The Centre
FOR EXCELLENCE IN CHILD AND FAMILY WELFARE

Rapid Review:

Foster Care Recruitment and Retention

April 2024

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria and Tasmania, representing more than 180 community service organisations, students and individuals across the two states. The Centre advocates for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. Our vision is to see a community that is fair, equitable and creates opportunities for children and their families to live happy and healthy lives.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Centre acknowledges and pays respect to past and present traditional custodians and Elders of this country on which we work. The Centre acknowledges the injustices and trauma suffered as a result of European settlement, including policies such as the forced removal of children from their families, communities, culture and land. We support the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to self-determination and recognise that this was and always will be Aboriginal land.

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Executive Summary

This rapid review of the literature has been prepared in response to concern from foster care service providers and the Victorian government about the declining numbers of foster carers available to provide high-quality care to children and young people in need of a nurturing home environment. This decline, while demand for home-based care continues to grow, is a global phenomenon.

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) has undertaken the review to identify promising and proven approaches and programs being implemented internationally and in Australia to recruit and retain foster carers. The focus has been on those strategies which have encouraged foster carers to commence fostering and to remain in the system supporting children in the carer's home.

The review looks briefly at the profile of children in foster care and the profile and motivations of foster carers. A key gap in the literature is the voice of children who have been in foster care and their perspectives on what makes a stable and functioning foster care family. The voices of carers are captured in some studies although generally indirectly and often in research involving small numbers of participants.

In relation to recruitment, the review found that one of the most successful mechanisms for attracting foster carers was through 'word of mouth'. Foster carers who are already in the system who have been well supported by professionals and are finding caregiving satisfying, are a critically important means of attracting new foster carers. The review also identified a number of innovative approaches which have led to successful recruitment of foster carers in different jurisdictions.

The literature shows that the primary motivation for taking on foster care is altruistic in nature. While financial considerations are not a significant factor attracting carers initially, financial costs can play a role in the decision to continue or not to continue fostering once in the system. Other factors affecting recruitment and retention of foster carers include the relationship between professional and carer and the extent to which the carer is treated respectfully and as a pivotal member of the decision making team working to support the child.

Studies show that entry into foster care can be enabled or hindered by the carer recruitment process of government and agencies. One consistent finding in relation to the generally low conversion rate from inquirer to foster carer is that the accreditation process is intrusive, overly bureaucratic and protracted, exacerbated when a prospective carer feels unsupported by either professionals or agencies.

Factors affecting retention include the level of satisfaction a foster carer experiences, their family circumstances, the level and quality of the support provided by professionals, the availability of respite care, adequacy of financial supports, availability of professional support during critical events and how well they have been prepared for fostering in general and for the particular needs of the child in their care. The literature varies in the weight given to the impact of children's challenging externalising behaviours on the decision to withdraw from fostering.

The review outlines a range of successful or promising programs and strategies which have been used to recruit foster carers and at ways in which governments and agencies have sought to retain carers. There is limited research on the quality of foster care itself and the research which does exist shows considerable variability in parenting approaches and children's outcomes.

Part 1: Current foster carer context

Introduction

Research in Australia and internationally shows that while the demand for home-based care is growing, the pool of available foster carers is progressively shrinking. Globally, there are shortages of foster carers in certain geographical areas and for certain groups of children (for example, teenagers, large sibling groups, children with disability, children with complex needs).[1]

Even when foster carers are recruited, there are challenges in retaining them, with one 2020 study in the United States finding that the average foster carer engagement in care lasts less than two years, with nearly half the accredited foster carers in the study quitting within 12 months of receiving a child in care.[2] Figures from a 2021 survey in England show that 12 per cent of foster carers left fostering over the course of one year, and while not all resignations were due to a negative event, 30 per cent of those who left did so within two years of their approval.[3] A 2022 UK parliamentary report noted that while there had been a slight increase in numbers of foster carers in the past seven years, the conversion rate of enquiries to applications was at an all-time low.[4]

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data for 2020-21 shows more households exited foster care in Victoria than in other states and territories (excludes data for New South Wales). The data shows that in Victoria in 2020-21, while 315 households commenced foster care, 580 households exited foster care in this same period.[5]

In Australia, the Foster Care Association of Victoria (FCAV) March 2023 Carer Snapshot reported a 26 per cent drop in people going through the accreditation process to become foster carers, which led to 50 fewer new carers entering the sector in 2023 compared to 2022. 'Compounded by the record number of exiting carer households, this has resulted in almost 100 fewer households available for a placement referral'.[6]

1. Ott, E., Wills, E., Hall, A. & Gupta, S. (2023). *Foster carer recruitment and retention in England.* Centre for Evidence and Implementation and The Fostering Network. p. 10.

2. Greeson, Johanna K., Gyourko, J., Ortiz, A., Coleman, D. & Cancel, S. (2021). 'One hundred and ninety-four got licensed by Monday': Application of design thinking for foster care innovation and transformation in Rhode Island. *Children and Youth Services Review.* 128(C).

3. The Fostering Network. (2021). State of the Nation's Foster Care: 2021 Report. https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sotn21

4. Foster, D. & Kulakiewicz, A. (2022). General debate on the recruitment and retention of foster carers. House of Commons Library. https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2022-0080/CDP-2022-0080.pdf

5. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022). Child protection Australia 2020-21. Australian Government. Table 7.2. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2020-21/contents/carers/how-many-households-commenced-and-exited-care

6. Foster Care Association of Victoria. (2023). Foster carer snapshot report. FCAV. https://www.fcav.org.au/assets/policies/carer_snapshot_data_2023.pdf

Significant changes in the external environment have contributed to the reduced pool of foster carers available, including the stresses associated with COVID-19[6] and the cost-of-living pressures of the past couple of years.[7] Interestingly, there are mixed reports of a surge in inquiries during the pandemic alongside a concern about plummeting inquiries at this time.[8] A 2023 parliamentary inquiry in Wales attributed the reduction in foster carers to 'the costs of dealing with the pandemic, increasing costs of living, and the growing complexity and numbers of cases of children in care [which] have all made the shortages worse'.[9]

While the external environment has changed dramatically since 2012, the findings from an evaluation by the Centre and Verso Consulting in 2012 are remarkably consistent with the findings from the current 2024 rapid review by the Centre in regard to recruiting and retaining foster carers,[10] highlighting the seemingly intractable nature of some of the challenges associated with recruiting and retaining foster carers. However, there are some positive developments and initiatives which could be considered for implementation, expansion or adaptation in a Victorian context.[11]

The establishment of Fostering Connections, funded by the Victorian Government and managed by the Centre, is one initiative which has contributed to better data collection in relation to motivations for foster carer queries, demographic profile of prospective and existing carers and the accreditation experience. This is a key enabler and piece of infrastructure which did not exist in 2012. Member agencies have also invested in evidence-based programs and evidence-informed approaches since 2012 to improve the quality of foster care and outcomes for children.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to report on strategies and approaches that are either promising or proven in recruiting and retaining foster carers. For the purposes of this review, foster carers are defined as carers:

• who have undergone the relevant screening/selection and approval process

• who have received authorisation from the relevant department or agency to enable a child to be placed in their care

• for whom reimbursement is available from the State or Territory Government for expenses incurred in caring for the child

• who are part of an ongoing review process.[12]

The review examines key challenges, primary motivations, a selection of promising and proven strategies and models of foster care, and implications for recruitment and retention including the role of Fostering Connections. The review does not argue the case for foster care – this has been demonstrated powerfully in many studies – but focuses on what can be done to improve recruitment and retention of foster carers in Victoria. Given the Victorian government's policy of transitioning children in foster care to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), the review does not specifically examine recruitment and retention in relation to First Nations foster carers or children.

Methodology

The Centre examined findings from a selection of studies and literature reviews identified through a search of electronic databases including ProQuest, PsycINFO, ERIC and Child Welfare Information Gateway. This is not a comprehensive review and does not include grey literature, articles before 2000 or articles not publicly available in English. Search terms included 'foster carer', 'home-based carer', 'foster parent' AND 'motivation', attraction', 'recruitment', 'retention'. The Centre also examined specific evidence-based or evidence-informed models, programs and strategies identified in the literature.

7. Hanlon, R., Kim, J-R., Woo, C., Day, A., Vanderwill, L. & Dallimore, E. (2022). An exploratory study of the impact of COVID-19 on foster parenting. *Child Family Social Work.* 27(3), pp. 371–80. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9347573/; see also, Smart et al.

8. See, for example, the 2022 survey of foster carers on the impact of cost-of-living crisis by FosterWiki in the UK. https://fosterwiki.com/2022-cost-of-living-crisis-survey-results/

9. See for example, Tadros, P. (2020). Thanks a million: Foster care inquiries and adoptions surge during COVID-19.News Corp Australia. https://www.news.com.au/national/nsw-act/thanks-a-million-foster-care-inquiries-and-adoptions-surge-during-covid19/news-story/61adbfe5b6f094da3f4b3bfb510b76f1 ; and Channel 9 News (2020). Appeal for Vic foster homes amid pandemic. https://www.9news.com.au/health/appeal-for-vic-foster-homes-amid-pandemic/a6802e5e-c923-4626-987d-b54b9aef70f5

10. Welsh Parliament. (2023). *If not now, then when? Radical reform for care experienced children and young people. Summary report.* Children, Young People and Education Committee. Cardiff Bay. www.senedd.wales/SeneddChildren

11. Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and Verso Consulting. (2012). Foster Care in Context: An evaluation of the Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy. https://core.ac.uk/reader/30678880.

12. Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and Verso Consulting. (2012). Foster Care in Context: An evaluation of the Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy. https://core.ac.uk/reader/30678880.

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Methodological challenges

It is important to note the limits of this review as these limits also point to the need for more research, including hearing from young people who have been in foster care.

There is sometimes a blurring of distinctions between different models of care.[13] There are relatively few studies of lived foster care experience,[14] and few studies capturing the insights of foster carers.[15] Most research into recruiting and retaining foster carers focuses on the voluntary model of faster care.[16] In relation to attraction and recruitment, the available research focuses on the numbers of people who respond, challenges in responding, and the percentage of people who progress through the recruitment process to become carers, but there are few longitudinal studies which track or evaluate the longer term results of particular recruitment or support strategies.[17] The lack of empirical research on the topic of recruitment or retention also limits the generalisability of conclusions drawn.[18] Much of the data is qualitative in nature with few, if any, cost-benefit analyses of recruitment campaigns to measure financial effectiveness.[19] Few studies have sought to systematically test targeted strategies that improve recruitment or retention.[20] Methodological limitations identified in the literature include:

- lack of randomisation
- lack of control groups
- differences in outcomes measured and methods of measurements
- differences in contexts
- transferability of strategies and lessons to different contexts.

There is a lack of research connecting characteristics of new foster carers to outcomes such as carer retention and placement stability[21] and there are currently few examples of rigorous research into psychoeducational programs.[22] The empirical evidence on how to support carers is also relatively scarce.[23] Systematic reviews of foster care programs found a lack of studies which included professionals or families of origin, limited empirical studies of evaluated professional or specialised foster care programs, and few studies from non-English speaking countries with different intervention models.[24] However this same review noted a high number of studies with 'robust methodologies' which could provide a solid foundation for building the evidence base.

Additionally, terminology is not consistent. Foster care can be seen as sub-set of home-based care, alongside kinship care. It can also be represented by a range of other 'care types', including 'enhanced', 'intensive', 'treatment or specialised', 'therapeutic', traditional volunteer foster care or professional foster care.[25] In parts of the United States, the term 'resource parents' is used.[26] Within these distinctions, there can be emergency, respite, permanent, short-term and long-term care.

Taken together, these methodological challenges suggest there is a relatively small pool of robust evidence on which to draw.

Key findings

Identifying what works means understanding:

- the profile of children in foster care
- the challenges and barriers to growing our pool of foster carers
- demographic profile of foster carers
- the motivations of foster carers
- what strategies work in *recruiting* foster carers
- what strategies and approaches work in *retaining* foster carers
- examples of effective practice
- implications and next steps.

13. McGuinness, K. & Arney, F. (2012). Foster and kinship care recruitment campaigns: A review and synthesis of the literature. Centre for Child Development and Education, Menzies School of Health Research, Darwin, Northern Territory.

14. Thomson, L., Watt, E. & McArthur, M. (2016). *Literature review: Foster carer attraction, recruitment, support and retention.* Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, p. 25.

15. Valentine, D., MacCallum, F. & Knibbs, J. (2020). When carers end foster placements: Exploring foster carer's experiences of adolescent foster placement breakdown. *Adoption and Fostering.* 43(4), pp. 445–60. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0308575919884884

16. Diaz, R. (2017). The experience of foster parents: What keeps foster parents motivated to foster long term? PhD thesis, p. 6. https://aura.antioch.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1390&context=etds

17. Thomson et al., p. 32.

18. Ibid., p. 25.

19. Ibid., p. 25.

20. Hanlon, R., Feltner, A., Day, A., Vanderwill, L., Kim, J-R. & Dallimore, E. (2020). Systematic review of foster parent recruitment. *Child Welfare.* 99(1), pp. 117–41, p. 136.

21. Wulczyn, F., Orlebeke, B., Hislop, K., Schmits, F., McClanahan, J. & Huang, L. (2018). The dynamics of foster care recruitment and retention. The Center for State Child Welfare Data.

22. Thomson et al., p. 6.

23. Valentine et al.

24. Smart, J., Muir, S., Hughes, J., Goldsworthy, K., Jones, S., Cuevas-Hewitt, L. & Vale, C. (2022). Identifying strategies to support foster, kinship and permanent carers: Final report. Australian Institute of Family Studies. Commonwealth of Australia. https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/Identifying-strategies-better-support-foster-kinship-and-permanent-carers

25. Vallejo-Slocker, L., Idoiaga-Mondragon, N., Axpe, I., Willi, R., Guerra-Rodríguez, M., Montserrat, C. & and del Valle, J. (2024). Systematic review of the evaluation of foster care programs. *Psychosocial Intervention.* 33(1), pp. 1–14. https://doi.org/10.5093/pi2023a14

26. Thomson et al.

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1.   Profile of children in foster care

Before looking more closely at recruitment and retention, it is useful to examine the profile of children in our foster care system as this will point to the kinds of attributes, skills, knowledge and experience we need in our foster carers.

Research shows that one reason for breakdowns in foster care placements is the child's level of externalising behaviours (thought to be used as mechanisms of coping),[27] although few studies specifically examine the profile of children in foster care (as opposed to residential or kinship care) or children who are in the general population of foster care (as opposed to children in foster care with identified disability, mental health or other specialist needs such as children with FASD etc).[28]

A 2016 scoping review by researchers in The Netherlands identified the following characteristics in relation to the general population of children coming into foster care:

- On average, in relation to *gender*, more girls are represented in foster care than boys
- With respect to *age of admission*, children are on average aged between 7 and 11 years old
- Around one-third have *physical health problems*
- At least one-third have *behaviour problems*
- Around one-third have poor academic performance (*cognitive development* and *school performance*)
- Up to one-third have been exposed to *physical abuse* in their family of origin
- Around one-half to two-thirds have experienced *physical or emotional neglect*
- Around 10 per cent have experienced *child sexual abuse* (although some studies have put this percentage higher)
- Around one-third have experienced *domestic violence*
- *Parental mental illness* has been in the family of origin for around one-third of children
- Around 20 per cent have been exposed to *parental substance abuse*
- Around 26 per cent have an *incarcerated parent*
- Children in foster care have experienced 1.3 to 3.4 previous placements.[29]

A more recent study of children in the Canadian foster care system estimates that around 32 per cent of 78,000 foster children and young people are diagnosed with at least one psychiatric disorder, with actual rates considered to be significantly higher.

> *In particular, foster children experience significantly higher rates of posttraumatic stress disorder, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, developmental disorders (e.g., fetal alcohol spectrum disorder; FASD), attachment disorders, externalizing and internalizing disorders, behavioural disorders, substance abuse disorders, and comorbidity.*

These and other studies highlight the critical importance of appropriate, trauma-informed interventions tailored to the specific needs of highly vulnerable children and to the need for highly skilled and trauma-informed carers.

The literature also contains examples of how to centre the needs of the child to create a more stable and effective foster home. For example, wherever possible, children should be routinely prepared for a foster family home *'by being told about the carers, their family and the carer's home, day-today care and routines before the first meeting (including seeing video messages and scenes of their bedroom and learning about some basic house rules'.*[32] The foster carer in turn should be provided with adequate information about the child and their current and likely future needs. For example, a 2019 NSW study based on unstructured interviews with 70 foster carers. which specifically focused on their concerns and challenges rather than on their success stories, concluded that not one interviewee 'had a foster child who was compliant and easy to manage'. If compliance and ease of management are the lens through which children in foster care are viewed, then there needs to be a much stronger focus on trauma-informed training to enable carers to better understand the perspective of the children who has been removed from their birth family and placed with strangers.

There is a need for more strengths-based research on the positive outcomes experienced by children in foster care (and to distil the critical success factors in those foster families) alongside the trauma research.

2.   Main challenges

Given that '[r]recruitment by carers of family and friends is the most powerful source of recruitment strategy',[33] it is important to understand the key challenges contributing to foster carers leaving the system. While there can be positive reasons for a foster carer choosing to no longer foster a child (for example, adoption, retirement, a change of family circumstances),[34] there are also a number of challenges which can lead to cessation. These fall broadly within the categories of communication, support, financial constraints and professional respect.[35] A 2022 study by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) identified four key overlapping challenges contributing to whether a foster carer chooses to remain in fostering:

- Systemic challenges
- Challenges inherent to the caring role
- Challenges in nurturing a child's connection with community, culture and Country
- Challenges with family contact.[36]

27. Casey Family Programs. (2020). *How have some child protection agencies successfully recruited and retained resource families?* Jurisdictional scan: Healthy Organisations. https://www.casey.org/media/20.07-QFF-HO-Recruitment-and-Retention-examples.pdf

28. Stewart, S., Graham, A. & Poss, J. (2023). Examining the mental health indicators and service needs of children living with foster families. *Children and Services Review.* 147.

