



CHALLENGE
Community Services

Foster Care

Changing a child's life through foster care



YOU ARE STRONG. YOU ARE BRAVE. YOU ARE READY.

About Challenge Foster Care

Challenge Foster Care has a focus on the human connection, on relationships and on people. To Challenge staff, our carers are integral to a child's care team; supporting a sense of genuine partnership and belonging. Challenge connects carers to a range of community supports and seeks authentic participation in decisions relating to the care needs of children.

We acknowledge the work of a foster carer is unique. People who choose to support children and young people in foster care are special individuals who deserve special attention.

We accept single people, married and de facto couples, same sex couples and people from all backgrounds.

Types of foster care

Guardianship

The court grants you guardianship for a child or young person you already know (such as a family member or significant other). You will be responsible for making parental decisions relating to that child or young person without the assistance of a foster care agency.

Foster to Adopt

An individual, couple, or family adopts a child or young person who is in their care. As the adoptive parents, you will have the legal rights and responsibility of that child or young person while supporting them to stay connected with their birth family.

Long-term Care

Long-term care. A child or young person remains part of your family with ongoing support from Challenge Community Services.

Intensive Therapeutic Care (ITC) step-down care

You care for a child or young person when they are transitioning from an ITC service into a foster placement. ITC is a government-funded program that helps children and young people recover from trauma.

Respite

You provide regular time-limited care to a child or young person, such as on weekends or during school holidays.

Crisis Care

A child or young person is placed with you within hours of being referred to Challenge Community Services.

Short-term care and restoration

A child or young person is placed with you for a short period. This can be anywhere from several months to two years. The child or young person may be restored to their family, transitioned into guardianship care, adopted, or transitioned to a long-term foster care arrangement

How to become a foster carer

Step 1. Enquire

Contact us to find out what's involved in fostering and what qualities we are looking for in foster carers to see if it's the right fit for you.

Step 2. Apply

Fill in the application form on our website or contact us and we can step you through your application.

Step 3. Home visit

After reviewing your application, one of our team members will visit your home to answer any questions you may have and assess your home to determine if it is suitable for fostering.

Step 4. Training

It is important to go into a foster care relationship prepared, therefore we provide both online and face to face training so you're ready for some of the challenges you may face as a foster carer.

Step 5. Home interview & assessment

One of our team members will then visit your home to assess your application, motivations for caring, the type of support you'll need as well as the age and needs of children who would suit you and your family.

Step 6. Approval

If your application is approved, we will work towards identifying a child or young person suitable to be placed in your care. Throughout your journey, you will be provided with ongoing training and support.



We support you, while you support them

To help prepare you for your role as a foster carer, we provide ongoing training and 24-hour support. Your training will cover areas such as:

- Caring for children and young people
- Caring for a child or young person with autistic spectrum disorder and ADHD
- Trauma informed care
- Identifying and managing stress
- Fostering healthy relationships with birth families
- The importance of family time for a child or young person in care
- Understanding the impact of trauma on brain development and attachment

Once you become an authorised foster carer for Challenge Foster Care, you will become a part of our team dedicated to supporting the children and young people in your care. As part of the Challenge team, you will take part in planning and decision making for the child or young person in your care. You will also receive a foster carer allowance from Challenge Foster Care and may be eligible for additional supports.

Myths about foster care

Myth 1: We are a same-sex couple, so I don't think we'll be accepted as foster carers.

Busted!

We welcome foster carers independent of their sexual orientation. If you can provide a safe and nurturing environment for a child or young person, you will be able to start your journey of becoming a foster carer.

Myth 2: I'm single. I would have to be in a relationship or married to become a foster carer.

Busted!

Families come in all shapes and sizes, and Challenge welcomes all who are interested in becoming a carer. Whether you are single, de facto or married, the important part is that you can provide a safe and nurturing home for a child in need.

Myth 3: All children in foster care have experienced abuse.

Busted!

Not all children are placed in foster care because of abuse. Some parents are unwell, some have had severe financial difficulties, and some parent find themselves in a position where they cannot adequately provide the care needed for their children.

There's a variety of reasons why children are in the foster care system, and it's important to understand this in relation to how children express themselves through their interactions and emotions.

If an emergency were to arise during your time as a carer, you can access our after-hours support number.

Myth 4: I'm renting. I must own a home to become a foster carer.

Busted!

To become a foster carer you will need to have a spare bedroom in your house for a child or young person. A bedroom allows a child to feel they have an opportunity to rest, play, be creative and feel like they have somewhere to belong. It is a room that they can take ownership of and call their own.

