety officer?
- Are there other stressors on your family? Is this a good time to consider foster caring?
- Are you willing to acquire new skills to help you with your work as a foster carer?
- How will your friends and family respond to your decision to become a foster carer?

- Does your home have any equipment that could be a safety concern for children (for example, swimming pool not properly fenced, unfenced yard on a busy road or unlabelled chemicals)?

The foster carer assessment will look at all these issues, but it is useful to consider them now as a family, before deciding to proceed. Perhaps it will raise questions for you, which you can talk over with a Mercy Community foster care worker.



12. Statement of Standards of Care

At Mercy Community, we recognise the Statement of Standards of Care and commit to ensuring these standards are met within our services (including where we provide support to others), as outlined in the Child Protection Act 1999.

In caring for children and young people, employees and approved foster carers assume a duty of care, with responsibility to ensure that the requirements outlined in the Statement of Standards of Care are met.

These Standards include:

- (a) the child's dignity and rights will be respected at all times
- (b) the child's needs for physical care will be met, including adequate food, clothing and shelter
- (c) the child will receive emotional care that allows him or her to experience being cared about and valued and that contributes to the child's positive self-regard
- (d) the child's needs relating to his or her culture and ethnic grouping will be met
- (e) the child's material needs relating to his or her schooling, physical and mental stimulation, recreation and general living will be met
- (f) the child will receive education, training or employment opportunities relevant to the child's age and ability
- (g) the child will receive positive guidance when necessary to help him or her to change inappropriate behaviour
- (h) the child will receive dental, medical and therapeutic services necessary to meet his or her needs
- (i) the child will be given the opportunity to participate in positive social and recreational activities appropriate to his or her developmental level and age
- (j) the child will be encouraged to maintain family and other significant personal relationships
- (k) if the child has a disability - the child will receive care and help appropriate to the child's special needs.

For subsection (1)(g), techniques for managing the child's behaviour must not include corporal punishment or punishment that humiliates, frightens or threatens the child in a way that is likely to cause emotional harm.

For subsection (1)(j), if the chief executive has custody or guardianship of the child, the child's carer must act in accordance with the chief executive's reasonable directions.

The application of the standards to the child's care must take into account what is reasonable having regard to: the length of time the child is in the care of the carer or care service; and the child's age and development.

13. Charter of Rights for a Child in Care

Children and young people in out-of-home care have particular needs that must be addressed in order to ensure their safety and improve their emotional, physical and psychological well-being.

The Charter of Rights under the Child Protection Act 1999, section 74 and Schedule 1, describes the core rights that apply to every child and young person who is subject to the custody or guardianship of the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services.

The Act establishes the following rights for children and young people in care:

- (a) to be provided with a safe and stable living environment
- (b) to be placed in care that best meets the child's needs and is most culturally appropriate
- (c) to maintain relationships with the child's family and community
- (d) to be consulted about, and to take part in making, decisions affecting the child's life (having regard to the child's age or ability to understand), particularly decisions about where the child is living, contact with the child's family and the child's health and schooling
- (e) to be given information about decisions and plans concerning the child's future and personal history, having regard to the child's age or ability to understand
- (f) to privacy, including, for example, in relation to the child's personal information
- (g) if the child is under the long-term guardianship of the Chief Executive, to regular review of the child's care arrangements
- (h) to have access to dental, medical and therapeutic services, necessary to meet the child's needs
- (i) to have access to education appropriate to the child's age and development
- (j) to have access to job training opportunities and help in finding appropriate employment
- (k) to receive appropriate help with the transition from being a child in care to independence, including, for example, help about housing, access to income support and training and education.

We must advise a child or young person of their rights

All children and young people have a right to participate in decision making about their own life. Children and young people's participation is a right, not an option.

The Child Protection Act 1999, section 5, establishes participation as a legal right for children and young people.

The legislation requires that the Act is administered in a way that ensures the views of the child and the child's family are considered and the child and the child's parents have the opportunity to take part in making decisions affecting their lives.

The Act has clear requirements for seeking and considering the views of children and young people, and includes a charter of rights for those children and young people who are in the custody or guardianship of the chief executive.

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