29. Leloux-Opmeer, H.; Kuiper, C., Swaab, H. & Scholte, E. (2016). Characteristics of children in foster care, family-style group care and residential care: A scoping review. *Journal of Child and Family Studies.* 25, pp. 2357–71. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/299652085_Characteristics_of_Children_in_Foster_Care_Family-Style_Group_Care_and_Residential_Care_A_Scoping_Review

30. Ibid.

31. Stewart et al.

32. Ibid., p. 1.

33. Narey, M. & Owers, M. (2018). Foster care in England: A review for the Department of Education, p. 100. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7885aa40f0b62e286ad7ec/Foster_Care_in_England_Review.pdf

34. Foster Care Angels. (2019). NSW Foster carer research report. https://www.fostercareangels.org.au/media/1184/research-report-final.pdf

35. The Fostering Network. (n.d.). Foster carer retention project: Project report. https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/content/fostercareretentionprojectfinalreport.pdf

36. Ibid.

Systemic challenges include the external environment, such as the number of women in the paid workforce who might previously have been able to spend time in the home caring for a foster child,[37] and delays in family formation.[38] Other system challenges include the high turnover of case workers, poor communication from government or service providers, and a sense of feeling unheard and excluded from decision making about the child.[39] Some carers who might be interested in fostering a child are impeded by structural barriers such as poor housing, food insecurity, financial hardship and family or community dysfunction.[40] If the carer is working, then there is also the likelihood of childcare costs.

Once in the caring role, there are challenges associated with meeting the needs of children and young people who have been exposed to significant trauma and chronic maltreatment, often with a history of placement change and instability.[41] Research shows that first-time carers in particular might not be wholly prepared to care for children who demonstrate severe emotional or behavioural problems as a result of the trauma they have experienced early in their lives.[42] The challenges faced by foster carers have become more complex with some foster carer children presenting with aggression and sexualised behaviours; others presenting with substance use and addiction; and many having special learning needs, developmental delays and/or disability.[43]

For Aboriginal foster carers, the challenges facing foster carers in general are compounded by limited financial resources, living remotely, experiences of systemic racism and workers in OOHC not engaging in culturally safe practices.[44]

Challenges with family contact can occur when there is a poor or conflictual relationship between the birth and foster care families, which can threaten the quality and stability of the placement.[45] It can be challenging for foster parents to interact with the foster child's family of origin particularly when there might be violence or incarceration in the child's family.[46]

37. Smart et al.

38. Randle, M., Miller, L., Dolnicar, S. & Ciarrochi, J. (2014). The science of attracting foster carers. *Child and Family Social Work*, 19(1), pp. 65–75.

39. Foster Care Association of Victoria. (2023). Foster carer snapshot report.

40. Smart et al.

41. McGuinness & Arney, p. 18.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Diaz.

45. Smart et al.

46. Chateauneuf, D., Turcotte, D. & Drapeau, S. (2018). The relationship between foster care families and birth families in a child welfare context: The determining factors. Child & Family Social Work. 23(1). link: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318176210_The_relationship_between_foster_care_families_and_birth_families_in_a_child_welfare_context_The_determining_factors

Another factor identified in the literature relates to the inherently uncertain nature of fostering. Being a foster carer is understood by all concerned to be a temporary role, the ultimate goal being reunification with the child's family. This means there is often uncertainty in relation to the length of time a child will be in the foster carer family and, the longer a child remains, the more likely it is that there will be a grieving process once the child leaves.[47] One evaluation of a reunification specialist model within the foster care program, run by Centacare Catholic Family Services SA, found that the expectation of promoting strong relationships with birth parents, and an awareness that the placement is temporary, affected how foster carers attached to children and how they conceptualised their role.[48] The uncertainty associated with children entering and leaving the family home can be upsetting and emotionally draining yet receives little attention in the research.[49]

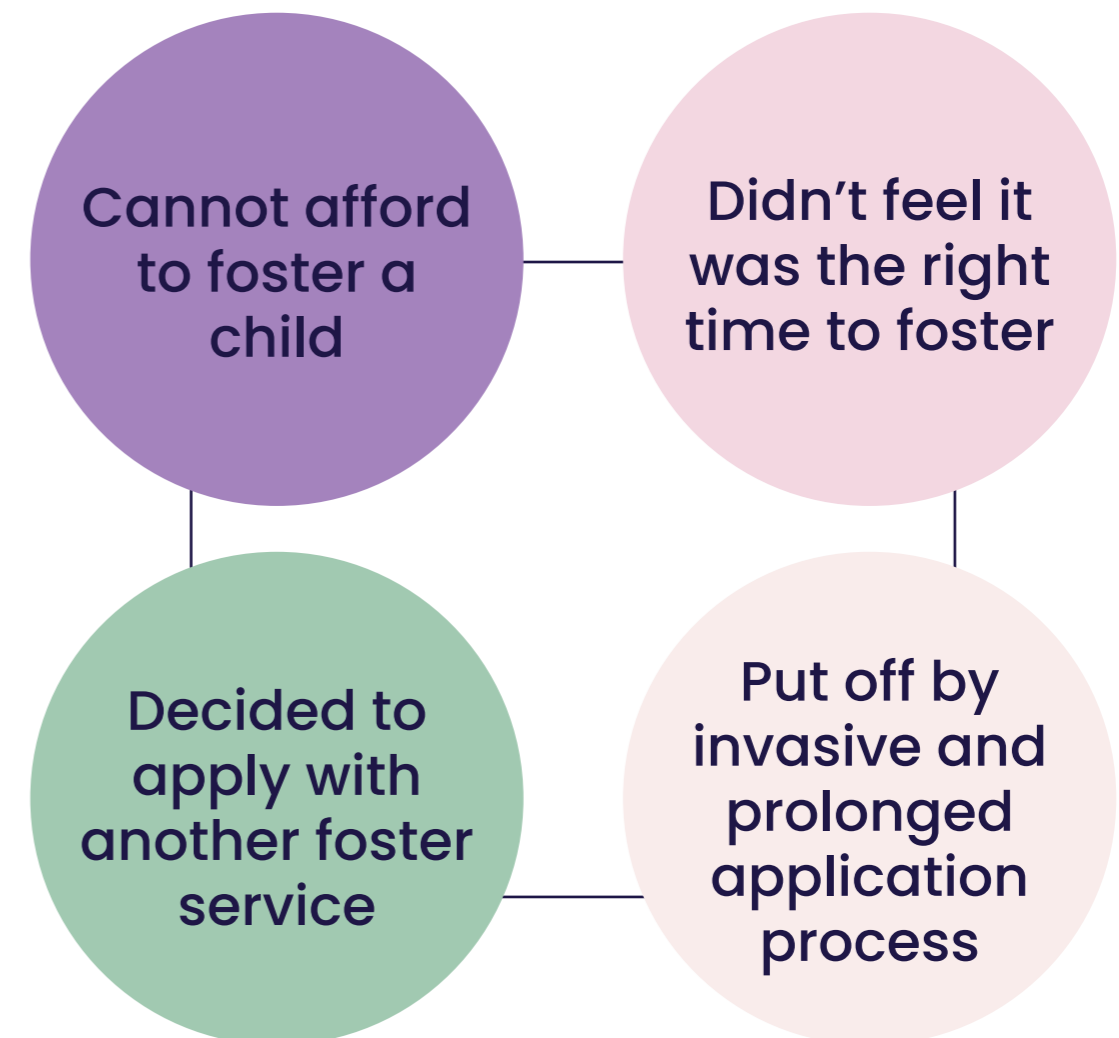## Main challenges to recruitment and accreditation

The most common reasons given by prospective foster carers for not applying to take on foster care with a service provider after initially inquiring were because of financial reasons (they could not afford to foster a child), timing (they did not feel it was the right time to foster) or because they had decided to apply with another foster service.[50]

Once the prospective carer commences the application process, the main challenge becomes the invasive and prolonged process they are put through.[51] This was a recurring theme in the literature – that the process prospective carers go through to become accredited is exhausting and bureaucratic.[52] Studies show that entry into foster caring can be enabled or hindered by the carer recruitment processes of government and carer support agencies.[53] One study reported that a quarter of initial inquiries did not progress because the agency did not follow up.[54]

Main challenges to retention

Among the most commonly cited factors affecting carer retention are the level of satisfaction a foster carer experiences, their family circumstances, the level of support provided by professionals (child protection and service providers), the availability of respite care, adequacy of financial supports, availability of professional support during critical events – including allegations of abuse – accessibility of services for the child in their care, and the extent to which they have been adequately informed about and prepared for the child.[55]

47. Diaz, p. 2.

48. Diaz, p. 33.

49. Coram, V., Louth, J., Mackenzie, C. and Goodwin-Smith, I. (2021). The foster care and family reunification nexus: Care as a mechanism for bringing families back together. University of South Australia, Adelaide.

50. Ibid.

51. Ott et al., (2023). p. 22.

52. Greeson et al.

53. Ibid.

54. Smart et al.

55. Sebba, J. (2012). *Why do people become foster carers: An international literature review on the motivation to foster.* Rees Centre, University of Oxford.

