

Welcome to Foster Care

Information Booklet





hello

// Foster caring is wonderfully rewarding, positive learning, and challenging to all. But to see a young child grow into a happy and healthy young person is the best reward of all.

David, foster carer

Welcome

to foster care with MacKillop

Thank you for taking the first step towards becoming a foster carer.

It's one of the most important and rewarding roles you can play in your community.

We have a critical shortage of foster carers. Each year, the number of children and young people needing foster care grows. And it grows more quickly than we can find people to care for them.

You can help create a brighter future for a child or a young person who may not have had the best start in life. Caring for them in your home and offering them the warmth of a family environment can make an immeasurable difference.

This pack provides information about all aspects of foster care. If you'd like to take the next step, our friendly staff will guide you through the foster care application and approval process.

At MacKillop, we help you with the paperwork, we provide training, and we support you once you are approved and become a carer.

Please call us on 1300 791 677 if you have any questions.

About MacKillop Family Services

MacKillop Family Services, a Catholic agency, exists to support, foster hope and promote justice for children, young people and families, particularly those who have experienced distress, disadvantage and abuse.

Our vision is to transform lives in the spirit of justice and hope.

We deliver foster care in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia. We protect and nurture every young person and family we work with, and give them the chance to build a brighter future.

MacKillop Family Services was formed in 1997, refounding the services previously provided by the Sisters of Mercy, the Christian Brothers and the Sisters of St Joseph.



The basics

What is foster care?

Foster care is temporary care of children and young people by people who are trained, assessed and approved foster carers in a home setting. Children and young people enter foster care when they cannot live with their birth family.

Ideally, children and young people rejoin their birth family as soon as it is safe for them to do so.

Types of foster care

There are different types of foster care. You can provide care for a weekend, a few weeks, a few months or even years. You choose the type of care that suits you.

Emergency care

Emergency carers care for children when their safety is at immediate risk. For this reason, emergency carers are often called on at short notice. The child stays for a short period (sometimes only one night) while a care plan is developed and a longer term placement can be found.

Short term care

Short term carers generally care for a child for between one month to two years. There is usually a plan in place for the child to rejoin his or her birth parents or guardians, who receive support to improve their ability to care for their child.

Respite care

Respite carers provide planned care for a child for a short period, typically one or two weekends a month. Respite carers provide crucial support for the child's parents, guardians or regular foster carers, by giving them a break. Respite carers allow the child to experience a different home environment.

Long term care

Long term carers provide much needed stability, safety and security for a vulnerable child or young person who cannot return home for a longer period, if at all. They may need support for a period of years, or until they reach adulthood.

The basics

Who needs foster care?

Children and young people of all ages may need foster care – it ranges from newborn babies to 18-year-olds. They may come into care on their own or with their siblings.


Children and young people enter foster care for many reasons. Many have had difficult experiences:

- They may have experienced illness or death of family members.
- They may have been abused or neglected, because their parents are experiencing drug abuse, in jail, have a mental illness or have an intellectual disability.
- They may be experiencing domestic and family violence.
- They may be homeless.
- They may display risky behaviours and their parents cannot protect them.

Some children entering foster care have a disability, emotional or behavioural difficulties, or a mental illness.

In other cases, the child's family decides to place the child in foster care, while in other cases the relevant child protection agency decides it is in the child's best interest that they enter foster care.

It's important to remember that you can choose the type of care you feel most comfortable with. Our staff will work with you to find the right match.



All kids are different.
They have different backgrounds, beliefs, ideas and experiences and will deal with change differently.

Nicole, foster child

Who can become a foster carer?

Many different people can be a foster carer. Like the children they care for, foster carers come from different backgrounds and all types of families. Foster carers can:

- be single or have a partner
- have children of their own or not
- own or rent their home
- work, stay at home, study or be retired
- be from any culture or religion.

Most importantly, our carers all share the desire to provide a safe and nurturing environment for children and young people in need. They understand that each child or young person has different needs. They are compassionate and resilient. And a good sense of humour helps.

Foster parents are trained, assessed and approved before they start caring for a child or young person. This process involves several screening checks (see checklist on next page).

We will work closely with you to help you through the process.

The basics

The most important requirement for becoming a foster carer is that you can provide a stable, loving and nurturing home environment for vulnerable children or young people.

