

Anyone over the age of 21 years in good physical and emotional health can apply to become a foster carer. You can be:

- single, married, or in a defacto relationship
- renting, buying, or own your home
- working or not working
- from a diverse range of cultures with a diverse range of life experience
- had children, worked with children or have a strong interest in helping children and young people.

There is no such thing as the 'perfect' carer, but there are special characteristics or qualities that are suited to caring for children and young people in need.

People interested in becoming carers will need some of the following qualities to be in the best position to support children and young people no matter what type of behaviours or characteristics they have.

Flexible and adaptable: should be able to learn new things, experience new situations and be prepared to have days that don't always turned out as you had planned.

Tolerant and patient: should be able to take things one day at a time, and can work towards goals while appreciating it may take a long time to get there.

Understanding: should be able to put themselves in 'someone else's shoes' and appreciate how a child is feeling or better understand the reasons for their behaviour. Should be able to listen and talk to children.

Perseverance: should be able to 'hang in there' and appreciate that things often do take a while to change. Should also be able to try different approaches when things don't always work the first time around.

Some carers may have had experience looking after children, others not. Carers are people who can provide children and young people with the following:

- make children feel welcome and give them a sense of belonging in your home
- treat each child in the family as an individual, but at the same time treat them all as equals with no favouritism
- set age-appropriate boundaries, eg. establish 'house rules' and utilise appropriate (non-punitive) behaviour management techniques
- a strong sense of encouragement, lots of positive reinforcement even when things don't seem to be going well.

- time to involve children in activities that promote their learning, social, emotional development and wellbeing
- invest a lot of time and energy in a child or young person, but not always expect a lot in return
- maintain a child's sense of connectedness to their family and significant others, eg. allowing the child to telephone their family, maintain a family album, buy a special gift for a parent, supporting the child before and after access visits.
- actively support children to maintain cultural continuity, eg. celebrating cultural events, allowing the child to practice cultural beliefs in your home
- demonstrate affection and nurture relationships with children and young people, but have the capacity to 'let go' when it is time for the child to return home.

Carers as part of a Professional Team

Carers are a part of a professional team. Being part of the professional team requires people who can:

- share the care of a child or young person with other people, including a child's birth parents, extended family and professionals
- work co-operatively with others to reunify a child with their family wherever possible
- attend meetings to share ideas and provide feedback to a child's caseworker or other involved professionals. Sometimes take a child to planned appointments
- maintain confidentiality of any information provided to you about a child and their family.

To be an effective carer it is also important that you:

- take the time to care for yourself and look after your own needs. It is hard to invest the energy in caring for someone else when your own energy levels are low
- be aware of and responsive to the needs of other members of the family, as caring affects everyone in the whole family.