Main challenges to foster care recruitment and accreditation

- Cannot afford to foster a child
- Didn't feel it was the right time to foster
- Decided to apply with another foster service
- Put off by invasive and prolonged application process

3.   Profile of foster carers

Foster carers are not a homogenous group and there is more than one sub population of foster parents,[56] which has implications for the strategies which are designed to improve recruitment and retention rates.

International studies show that foster carers/applicants are more likely than not to be:

- female
- white
- married in a two-parent household
- earning a mid-range income
- without post-school education
- in a household which has one person in the house in paid employment
- aged between 35-54
- parents of their own birth children
- in homes with underutilised space, and
- wanting more children.[57]

The longitudinal *Pathways of Care: Outcomes of children and young people in out-of-home care in NSW* study includes more recent data about foster and kinship caregivers. Based on disaggregated data representing around 450 foster carers, the following profile emerges:

- Almost three quarters were aged over 40 years and just over three quarters were married or in a de-facto relationship.
- Approximately two thirds reported a minimum of Year 12 as their highest level of education completed, with one in five having achieved a Bachelor's degree or higher.
- The majority of carers were not in paid employment or looking for paid work.
- Despite being (overall) more financially disadvantaged than the general Australian population in regard to annual household income, most carers were satisfied with their current financial situation.
- Six in ten of those carers interviewed owned their property outright or were paying off a mortgage.
- Five per cent of carers were likely to be experiencing high or very high levels of psychological distress.[58]

FCAV reports an increase in the proportion of single foster carer-headed households and in the average age of foster carers, together with many women taking on foster care who are on reduced salaries, either not working or accepting jobs with flexible working arrangements.[59] The FACV annual report for 2023 notes that foster carers are generally:

- 85 per cent women
- Have an average age of 49 years
- 40 per cent working part time or staying at home
- 50 per cent receiving an income below $100,000.[60]

The data collected by the Fostering Connections team at the Centre relates to people who are at the start of the foster carer process, making their initial inquiry to find out if foster care might be for them. Recent analysis of Fostering Connections demographic trends from 2016-2023 showed that:

- Around one third of inquiries during this period were from people in regional areas in Victoria
- The vast majority of inquiries were from females
- Over the period analysed, the most common age range for initial inquiries was 35-44 years, followed by inquirers in the 25-34 age bracket and 45-54 respectively
- There were fewer inquiries (10 per cent of all inquiries) from people aged 55-64 in 2023 than in 2016 (15 per cent of all enquiries), while the opposite trend is evident in the 21-24 age bracket with the number of young inquirers growing from none in 2016 to 8 per cent in 2023.
- First Nations inquiries have continued to represent only a small proportion of inquiries received (5 per cent in 2023) each year.
- In the period 2016 to 2023, there was a decline in the number of inquiries from married couples with dependents (from 30 per cent in 2016 to 19 per cent in 2023) and an increase in inquiries from same sex couples with dependents (from 21 per cent in 2016 to 29 per cent in 2023).
- In the period 2016 to 2023, there was an increase in the number of inquiries from single people (from 37 per cent to 45 per cent).

The Fostering Connections data reveals a younger cohort of people making their initial inquiries compared to those contacting a foster care agency directly which means caution needs to be exercised when seeking to generalise about future foster carers.

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56. Thomson et al., p. 8.

57. Wulczyn et al.

58. McGuinness & Arney.

59. NSW Department of Family and Community Services. (2022). Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study: Outcomes of Children and Young People in Out-of-home Care in NSW. Wave 1 Baseline Statistical Report. New South Wales Government. ch.9: Characteristics of the caregiver, household and neighbourhood. https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/583223/POCLS_Report_Chapter_9.pdf

60. Foster Care Association of Victoria. (2023). Foster carer snapshot report.

4.   Motivations of foster carers

It is important to note that the decision to become a foster carer 'is not made in response to a single stimulus' and that two-thirds of the Australian population have never considered fostering as they have not been asked to do so and often do not know anything about foster care.[61]

The most common finding in the literature in relation to motivation for becoming a foster carer is altruism. This is expressed variously as wanting to provide a loving home for children, to make a difference in a child's life, to protect children from harm, and/or a desire to give back to the community.[62] These findings are consistent across global studies.

Other motivations which relate to personal circumstances, family characteristics and social context include a desire to provide a sibling for an existing child, to replace children who have left home or to fill a gap because of childlessness, the loss of a child, or lack of success in adopting a child.[63] Financial considerations are generally not a primary motivation to begin fostering although financial stability might enable a family to consider fostering a child[64] and the level of payment offered can influence the decision to progress with an application[65] or to remain a foster carer.[66] However, the level of allowance provided to cover the cost of supporting a child does not represent a viable alternative to paid work.[67]

One 2014 study of 'segments' in the population who might choose **not** to foster categorised these as:

- 'Mums and dads' who are too busy looking after their own children
- The 'not interested segment' who do not consider foster care for a range of factors, including that they would find it hard to return the child if the placement did not work out or, if it did work out, and they had to return the child to the birth family
- The 'couldn't cope' segment who have no real interest in children and do not think they could cope.
- The 'never been asked' segment which has never been approached to become a foster carer.[68]

For the purposes of this paper, the Centre has distinguished between *recruitment* (i.e. bringing in new foster carers) and *retention* (i.e. keeping the existing foster carers) and the factors contributing to each. However, the two are inextricably linked. Recruitment of foster carers – without addressing retention – 'is missing an important factor in the shortage of foster parents'.[69]

5.   What strategies work in *recruiting* foster carers?

Recruitment activities can be local and/or statewide and fall roughly into three categories:

- Formal – the overall plan or campaign to disseminate information to find new foster care homes
- Informal – the day-to-day staff activity which promotes positive public image and awareness of fostering and involves community leaders and current foster parents in the search for foster homes
- Response – the engagement process between the agency and the person making an inquiry.[70]

The literature highlights a range of strategies which have been used successfully to recruit foster carers across these three domains, including the following (in no particular order):

- Encourage positive **word of mouth** promotion: Grassroots and word of mouth campaigns have been found to be more effective than publicity and media campaigns targeting the general population, including with people from non-English speaking backgrounds in partnership with cultural and community based groups.[71]
- **Target local communities**: The most effective campaigns for First Nations carers, for example, are locally run via local radio, newspaper advertisements, community events and word-of-mouth referrals.[72] Community-based forums (such as women's groups, faith-based gatherings, local meetings of Elders etc) have been identified as an avenue for promoting foster care among community members and professional groups.[73]
- **Be upfront about financial support**: While it is important to let potential carers know they can afford to foster, this should not be over-emphasised as children in care can be affected by the perception that carers are only fostering children for the money.[74] Any awareness-raising efforts need to also include the risks associated with foster care and acknowledge that foster care is not right for every child.[75]
- **Promote other benefits**: Given that financial remuneration for volunteer foster carers is not the equivalent of a full time salary, some jurisdictions have looked to other inducements and compensations, such as paying for transportation and parking costs, offering local council tax deductions, providing parking permits, enabling access to counselling.[76]

61. Foster Care Association of Victoria. (2023). Annual Report. https://www.fcav.org.au/assets/docs/fcav-annual-report-2023.pdf

62. Sebba, p. 13.

63. McGuinness & Arney, p. 18.

64. Gouveia, L., Magalhaes, E. & Pinto, V. (2021). Foster families: A systematic review of intention and retention factors. *Journal of child and Family Studies.* 30, pp. 2766–81.

65. Ott et al., (2023). p. 19.

66. Sebba, p. 6.

67. Hanlon, R., Simon, J., Day, A., Vanderwill, L., Kin, J-R. & Dallimore, E. (2021). Systematic review of factors affecting foster carer parent retention. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services.* pp. 1-15. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1044389420970034

68. Randle et al. (2014).

69. Ibid., p. 14.

70. Hanlon et al. (2021), p. 11.

71. New Jersey Department of Children and Families. (2010). Recruitment of Resource Homes (Foster and Adoptive) Policy Manual. https://dcfpolicy.nj.gov/api/policy/download/CPP-IV-B-1-300.pdf

72. Thomson et al., p. 29.

73. Wilkinson, H. & Wright, A.C. (2019). Barriers and motivations to recruiting carers for children and young people in care aged 9+ years. University of Sydney, p. 4.