Requirements for becoming a foster carer:

- Be an Australian citizen or permanent resident.
- Be at least 25 years of age.
- Have space in your home for a child or a young person.
- Have Police and Working with Children Checks
(we will help you obtain these).
- Complete a health check, referee checks, and a home and environment check (we will help you with these checks).
- Complete training to prepare you to become an authorised carer.
- Undertake thorough assessments (we will help you with this).

// There are probably other things these people could have been doing, instead of looking after me. But they did, and I don't know where I would be now if they hadn't.

Stephen, foster child

What do foster carers do?

Foster carers care for children and young people in their home.

They can make a real difference to a vulnerable child – providing stability, support and care.

But foster carers do more than simply provide shelter and food for a child or young person. They also support each child's emotional needs.

As a foster carer, these are some of the ways you will help the child or young person in your care:

- Create feelings of safety and connectedness for the child or young person, so that they may start to heal and attach.
- Help them keep in touch with their birth parents, siblings and other significant people, usually through regular, planned meetings.
- Help them maintain their regular routine as much as possible. This may involve taking them to and from school, taking them to regular activities (such as sports practices and games, ballet or music lessons), picking them up from school when they're sick, and taking them to appointments (for example, with a doctor or counsellor).
- Help them retain a connection with their culture.

Importantly, foster carers work as part of team, including the child's parents and other family members, the MacKillop caseworker, the child protection worker and any other health professionals. Together, the 'care team' work to create a safe and nurturing environment that suits the child's needs and circumstances.



The MacKillop approach

Mackillop Family Services understands the important role foster carers play in supporting vulnerable children, young people and their families. We are committed to supporting you, so you can provide the best care possible.


We use a therapeutic care model. You and your foster child are supported by a specialist team that helps you understand your foster child and respond appropriately to their needs.


Sanctuary model

The Sanctuary model is the foundation for how we work with clients, carers and each other. Sanctuary focuses on safety and understanding how past trauma can affect someone's behaviour. It gives carers tools and strategies that are proven to address the effects of adversity, loss and change.

Working within this trauma-informed framework, carers and the children they care for are supported by staff who can recognise and effectively respond to the effects of past trauma.

As a carer, this framework helps you to understand how trauma affects the children and young people in your care. But it also helps you understand how it affects you and your support teams.



 MacKillop Family Services tries to place children and young people with carers who can help them keep their cultural identity and connections.

The MacKillop approach

Additional support

Training and support does not end once you're approved to be a carer. All MacKillop foster carers have access to:

- trauma-informed training (including trauma theory, attachment theory and the Sanctuary model)
- tailored and ongoing support from a designated case worker, including regular telephone calls and home visits
- a team of specialist professionals
- comprehensive support from an after-hours support program
- respite care if you need a break
- links to peer support networks of MacKillop foster carers in your area
- regular updates about help and support.


Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster carers

We value placements with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, that can create and maintain positive cultural connections for these children while they are away from their families.

We welcome Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster carers to work with us.

However, if you are interested in caring specifically for Aboriginal children and young people, or you would like to work specifically with an Aboriginal organisation, we encourage you to contact one of our Aboriginal partner organisations.

Our website has more information about Aboriginal foster care agencies:

 www.mackillop.org.au/aboriginal-foster-care-agencies




Things to consider before you decide

Foster care is an emotional and rewarding journey, but it also has challenges. It's important that you consider the following issues before you decide to become a foster carer.

Foster care involves your whole family

It is important for you to think carefully about your family's needs, and talk with them about how they feel about becoming a foster family.

 You can't just force a kid to fit in, because it just won't happen. It is hard to move into a new home with a new family. You can't just blend in [because] a lot of things change like rules, religion and a way of life that is often very different to your own family's.

Nicole, foster child

Many foster children have complex behaviours and needs

A child or young person in foster care may display challenging behaviour. They may also find it difficult to trust, talk about their emotions, feel like they belong or feel safe. Managing challenging behaviours can be difficult at times but we will help you with training and support.


Your foster child will have ongoing contact with their family

Children and young people in foster care need to maintain contact with their birth families when possible. In fact, the most important factor influencing outcomes for children in foster care is the quality and amount of contact they have with their birth parents.