Having your own children share the same bedroom with a foster child is generally not accepted, neither is having a house member sleep in another room, i.e. in the living room, to allow for a spare bedroom.

It doesn't matter if you own the home you are living in or if you are renting. As long as you have a spare bedroom and can provide a safe environment, home ownership is not essential.

Myth 5: My children won't like a foster child.

Busted!

Some people have concerns that having children enter their care will impact negatively on their biological family. The reality is that some of our biggest advocates are the children of foster carers who are vocal about how much they enjoy sharing their lives with other kids.

At Challenge, we assess the needs of each family and undertake placement matching to ensure your family and your foster child are supported through the transition. Your biological children and your foster child will learn from each other. They acquire interpersonal skills of consideration, sensitivity and understanding. This learning opportunity will be shared by their foster siblings as they navigate the experience together.



Opening their homes: giving children in need a future



When a newborn comes into the world dependent on methamphetamines, they need a very special kind of care. So, when baby Melissa* was referred to Challenge Community Services for out of home care, we contacted our lovely carers Grace* and Adam*..

With Grace and Adam's loving home care following the initial hospital treatment to reverse the effects of prenatal methamphetamine exposure (PME), Melissa made significant progress. But after a few months Grace and Adam knew that Melissa wasn't developing as she should be. Suspecting she may have brain injury as a result of the PME, the couple contacted Challenge Community Services who helped them get in touch with medical professionals who could help Melissa.

Not all children in care have been affected like Melissa, although many have experienced or witnessed traumatic events in their short lives. This makes the work of a foster carer unique. At a time of great need, foster carers provide a safe and loving haven. The foster carers become the most important people in the child or young person's life.

Helping children who need care is a team approach with each person sharing responsibility for the child's welfare. This includes the child's birth family and friends, the foster care agency, a 24/7 casework support, health practitioners, Communities and Justice (DCJ) and the child's school. All of these people and organisations work together to look after the best interests of the child or young person.

Deciding to become a foster carer might seem like a big step into the unknown. In many ways it is a leap of faith because the foster care journey is full of uncertainties. The uncertainty of taking on a new role, the uncertainty of when a child will be placed in your care, how old that child will be and how long they will stay with you.

While it's true that as a foster carer you may not be able to plan what will happen over the next year, or even over the next weeks, there is one constant. No matter how long a child is in your care, you will be making a positive difference to their life and even completely turn a child or young person's life around.

'Placing a child with the right carer is vitally important for both the child and the carers,' says Kayla Bevear, Carer Compliance Officer with Challenge Community Services. 'When we talk to prospective foster carers, it's a not a test, we're not trying to catch them out. Not all families are suitable for every child, so our focus is always on finding the right match. For example, there might be a special reason why we think a child would thrive better in a single parent household or a larger family with children close in age.'



The goal is always to restore the child to their family of origin provided it is safe to do so within 2 years of the child being placed in out-of-home care. As a foster carer this may mean accepting that the child or young person may return to their family of birth.

Many children and young people needing out-of-home care have never experienced a safe home environment or consistent care. 'Giving the children a safe and secure place to stay is always the priority – it's all about the children and what they need,' confirms Kayla. 'But as a foster carer it's perfectly okay to say "no" if you don't feel you can care for a particular child, or you have been through the process and don't feel you're ready yet. During the application process prospective carers attend training in helping children who have experienced trauma. After a child is placed with a family, the foster carers also have ongoing support from a dedicated case worker.'

“No matter how long a child is in your care you will be making a positive difference to their life.”

Quietly dedicating themselves to nurturing children in need, foster carers like Grace and Adam, and many other people with a lot of love to give, are making a real difference to the lives of children and young people in care.

*Names changed and models used to protect privacy

Fostering as a single parent: Jason's story

Being a single, gay man, Jason knew his dream of becoming a dad wasn't going to be easy. Then at age 34 he took a leap of faith and began the rigorous assessment process to become a foster carer. Once approved, he didn't have to wait long.

Weekends to every day of the week

But it didn't all happen at once. Siblings Robert and Mikaela came to Jason for short periods in a respite care arrangement over eight months before entering full-time care with him in December last year. For Mikaela, who had experienced multiple placements and suffered from anxiety, it was critical to find a stable arrangement quickly.

'The respite care proved to be an important transition time for everyone,' says Jason. 'The children gradually began to develop trust in me, which really helped with the transition.'