74. Family for Every Child. (2015). Strategies for delivering safe and effective foster care: A review of the evidence for those designing and delivering foster care programmes. https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/Strategies%20for%20Delivering%20Safe%20and%20Effective%20Foster%20Care.pdf

75. Ott et al. (2023). p. 20.

76. Family for Every Child. (2015).

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- **Provide realistic, concrete communications** which address public misconceptions, such as that:
  - » Foster carers need a large home or to own their own home
  - » Foster care provides a lucrative form of employment
  - » Only people in heteronormative relationships can become foster carers
  - » Children in foster care and their parents come from 'bad' homes.[77]

- **Promote the diversity** of foster carers so that prospective carers can see others like them, including ethnicity,[78] same sex couples and single parents.[79]

- **Utilise foster carer knowledge**: The literature shows the importance of including current foster carers in campaigns and information sessions.[80] Multiple studies confirm that meeting or knowing someone in foster care, or having an opportunity to hear from current carers, is the most effective way of initially attracting people to fostering, with some studies suggesting this could be a paid ambassador role.[81]

- **Follow up initial inquiries** promptly and effectively, including provision of information packs and follow up calls to reinforce agency interest.[82] Follow up individuals who choose not to proceed to understand better the factors leading to this decision.[83]

- **Provide wrap-around support** during the approval process: Some studies show the benefits of having a buddy or mentor to support prospective carers through each stage of the accreditation process.[84]

- One recent UK study identified the following factors as contributing to successful recruitment:
  - » responding to enquiries quickly
  - » using a relational and strengths-based approach
  - » giving inquirers and applicants a chance to hear from foster carers and adults with lived experiences of fostering
  - » a streamlined and informative process, aiming to equip, empower and support applicants
  - » being flexible and reducing anxiety about the panel process.[85]

6.   What strategies work in *retaining* foster carers?

If positive word of mouth is a key source of recruitment for future foster carers, then more robust and consistent efforts need to go into retaining existing foster carers. Just as positive experiences can motivate prospective foster carers, so too can the negative experiences of those who have left the system discourage future recruitment.[86]

The most commonly cited factor in the retention literature was the relationship between the agency and foster carer. Sufficient and specialist professional support is key to retaining foster carers with an appropriate level of support. Other factors have been identified as:

- Relationship to the child welfare system (including caseworkers)[87]
- Material resources (e.g., reimbursements, services, adequate payments to foster carers to ensure that they are able to carry out the role; payment of a retainer etc.)[88]
- Personal attributes (e.g., confidence, personal agency, etc.)[89]
- Training (pre-service and ongoing, e.g., caring for children who have experienced trauma)[90]
- Peer support (social, emotional, and shared knowledge; buddy and mentoring schemes)[91]
- Availability of respite care.[92]

77. Ibid.
78. Sebba.
79. Ott et al. (2023).
80. Thomson et al.
81. Ibid.
82. See, for example, McDermid, S., Holmes, L., Kirton, D. & Signoretta, P. (2012). *The demographic characteristics of foster carers in the UK: Motivations, barriers and messages for recruitment and retention.* Child Wellbeing Research Centre.
83. Thomson et al.
84. Sebba.
85. Thomson et al.

86. Ozan, J., Mendez Sayer, E., Hayes, L. & Armstrong, C. (2023). Foster carer recruitment and conversion rates. Research report. Department for Education. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64b1555699590000013002b02/Foster_carer_recruitment_and_conversion_rates_report.pdf
87. Foster Care Angels.
88. Day, A. (2021). Foster parent recruitment and retention. National Council for Adoption. https://www.academia.edu/48984045/Foster_Parent_Recruitment_and_Retention
89. Swain, V. (2017). Payment survey: The views of foster carers in England. The Fostering Network. https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/content/paymentsurveyoctober2017.pdf
90. See, for example, this research which describes the attributes needed in an effective foster carer as seen through the eyes of former foster children: Randle, M. (2013). Through the eyes of ex-foster children: Placement success and the characteristics of good foster carers. University of Wollongong. https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1109&context=buspapers
91. McPherson, L., Cameron, N., Gatwiri, K., Mitchell, J. and Parmenter, N. (2023). Research Brief: What do foster carers tell us about their support needs? Centre for Excellence in Therapeutic Care. https://www.cetc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ACF831-CETC-Research-Foster-Support-Needs-v3.pdf
92. Day.

Part 2: Examples of promising or proven practice

This section looks at a range of promising and in some cases proven examples of models and strategies which have helped recruit and/or retain foster carers. This list is not exhaustive. There is an extensive body of literature on foster carer attraction, recruitment and retention but a more limited evidence base of what has been proven to work.

Included in this following section are one-off initiatives, evidence-based programs, and evidence-informed programs. Many of the therapeutic programs are time-limited, underpinned by attachment, trauma and resilience theories, and show signs of promise in supporting carer retention. However, there is still a lack of rigorous evidence for the effectiveness of most supports.[93]

Victorian agencies have long invested in evidence-based and evidence-informed programs, including a number of the innovative programs outlined below.

Care Hub trial

The Care Hub trial is a promising initiative in Victoria, funded by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, which brings together a single team of multidisciplinary professionals to support children either entering care (first time ever or first time in the current child protection involvement), including sibling groups. The intervention is short-term and intensive and seeks to stabilise the child's life. The aim is for these children to spend the minimal amount of time in care and to be reunified with their birth family. Where returning home is not possible, the next option is kinship care then foster care or residential care. While this model is not specifically about foster carers, it does provide sound practice principles, a wrap-around approach, early intervention and is focused on improving outcomes for the child.[94] The Loddon Care Hub trial includes local ACCOs, community service organisations, community health services and youth services.

Fostering Connections program (Ireland)

This manualised psychosocial intervention in Ireland aims to support foster carers by improving their capacity to provide trauma-informed care for children with trauma-related emotional and behavioural challenges.[95] Its holistic program focuses on child, carer and the professionals who support them and draws on neurobiology, trauma, attachment and resilience research. The program evaluation showed increased confidence and knowledge in foster carers and in their empathy for the child, and improvements in children's communication and behaviour. A key

93. Thomson et al.

94. Smart et al.

95. Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (2023). Program requirements for Care Hub. https://fac.dffh.vic.gov.au/dffh-care-hub-program-requirements

element in the program's success was found to be having a foster care facilitator who brought local context to the intervention and was seen to be an important change agent.[96]

Fostering Wellbeing

This multidisciplinary program, which is funded by the Welsh Government, and delivered by The Fostering Network, aims to introduce social pedagogy principles into foster care, working across social services, health and education. A promising feature of this model is the concept of foster care 'Pioneers' or champions who help embed program principles across their service. These pioneers provide support for their peers, are trained before they take on the role, and are co-located with social workers. Other features of the program include:

- Running a general telephone helpline form the social work office
- Providing peer support – e.g. coffee mornings, support groups
- Attending schools to provide training for staff
- Developing booklets to promote the service to local foster carers.

An evaluation found that the multi-disciplinary nature of the program was highly valued and that the Pioneers had facilitated increased engagement between foster carers and education.[97] One recommendation was to disseminate the positive feedback received in the form of 'aspirational promotional material' clearly stating the benefits of the program.[98]

Head, Heart, Hands (HHH) program

This innovative and holistic approach to foster care in the UK, which ran between September 2012 and June 2016, aimed to build the skills and confidence of foster carers and brought together head (professional knowledge), heart (empathy and own experiences) and hands (practical activities) to support foster carers in working alongside children. The stated aims were:

- Develop a professional, confident group of foster carers who can demonstrate that by using a social pedagogic approach, they can significantly improve the day to day lives of the children in their care
- Develop social pedagogic characteristics in foster carers. Foster carers will have an integration of 'head, hands and heart' to develop strong relationships with the children they look after.
- Implement systemic change and a cultural shift which will support social pedagogic practice and recognise the central role of foster carers in shaping the lives of children within their care
- Provide a platform for transformation of the role that foster carers play as part of the child's network.[99]

A 2019 evaluation found that while the training received by foster carers supported them in better understanding the principles underpinning the approach, more could be done to support using them in different contexts for a range of children.[100] Foster carers also benefited from enhanced and more equal relationships with supervising social workers. Overall, the evaluation found that the impact of this program was deep rather than wide, with a small group of committed foster carers able to make small changes which had a big impact on individual foster families.[101]

KEEP (Keeping Foster and Kin Parents Supported and Trained)

This 16-week group-based training program (UK, originally US) typically involves providing foster and kinship carers of children 4-12 years with practical parenting techniques to manage challenging behaviours. The following characteristics have been found to have contributed to the success of this program:

- A collaborative, strengths-based approach to working with families which helps carers to feel valued
- Guaranteed respite care
- Having out of hours telephone support available
- Easy access to specialist help and advice, frequent contact with social workers
- Opportunities to take part in training with other foster carers as a means of developing informal social support networks and connecting families with other foster families
- Flexibility – facilitators can adapt the pace of the curriculum to the learning needs of participants.

The program has been evaluated with studies consistently showing positive findings in regard to a reduction in children's problematic behaviours and an increase in foster carer confidence and knowledge.[102] The findings from a 2019 investigation suggest that the KEEP training could provide foster caregivers with tools to address a broader range of behaviour problems.[103]

Mockingbird Family Model

The Mockingbird Family Model, another evidence-based and pioneering program, aims to improve retention of foster carers through increased peer support and the availability of respite care. Delivered by The Fostering Network in the UK, it has also been delivered successfully in Australia. The model involves 'satellite' family foster carers living in proximity to a 'hub' home carer who can offer respite and support carers. It enables children to thrive in an extended

96. Lotty, M., Bantry-White, E. & Dunn-Galvin, A. (2022) Towards a more comprehensive understanding of Fostering Connections: The trauma-informed foster care programme: A mixed methods approach with data integration. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies.* 13(1): pp. 1-29. DOI: 10.18357/ijcyfs131202220656

97. Lotty et al.

98. Rees, A., Maxwell, N., Powell, J., Corliss, C., Khan, A. & O'Donnell, C. (2023). Fostering wellbeing: Placing foster carers centre stage. *Adoption and Fostering* 47 (4). pp. 453-70. https://doi.org/10.1177/03085759231208460

99. Rees, A. & Handley, B. (2022). Evaluation of Fostering Wellbeing. Cardiff University. https://cascadewales.org/research/an-evaluation-of-fostering-well-being/

100. The Fostering Network. (2011). Head, Hands and Heart Bringing up Children in Foster Care: A Social Pedagogic Approach: Funding Proposal. London: the Fostering Network. In McDermid, S., Holmes, L., Ghate, D., Trivedi, H., Blackmore, J. & Baker, C. (2019). The evaluation of Head, Heart, Hands: Introducing Social Pedagogy into UK Foster Care. Final Synthesis Report. https://hdl.handle.net/2134/2409.