As a foster carer, part of your role will be helping to maintain the child's significant relationships. Maintaining these lines of contact may be quite difficult or confronting for you.

Your foster child may return to their family

When possible, children and young people in foster care are reunited with their birth family. As a foster carer, you may feel a sense of loss when a child or young person returns to their birth family. This is completely normal, and it's important to recognise how this may affect you and your family.

 It has not always been easy to let go. There have been many smiles and tears, but in the end, it has all been worth it – to know that you have made a difference in the life of one child.

Olivia, foster carer

Things to consider before you decide

Being a foster carer can be emotionally challenging

Parenting can be challenging for every parent, but many foster carers also face feelings of isolation and frustration. For example, you may:

- not know who to talk to about your foster child's complex needs or if a crisis arises
- have mixed feelings about the birth parents of your foster child
- feel emotionally attached to your foster child and not know how to deal with these feelings – or not know how to deal with the child's feelings towards you, which may be mixed
- feel frustrated dealing with social and government agencies.

All these emotions are completely normal, and we will work through these with you during your foster care journey.

Being a foster carer can have financial challenges

Foster carers are paid a care allowance, which is a fortnightly contribution towards the everyday costs of caring for a child or a young person. The level of the allowance depends on the age of the child or young person.

The care allowance isn't a payment for being a foster carer. Rather, it covers items such as food, clothing, household provisions, gifts, pocket money and entertainment. It isn't considered income so you're not taxed on it and it won't affect your eligibility for Australian Government allowances or bank loans.

Despite the care allowance, you may still find the costs of providing care difficult, especially for a child with special needs. It's important you consider these financial costs before becoming a foster carer, particularly if the costs will affect your own life or retirement plans.



// Many adolescents have come from a diverse range of situations and family settings. ... Have a thought for the teen who has landed through no fault of their own into a carer's home. And don't forget, we were all teenagers once too.

Sally, foster carer

Taking the next step

Along with the reward of helping create a brighter future for some of our most vulnerable children and young people, foster carers face challenges. Our training and assessment process equips you for these challenges, and usually can take up to 6 months.

Our training, assessment and support is based on a therapeutic care model so you can provide the best care for a child or young person.

Step 1: Make an enquiry

Making an enquiry is the first step towards becoming a MacKillop foster carer. You will have completed our **online enquiry form** or called us on **1300 791 677**.

Step 2: Chat over the phone

During our first conversation, we explain the foster care system and how you can become part of it. If you would like to find out more after reading this foster care booklet, we'll arrange a time to come to your house to talk in person.

Step 3: Information exchange

Our home visit is your second opportunity to ask us about foster care, particularly about anything from this Welcome to Foster Care information pack. And it's also our chance to get to know you, to see if you can provide suitable care for a child. If you're keen to move to the next step and we think you are suitable, we go through the mandatory application forms (such as Police and Working With Children Checks), and invite you to training.



Step 4: Attend training

Our qualified workers facilitate the 'Shared Stories, Shared Lives' foster care training, which is the statewide framework in Victoria and New South Wales. In Western Australia, the Department for Child Protection and Family Support runs Foster Care Preparation Training.

The training modules provide up-to-date information about fostering children. You will also receive a comprehensive range of resources, to support you throughout your foster care journey. We run training regularly.

Step 5: Participate in interviews

Once you've finished the training, we meet with you approximately four times for assessment interviews. In the interviews, we'll discuss your life, how MacKillop can best support you as a foster carer, how you would respond in certain situations and the types of foster care you are most interested in.

Step 6: Become a foster carer

After completing the training and assessment process, a panel of MacKillop staff and external stakeholders/partners may approve you as a foster carer. Once you are approved, we match you with a child and you will receive ongoing training and support.



For more information

Find out more by visiting our website at:

mackillop.org.au/fostercare

Or by calling us on:

1300 791 677



Contact us

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MacKillop Family Services is committed to hearing the voices and concerns of the people we work with. If you have feedback or a complaint about our services, please make contact via (03) 9699 9177 or the 'Contact Us' section of our website.

mackillop.org.au



MacKillop Family Services acknowledges the Traditional Custodians and their Elders in each of the Communities where we work.

MacKillop Family Services was founded by the Sisters of Mercy, Christian Brothers and Sisters of St Joseph.

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