Calming right down

'When the Robert and Mikaela first came to me full-time, the relationship between Mikaela and Robert was pretty explosive' says Jason. 'Mikaela had a desperate need for affection from Robert, but Robert is a different personality. He likes his own space and would push Mikaela away when she was too much in his face. This would make her angry and the situation would spiral out of control from there.'

By talking to each child separately, Jason was able to show Robert how to take deep breaths while counting to 5 and thinking about whether it was really worth becoming upset about the situation. Mikaela would need a different strategy as she found it difficult to listen calmly and tended talk over the top of Jason. 'With Mikaela, it was a case of giving her something to read or offering a calming activity to manage her emotions' explains Jason.



Loving every minute

Jason knew becoming a foster carer would involve challenges but found the online training he completed during the foster care assessment process, along with a personal behaviour management plan for each child, very helpful.

The biggest challenges for Jason have been the kind of things most working parents have to deal with, like arranging after school activities and keeping both children occupied at the same time when they wanted different things.

“As a foster carer, my life has so much more meaning and I love every minute of it. I wouldn't change a thing.”

'I have family close by who help out and my employer is also very supportive,' says Jason. 'I admit that sometimes it has felt as if I were getting nowhere. The Challenge Community Services caseworker has been fantastic and always there when I needed her. Now that the children are both more settled, I feel as though we have turned a major corner.'

For any single person or couple wanting to care for a child, Jason urges them to 'just do it'. 'Don't let other people who don't understand talk you out of it,' Jason confirms. 'It can feel like an enormous step, but it's an extraordinary feeling to give a child in need a loving, safe and stable home. As a foster carer, my life has so much more meaning and I love every minute of it. I wouldn't change a thing.'



Your partner in care: the role of the Challenge case worker

As much as foster carers love the children in their care and find the experience hugely rewarding, being a foster carer can be frustrating, exhausting or even overwhelming at times. For many foster carers, their case worker becomes a lifeline – on a practical as well as an emotional level.

Challenge Community Services case workers, Natalie Hufnagl and Melissa Day talk about how they help children in need and support the extraordinary families who care for these vulnerable children.

What is a case worker?

Case workers are qualified professionals who work with agencies and foster carers to ensure the protection of children in out-of-home care. With university or TAFE qualifications in social work, social science, welfare or a related discipline like psychology, case workers conduct risk assessments, develop case plans and provide practical and emotional support to foster carers.

‘It’s a challenging role and no two days are the same,’ says Challenge Community Services case worker Natalie. ‘We are a sounding board for carers when things get rough and bounce ideas around about strategies they can try. Sometimes carers just need to hear they’re doing a fantastic job, which is equally important. We also provide practical support where needed such as taking a child to their respite placement, attending meetings at the school or taking a child to a medical appointment.’

How often does the case worker visit the foster family?

It is a part of the Challenge policy, that case workers visit the foster family at least once each month. At Challenge Community Services, carers and children in care are also able to contact a case worker 24/7 in case of emergency. Case workers remain flexible and adapt to the different needs of children and their carers.

‘At Challenge, the Caseworkers are very hands-on,’ says Melissa. ‘Caseworkers are required to conduct monthly placement support visits. Depending on the child or young person’s needs the Caseworker may attend the home more frequently. The Caseworkers role is to support the child or young people and their foster families.’



What is a case plan?

Within 30 days of having a child or young person being placed in care, the case worker will work with the family to develop a personalised case plan which is current for 12 months. The case plan sets out how the foster family – with the help of their case worker – will support the child. This includes physical (including dental) and psychological health rights (including nutrition and exercise) as well as cultural considerations for culturally and linguistically diverse children and children identifying as Aboriginal. The plan, which is reviewed every 6 months, also looks at educational successes or the need for additional academic support.

Children over 7 are usually involved in the development of their own plan, and have the opportunity to tell the case worker one-on-one what they need and how they feel about their placement. Each child is also given a booklet that sets out their charter of rights. This is an important part of ensuring the success of a placement.

If you are thinking about fostering, or have just embarked on the foster care journey, we know that it can feel like a huge leap into the unknown. The training you’ll receive, the detailed case plan for each child in your care, and the support of your dedicated case worker are all designed to set up the placement up for success. Fostering is all about working as a team. Your case worker has your back – when the going gets tough there will always be someone to support you.





Want to know more?

If you have any further questions, or want more information, don't hesitate to contact us. We're here for you every step of the way.

Contact Challenge Community Services on
1800 084 954

or at [challengecommunity.org.au](https://www.challengecommunity.org.au)

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