101. Ibid.

102. Ibid.

103. Price, J., Roesch, S., Walsh, N. & Landsverk, J. (2015). Effects of the KEEP foster parent intervention on child and sibling behavior problems and parental stress during a randomized implementation trial. *Prevention Science.* 16(5), 685–95. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4442755/

family of care providers and particularly suits siblings who are not in the same home but can be fostered nearby to retain familial connection. A constellation consists of six to ten satellite homes with each hub home and provides care for between six to 18 children and young people. Satellite and hub home families are supported by a host agency to build this micro-community of support.

Evaluations have shown increased foster carer satisfaction and improved status of foster carers in the team around the child. There have also been promising indicators for outcomes such as child safety, child wellbeing, sibling connections, building strong community connections and fostering cultural identity.[104]

Treatment and Care for Kids (TrACK) Program

The TrACK program is a therapeutic foster care program which provides intensive intervention for children and young people with complex and challenging trauma-based behaviours. Initially established in 2002 (called 'Catalyst'), the program provides foster carers with intensive training and ongoing high level support from their foster agency to enable them to develop a strong carer-child relationship. The role of the carer is key to the success of the program. An evaluation of TrACK found that children who had previously had many placements 'were almost always able to achieve stability in TrACK', had improved capacity to self-regulate and enhanced emotional and psychological wellbeing.[105] Carers benefited not only from the training but from strong, mutually valued relationships with professionals.[106]

Key elements of this model have also been incorporated into the Circle Therapeutic Foster Care Program in Victoria.

Treatment Foster Care Oregon (TFCO)

Treatment Foster Care Oregon, previously known as Multi-Dimensional Treatment Foster Care, is a short-term, intensive community-based foster care program aimed at children and young people who are either in, or at risk of entering, the residential care system.[107] TFCO is tailored to the unique developmental needs of children 7 to 17 years, and focuses on five areas:

- A consistent, reinforcing environment with mentoring and encouragement
- A daily structure with clear expectations and specific consequences
- A high level of youth supervision
- Limited access to problematic peers and access to prosocial peers
- An environment that supports daily school attendance and homework completion.[108]

Evaluations have found TFCO a positive alternative to residential care for children and young people with severe behavioural challenges. TFCO foster parents are committed to being part of a 'treatment team' and having regular contact with program staff.[109] In addition to improving outcomes and generating significant cost savings, TFCO represents a step '*toward a more professionalised pool of foster caregivers. The program can be used to create smaller, leaner, high intensity family foster care settings.*'[110] Treatment Foster Care is a therapeutic foster care model as is Enhanced Treatment Foster Care.

Teaching-Family Model (TFM)

One of the first evidence-based programs in human services,[111] TFM is a manualised program which targets a broader range of young people and adults than children in foster care or foster carers. The model provides services to caregivers and is designed to address challenges with the child and family more broadly. It uses TFM-trained practitioners or 'teaching parents' to offer a family-like environment in the child's residence. The model focuses on strengths, problem-solving and interpersonal and leadership skills.

There is an accreditation process for organisations wishing to deliver this program and fidelity in implementation is critical.

The key features of the model are:

- Staff selection and training
- Competency-based management/consultation/supervision
- Quality assurance (evaluation)
- Facilitative administration.

In Victoria, the model has been rolled it out in residential care.

The Circle Program

The Victorian Circle Program aims to provide a therapeutic approach to the provision of foster care, improving the placement experience for children and also the retention of foster carers. An early evaluation (2012) of the program found that foster carers were well trained, supported, felt valued as part of a care team, and were able to provide a healing environment.[112]

104. Price, J., Roesch, S. & Burce, C. (2019). The effects of the KEEP foster parent training intervention on child externalizing and internalizing problems. *Developmental Child Welfare.* 1(1), 5–21. https://journals.copmadrid.org/pi/art/in2012a20

105. Ott et al. (2020). p. 15.

106. McPherson, L., Gatwiri, G. & Cameron, N. (2018). Evaluation of the Treatment and Care for Kids Program (TrACK). Southern Cross University. Commissioned by the Australian Childhood Foundation and Anglicare Victoria. https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/TRACK-FINAL-EVALUATION-REPORT-5march17.pdf

107. Ibid., p. 8.

108. Fisher, P. & Beauchamp, K. (2012). Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care: An alternative to residential treatment for high risk children and adolescents. *Psychosocial intervention.* 21(2), pp. 195–203. DOI:10.5093/in2012a20

109. See the Treatment Foster Care Oregon website: https://www.tfcoregon.com/evidence/

110. Fisher & Beauchamp.

111. Parenting Research Centre. (2013). Evidence review: Analysis of the evidence for out-of-home care. Commissioned by the Community Service Directorate of the ACT Government.

112. Fixsen, D. & Blasé, K. (2018). The Teaching Family Model: The first 50 years. *Perspectives on Behavior Science.* 42(2), pp. 189–211. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40614-018-0168-3

The program was found to have been more successful that the generalist foster care model in engaging families, a key reason for this being their involvement in care team meetings in which the child's family was included. This interaction helped facilitate reunification where appropriate.[113]

Professional foster care

There are mixed views on professional foster care and it is not always clear how the term 'professional' is being understood or used. While interest in and advocacy for this concept is not new in the literature,[114] it has been difficult to find examples which link fully professionalised foster care models with evidence of improvement in either recruitment or retention rates. There are elements of professionalisation in how agencies locally and internationally approach foster care – for example, in inductions, financial administration and support systems, allowances to cover costs of fostering, working conditions, professional development and training, and (potentially) support when there is an allegation – but few examples of full professionalisation.

However, the professionalisation of services, including reimbursement for the costs of caring, was identified in a recent study of foster carer recruitment and retention as one of the three central themes supporting retention of foster carers, (the other two being the quality of support provided and being treated with respect).[115] Similarly, another study found that many foster carers believe fostering should be either semi or fully professional due to the training and skill provided and that the helping professions could be specifically targeted for children in care with complex needs.[116] Professionalisation could also benefit child and agency by enabling high standards to be set for approving applicants and for evaluating ongoing performance.[117]

On the other hand, it has been argued that to professionalise foster care would be to strike at the very heart of fostering as a concept, with foster carers needing to see themselves primarily as parents not professionals, and needing to advocate fiercely for their child as any good parent would.[118]

Professional foster care involves carers being paid a salary commensurate with their level of skills, with a relevant qualification and/or training, who can provide, or access, specialist clinical support. International findings in relation to professional foster care highlighted the following features as being core to the model:

• Competitive remuneration packages that explicitly link payment to carer skills and effort
• Allowances that cover the cost of raising the child
• Special taxation and industrial relations arrangements
• Variation in expectation of minimum qualifications for professional carers.[119]

Options for professional models include:

• Having an independently contracted carer, with no minimum qualification, recruited from related human services with potentially some volunteer foster carers, mixture of assessable (linked to skills, effort and qualifications) and non-assessable (e.g., reimbursement of costs incurred in fostering) financial arrangements
• Having a contracted employee, with a minimum qualification, with part or all of the wage being exempted from assessable income
• Having a professional employee, with no minimum qualification, with legally enshrined industrial rights and exemption from assessable income.[120]

One model currently being funded by the New South Wales government is Professionalised Individual Care (PIC), where a child lives in the home of a psychologist or therapeutic expert who is paid $100,000 to care for the child full time. While these carers are experienced professionals, the model is not clinical but relationship based, with the carer working one-on-one with the child.[121] These professional foster carers are qualified, experienced and receive full-time wages as 'case experts'.

Another current example of an innovative professionalised foster carer model is the Together California initiative, which aims to employ full-time, professionally trained, foster carers who will each care for one sibling group of up to six children.[122] This initiative has received some local government funding ($1.2m) but is largely funded privately through donations. It is expected that the first foster care community of 12 homes will be operational by 2025. The five core elements of Together California are:

• Children live together with their brothers and sisters.
• Children receive care and support from a full-time, professionally trained foster parent.
• Children thrive in a single-family home.
• Children are supported through an intentional community of care.
• Birth parents receive support and counselling to reunite families when possible.[123]

113. Frederico, M., Long, M., McNamara, P., McPherson, L., Rose, R. & Gilbert, K. (2012). The Circle Program: An evaluation of a therapeutic approach to foster care. Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.
114. Frederico et al.
115. See, for example, McHugh, M. & Pell, A. (2013). Reforming the foster care system in Australia: A new model of support, education and payment for foster carers. Berry Street and the University of New South Wales; and ACIL Allen Consulting. (2013). Professional foster care, barriers, opportunities and options. Melbourne.
116. Ibid., p. 37.
117. McGuinness & Arney, p. 14.
118. Font, S. & Gershoff, E. (2020). Foster care: How we can and should do more for maltreated children. Social Policy Report. 33(3). https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED609900.pdf

119. Narey & Owers.
120. ACIL Allen Consulting. (2013). Professional Foster Care, Barriers, Opportunities and Options. Melbourne. Report for the Department of Social Services.
121. Ibid., p. 8.
122. See https://www.myforeverfamily.org.au/agencies/professional-individualised-care/
123. See https://togethercalifornia.org/

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While this rapid review has not examined professional foster care in depth as a model, it does highlight professional elements which could be incorporated into current approaches to potentially make a difference in foster carer retention. However, as the literature makes clear, there is a difference between giving a foster carer equivalent status to a professional and treating carers professionally. The literature consistently highlights the importance of the latter without necessarily endorsing the former.

Other strategies

Rhode Island: Use of design thinking as a change management strategy

The authors of this US study explored use of design thinking processes to improve foster carer recruitment and accreditation (licensing) in Rhode Island. Design thinking, which prioritises stakeholder perspectives, provides a change management framework which the state used to bring about major system changes.[124] Rhode Island provides one of the first case studies of how a child welfare system can effectively use design thinking to address complex and seemingly intractable problems.

In 2018, Rhode Island had 498 licensed foster homes; by 2020, it had 1,274 licensed homes in its pool of available foster carer resources. Given that from 2019-2020, Rhode Island increased the total number of licensed foster homes in the state by 36 per cent, it is worth looking in a little more detail at the steps the state took, specifically: empathise, define, ideate, prototype, test and iterate.

- *Empathise* – Involved seeking feedback from those directly affected by the foster care approval process and care and identify the 'real issues' needing to be addressed. This step also involved listening for motivations, challenges and frustrations as expressed by carers and showing their views are valued
- *Define* – Involved using the information gathered to define or re-define the problem – e.g. the foster care enrolment pipeline and the 'pain points'. Also included doing geo-mapping to see where the foster parents lived and where the children came from originally to determine where the 'foster care deserts' were – 'what we did was a targeted effort to engage those communities that were deemed "hotspots"'.[125]
- *Ideate* – Used a team-oriented approach to problem solving, e.g. ran brainstorming sessions, engaged in process mapping and storytelling; collated all the information to generate approaches/solutions
- *Prototype* – Rhode Island shifted the focus on issues in foster care recruitment to focus on removing barriers to licensing new families. The state piloted a new process with foster care families waiting to be approved. They ran a highly successful 'recruitment weekend' – pre-populating the names, emails, and address of prospective carers so the applicants could focus on other information – then sought further feedback on the trialled process. During the recruitment weekend potential foster carers could also talk to agencies to decide which one suited their needs best; they then had a 'point person' from the agency who would be their navigator through the process. Rhode Island also created 'pods' of families – geographically connected - which formed a kind of social support group as applicants went through the process.

- *Test and Iterate* – This involved putting the team's best ideas and prototypes in action – e.g. the recruitment team would set up in a space and any family could come by and someone was there to talk to them about being a foster career – they helped people fill out the paper work – like an outreach service which went to the carers' locations.

Casey Family Programs

As part of their commitment to providing and improving foster care, Casey Family Programs have developed a series of resources, initiatives and strategies.[126] Their jurisdictional scan of how the states of New Jersey, Oklahoma and Washington have approached the recruitment and retention of resource families has been documented in *How have some child protection agencies successfully recruited and retained resource families?*[127]

Examples of strategies include:

- A **Resource Family Retention Plan** which incorporates a set of core principles, outlines the importance of professional staff development to improve support for foster carers, commits to management and leadership valuing and respecting foster carers as partners in meeting the needs of children, and tools and services to enable foster carers to be effective in caring for children in their home.[128]
- A **Mobile Response and Stabilization Services** intervention which provides a timely response service to any family needing urgent assistance with a child's behavioural or mental health needs anywhere in the state of New Jersey 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. The health professional response includes on-site intervention for immediate de-escalation, assistance to return to routine functioning and provision of preventative strategies and resources to avoid or at least mitigate future crises.[129]
- A new **Caregiver Recruitment and Retention Program** (2021) which was informed by caregiver focus groups in each region in Washington, supported by Targeted Recruitment Specialists, with a focus on targeted recruitment and caregiver retention and support to increase the number of caregivers who:
  » are racially, ethnically and culturally diverse
  » can accommodate sibling groups
  » can support medically fragile children
  » can support children with extensive emotional, behavioural and physical needs.[130]

124. See https://togethercalifornia.org/about-us/
125. Greeson, p. 3.
126. Ibid., p. 24.
127. See https://www.casey.org/who-we-are/about/
128. Casey Family Programs. (2020). *How have some child protection agencies successfully recruited and retained resource families?* https://www.casey.org/media/20.07-QFF-HO-Recruitment-and-Retention-examples.pdf
129. New Jersey Department of Children and Families. (2016). Resource Family Retention Plan. https://www.nj.gov/njfosteradopt/RetentionPlan.pdf
130. Casey Family Programs. (2018). *What is New Jersey's Mobile Response and Stabilization Services intervention?* https://www.casey.org/nj-mobile-response-stabilization-services/

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Showcasing good practice

- In 2010, The Fostering Network in the UK ran a workshop on supporting foster carers, accompanied by a workbook which included 14 case studies showcasing the good practice being undertaken in local council areas.[131] The workbook also contained useful practical information.

- The Fostering Network in the UK has developed an exit interview toolkit which could be used to better inform agencies about why a foster carer leaves their service and what steps could be taken to inform future recruiting and retention practices. The literature shows few fostering services have a systematic or robust approach to conducting exit interviews. The Exit Interview Toolkit is available at https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/recruitment-and-retention/foster-carer-exit-interview-toolkit.

- Family for Every Child has captured a wide range of examples of good practice across locations in Europe, the Middle East, United States, Asia, South Africa, South America, Canada and Russia. Examples include:

  » Development of a television documentary series, 'Life as it is: foster care', which followed 11 foster care families for seven months to showcase both the positive elements and challenges of fostering (Bulgaria).

  » Establishment of a 'Just Us' group of children and young people who are in or have been in foster care and who can act as an advocacy group to inform development of guidelines and policy (UK).

  » Establishment of 'communities of care' which function as foster care support groups, meet regularly, participate in joint training and events together, and form a peer support network (UK).[132]

- A 2018 government-commissioned review of foster care in England found examples of some local authorities significantly increasing foster carer numbers through innovative recruitment methods, including improved use of social media, use of promotional materials that explicitly recognise fostering as altruistic (using language and messaging which emphasised the opportunity to change children's lives), use of a behaviour insight approach to better understand the values and behaviours of prospective carers, and use of existing foster carers to appeal to prospective carers.[133]

- Essex County Council has shared online a number of stories about successful fostering experiences through the eyes of young people who were fostered. Their varied circumstances have one thing in common – being placed in a foster care home where the foster parents were able to give them love and stability and encourage them to aspire to and achieve a better life than might otherwise have been the case.[134]

Emerging good practice

- The Reflective Fostering Study, funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research in the UK, aims to strengthen the relationship between child and carer by encouraging foster carers to be more reflective about their emotions and actions and those of the children in their care.[135] It is the largest study of its kind in the UK, involves co-delivery between a social worker and experienced foster carer, and draws on a growing body of research indicating the importance of a carer's reflective capacity in building strong relationships and supporting the emotional wellbeing of children. The researchers have conducted a feasibility and pilot evaluation of the program which show promising results, prior to an impact evaluation using a larger number of participants, a randomised design and a control group, but the results are promising.

Still capture from "Life As It Is: Foster Care" TV Show (Bulgaria), produced in November 2012 by Unicef.

131. Casey Family Programs. (2020).

132. The Fostering Network. (2010). *Supporting Foster Families: Showcasing good practice in support for foster families.* https://fostercareresources.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/workbook_support_foster_fam_nov2010.pdf

133. Family for Every Child. (2015).

134. Narey & Owers.

135. Essex County Council. Real life stories. https://www.essexadoptionandfostering.co.uk/fostering/who-needs-foster-care/real-life-stories/

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Part 3: Implications and next steps

This section of the paper looks at some of the approaches and strategies which could potentially be implemented or adapted in Victoria to improve the number of foster carers who enter and remain in the foster care system. While there is generally consensus amongst providers and government that a new more contemporary model of foster care is needed, reinforced by the Cube Group's findings in their analysis of the economic benefits of foster care to the Victorian community,[136] such reform is likely to be costly and not in the immediate future. This rapid review does not examine in depth the evidence-based programs which some agencies are already implementing, with their own measures of effectiveness, but considers less costly interventions which could be implemented reasonably quickly.

Systemic considerations

Commonwealth and State Governments

• The Commonwealth and state governments have policy and financial levers which could **ease the financial burden** on foster carers, better reflect the true cost of caring, and improve industrial working conditions. Steps which could be taken to create a more supportive environment for foster carers include:

   » Providing a carer allowance which covers the true costs of care, is reviewed regularly based on the needs of the child, and indexed to the household rate of inflation

   » Examining how changes to superannuation, tax-free remuneration, parenting payments, and child care subsidies could better support foster carers

   » Examining what exemptions could be made for schools costs, medical and dental care

   » Considering funding for counselling, speech therapy, sporting club memberships for children.

The Centre as the peak body for child and family services has advocated for many of these measures in previous pre-budget submissions.

• The Centre also supports a **national policy and data collection** approach to foster care, given that the issue of recruiting and retaining foster carers affects all jurisdictions.[137] Establishing a national register of carers could improve recruitment through the data it holds and could enable vacancy management and better matching of carer and child. A 2017 review of the foster care system in England outlined the type of data that could be held, including:

136. Midgley, N. et al. (2021). The Reflective Fostering Programme: Improving the wellbeing of children in care through a group intervention for foster carers: A randomised controlled trial. Study Protocol. https://trialsjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13063-021-05739-y

137. Cube Group. (2023). *Valuing something that matters: The economic value of foster care in Victoria.* Final report. Unpublished report commissioned by the Centre for Excellence on behalf of a group of foster care service providers in Victoria.

- » details of the carer's fostering agency
- » date of their approval as carers
- » where they live
- » the number of beds and bedrooms in their home
- » the number of vacancies for children
- » personal characteristics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, religion and language)
- » their level of training and expertise.[138]

More recently, a Welsh parliamentary report argued for a **national register of foster carers** – in line with other roles such as social workers which have significant daily contact with children – to improve safeguarding of children and the national picture of foster care placements.[139] The register would include all fostering placements and approved foster carers across local authorities and independent sectors.

- The Victorian government could consider trialling a small number of **professional foster homes** for children with complex needs who require a stay-at-home caregiver with highly specialised skills. This could broaden the mix of foster home environments available for children and, if shown to be effective, could be incorporated into a future model of diverse, flexible and responsive foster care arrangements.

Foster care providers

- The literature highlights the benefits of having structured peer support for carers to promote carer retention and placement stability for children. Examples have been given in this paper, including introducing a foster care buddy or mentor to sit alongside a prospective carer's journey through the accreditation process and setting up peer networks in local areas to support each other.
- More could be done to create opportunities for existing foster carers to share their experiences, motivations, challenges and ultimately the rewards of fostering. Studies have shown the value of foster carers taking on the role of 'pioneers', champions or paid ambassadors to share their insights and perspectives with prospective carers.
- There are adaptations service providers could make which provide professional elements (such as formal training and leave, including carers in decision making) without needing to invest in a full time professional foster carer model.
- The research highlights the importance of being able to ease the financial burden once people become foster carers. Consider what modest financial and non-financial support might be given through Myki cards or petrol vouchers, parking permits, and other means to make it easier for a carer to focus on the child in their care.
- There are opportunities at commencement and on exit to improve the way these critical time points are handled. There is scope to improve the timeliness and quality of responses to initial inquiries, and through the course of accreditation, to convert more inquirers into foster carers. There is also scope for improving the quality of the information gathered as part of the exit interviews to help inform future recruitment and retention approaches.

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138. Hanlon et al. (2020).

139. Narey & Owers.

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- As the peak body for child and family services, the Centre has an important role to play in leading advocacy for the rights of children in foster care and for better working conditions to enable foster carers to provide the best possible home environments. Centre membership of a new national taskforce specifically focused on foster care would facilitate a stronger national contribution and presence.
- There is a role for the Centre to play in continuing to bring foster care providers together regularly to share experiences, data and examples of what has worked, to provide guidance regarding the design of a future system and to develop agreed strategies for realising this.
- There is an opportunity for Fostering Connections, as an initiative funded by government and managed by the Centre, to provide a more consolidated and innovative leadership role with foster care service providers in Victoria. While there is a peak body in foster care (FCAV), which focuses on responding to the needs of foster carers, there are still several gaps which Fostering Connections could fill to improve recruitment and retention for foster carers. Specifically:
  - » There is a need for more accurate data to document what is happening in foster care in Victoria, including trends over time. Fostering Connections is well positioned to continue collecting and improving the utility of the data collected from service providers and sharing this to inform local decision making and statewide collective efforts.
  - » Improved data collection will enable the Fostering Connections team to analyse and report on these trends and developments and share consolidated data to the state government to inform policy and funding decisions, including advocacy for improved Commonwealth government support.
  - » Data and evidence more broadly will enable targeted marketing approaches to increase the diversity of foster carers, including for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, children with disability and/or complex health needs, and LGBTIQIA+ children and young people.
  - » Given the low conversion rate from initial inquiry to accredited foster carer, Fostering Connections could strengthen its concierge support service to make sure each inquirer is regularly followed up in a timely way, that no one is left waiting or overwhelmed by the accreditation process, and that whenever possible, they can be linked to an existing foster carer to make the process less isolating and overwhelming.
  - » The strongest theme to emerge from the research is that the best foster carer recruitment strategy is to retain current foster carers. Fostering Connections could be collecting case studies of examples where foster carer retention is consistently high and the reasons for this, shared through the Fostering Connections website, OPEN portal, and social media.
  - » The Centre's OPEN forums also provide an opportunity to showcase the latest initiatives to successfully recruit and retain foster carers to create safe and nurturing foster family homes.
  - » A refreshed Fostering Connections Advisory or Reference Group could support Fostering Connections in developing a Five Year Statewide Recruitment and Retention Plan for foster carers in Victoria.
  - » Fostering Connections and foster care agencies more broadly could review the induction packages they offer to make sure their tone is sufficiently engaging and warm, building on the altruistic motivation which leads people to inquire, while making sure the content is realistic about the rewards and challenges of foster care. Consider involving foster carers in the design and content development to highlight the 'word of mouth' element. Recruitment strategies, publicity, information packages, and responses to enquiries could be examined for inclusiveness and clarity.

» Interview foster carers to highlight the benefits gained not only for children but for those doing the fostering. Carers in one small US study reported that being a foster parent was the most positive and meaningful experience of their lives.[140] Such endorsement of fostering as a vocation is priceless.

» Conduct interviews with young people who have previously been in foster care, and potentially with their foster siblings, where the foster arrangement has been successful, to show how precious and valuable fostering is for children and the difference that high-quality foster care can make to a child's life

» Fostering Connections could organise recruitment days in local communities, or a state-wide recruitment day, with all providers participating and the processes in place to commence immediate immersion of prospective carers into the accreditation process. Resurrect the roadshows which take fostering into local communities.

» While the external environment has changed rapidly over the past two decades, the challenges associated with recruiting and retaining foster carers are not new. Is it time to revisit the concept of the traditional model of voluntary foster care to create a language which can engage the community's interest and create a greater sense of community responsibility for the environments in which we raise children who cannot live with their birth families? In the United States the term 'resource parents' is used while in Wales, a 2023 parliamentary report talks of 'corporate parents'. The concept of 'professional foster carers' also has connotations which suggest a more commercial arrangement which is potentially at odds with the altruistic motivation persistently highlighted in the literature. Fostering Connections could help lead this conversation with government, agencies, carers, and children and young people in foster care.

Contemporary model of foster care

The literature does not reveal any single model or strategy as being the one that should be adopted for all children coming into foster care but rather, points to the need to have a range of foster care options to suit the particular needs of each child.

A contemporary model might consist of a base level of foster care. This would be characterised by a consistent set of principles and supports which every child in foster care and every carer could expect to receive and then, in addition, an enhanced component which provides a flexible range of strengths-based and diverse options also suited to the needs of the child. The literature provides the evidence base on which to identify the core components for every base and enhanced foster care arrangement, including a baseline assumption that all care should be trauma-informed given the trauma background of each child. For example, in the base model, all foster carers could have access to 24-hour support and all children could receive private health insurance and $1000 in brokerage. On top of this, depending on what best suits the need of the child, there could be a range of offerings such as TFCO for some children, one-one-one paid professional care for other children, a Care Hub multidisciplinary arrangement for children who have not been in care before, a dedicated First Nations foster care setting, and other foster family settings based on what the evidence shows works.

An important next step will be to identify the core features of the base component of a new model, which every child can expect to receive and every carer expect to deliver, together with the range of enhanced components which offer flexible options to carers and children depending on need.

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140. Welsh Parliament.

Finally

This paper provides a synthesis of the evidence in relation to recruitment and retention. However, the ultimate goal is to have children in permanent families not foster carer retention.[141] What is needed is a better understanding of the factors which help create a stable, safe and nurturing foster care family from the perspectives of children and young people who have been in foster care. There is limited research on the quality of foster care itself and the research which does exist shows considerable variability.[142] *'Yet, understanding children's experiences within their foster homes is critical to making real progress on issues of placement instability and negative well-being outcomes'*.[143] The quality of the care to be provided, and a focus on how this care will promote child wellbeing and safety, need to guide decision making in relation to recruitment and retention of carers.

Fostering Connections' "Play a Part" poster, celebrating Foster Care Week 2023.

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141. Diaz, p. 70.
142. Hanlon et al. (2021). p. 12.
143. Font & Gershoff.
144. Ibid., p. 20.

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For over 100 years, the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare has advocated for the rights and wellbeing of children, young people and families in Victoria.

We advocate for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture.

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