

# Long-Term Foster Care

We all share the responsibility for child safety

**LIFE  
WITHOUT  
BARRIERS**

## What is long-term foster care?

Although the aim of foster care is always for children to return home where safe to do so, for some children and young people, there is a need for longer-term care. Long-term foster care is where children or young people who cannot return to live with their families are placed in the care of a foster family for an extended period. This can be from 1 year to many, or even until a child reaches adulthood, with long-term carers needing to commit to taking on this type of care for as long as the child and their family need.

In many states, long-term carers are now supported to continue caring for young people beyond 18 as they transition into adulthood and independence.

## How does long-term care work?

So, what does long-term foster care look like?

Whilst in many cases long-term care looks very much like day-to-day parenting, some defining features make it a little different. Children requiring long-term care may feel struggles around why they cannot return home, the ongoing impacts of trauma on their development, and a longing to stay connected to their family and communities in whatever way they can.

Long-term carers are responsible for helping children understand their stories, stay connected to those important to them, and heal from their experiences while providing day-to-day care that every child needs.

There is no set age group of children needing long-term care, but there is an understanding that long-term carers must be ready to commit to the long haul. Kids needing longer-term care may be part of a sibling group, with the aim of keeping children together wherever possible.

## Why do children need long-term care?

Children and young people may need long-term foster care when courts determine that they are not able to return to their family home. In many jurisdictions, this is known as “long-term orders,” whereby an order is made for children’s parental responsibility to be held by the state until they reach adulthood. In the case where relative carers or members of a child’s extended community are not able to provide care for them, long-term foster carers may be called upon to provide the care they need.

Children needing long-term care come from all backgrounds, have all sorts of needs, and may come to care for various reasons. In many cases, they have complex family backgrounds that may have experienced generational care experiences or trauma. No matter the reason they have come to need foster care, when children are unable to live with their families, they will experience the impacts of grief and loss, which require gentle and consistent care.

## What children in long-term foster care need

Children in long-term care need what every other child needs: somewhere to call home, somewhere to feel safe, believed in and cherished. Children in care need connections to their roots, even when unable to live within their family of origin. Long-term carers need to be able to provide the same kind of love and care they would for their own, with a little extra to help overcome the early challenges they may have experienced. Whilst children’s individual needs vary, some general needs of children in long-term care are explored below.

### 1. Stable and loving environment

Children in long-term foster care need consistency and love. They may struggle with feelings of loss, abandonment, or grief, and carers must offer a stable, secure home where the child feels valued. Predictability and daily routines, along with a calm environment, can provide a space for children to feel safe again. Long-term carers need to understand the impact of felt safety and how to attune to children in promoting this. Chris and Sophiaan outline how they prepared for the commitment of caring in saying, “We knew how unsettling and changeable the lives of so many children in care are. We knew we would only take the leap once we were sure that any child who became a part of our family would be a welcome part of our family for as long as they needed to be, not as long as we could manage.”

## **2. Emotional and psychological support**

Many children in long-term care have experienced trauma or abuse. They may have difficulties with attachment, behaviour, and trusting others. Access to therapeutic services, including healing parenting approaches, will be needed to help children process their experiences. Patient and resilient carers are needed to help children and young people through these difficult times, where they may be more inclined to act out their pain than know how to talk about it.

## **3. Sense of belonging**

It's vital that children feel like they belong and are part of a family. This includes participating in family activities, holidays, and celebrations. This also means a sense of connection and belonging with their family and community, which remain lifelong links regardless of their time in care. Carers must be able and willing to support those connections in a healthy and positive way, whilst embracing the child as a part of the caring family. Narelle explains why this is so important, saying "It's incredibly important for the children to understand their story and make sense of their world. As carers, it's been a complex journey to navigate, putting together different pieces of information and trying to make the right decisions for the children."

## **4. Educational support**

Children in long-term care may have gaps in their education due to instability in their earlier years. Carers need to advocate for the child's educational needs, ensure they attend school regularly, and work closely with teachers to support their learning and development. Children who have experienced abuse or neglect may have a younger developmental age than their chronological age and need opportunities to experience things that may be expected of younger children at times.

## **5. Health and wellbeing**

Regular medical checkups and maintaining a healthy lifestyle are crucial. Children in care may have experienced neglect or health issues in the past, so it's essential to monitor their physical, mental, and emotional health closely. This can include catching up on vital medical care like immunisation schedules, hearing and sight, and attending to individual medical needs.

## **6. Cultural and identity considerations**

It's essential to support children in understanding and maintaining their cultural identity. This may include maintaining links with a child's family and their cultural or religious background and ensuring they can connect with others from similar communities. Wherever possible, children should be matched with carers who understand and live within their communities, cultural and otherwise. However, the most important is the willingness to learn and embrace every element of a child's identity in whatever way you can.

## **7. Opportunities to succeed**

All children do well when they are allowed to do so. Long-term foster carers are important in helping children explore their strengths and interests, allowing them to succeed at something they love. This isn't always easy, but no great success comes without effort. Supporting a child to be persistent and determined, growing bit by bit, day by day, is one of the most rewarding parts of long-term caring. Sarah talks about how succeeding in the small things reminds her of why she cares, saying, "I would say the biggest thing that brings me joy is watching kids overcome issues that have been stopping them from succeeding".

## **8. Connection to family and community**

All children need to know their roots to grow and thrive in life. To have a strong sense of self, children and young people in care need to be supported by their long-term carers to maintain the connections with their family, community and those important to them. These connections allow children to learn about their stories, where they are from, and understand who they are. This sets young people up with the capacity to form their identity and pathway into adulthood. This might be a daunting task for some people considering caring, but our care teams will be there along the way to help you out.

## **9. Unconditional support and understanding**

The early experiences children in care have faced may make it challenging for them to speak out about how they feel and process the trauma they may have encountered. These children need carers who can give them unconditional support and understanding even through the toughest of days, so they can see the potential in themselves and build the skills of self-regulation alongside a supportive caregiver. Long-term carers Chris and Paul sum it up by saying, "We foster with love, acceptance and taking the lead from the child, learning what their needs are. We are here to help them understand themselves as well as others".

## Key things to consider as a potential long-term carer

Becoming a long-term foster carer can be a very rewarding decision, but it is one that requires much thought and consideration. The following are important factors to consider when deciding if now is the right time for you and your household.

### 1. Commitment and longevity

Long-term foster care can last for many years, sometimes until the child reaches adulthood. As a carer, you need to be prepared for a long-term commitment, which may include ongoing emotional support and involvement in the child's life. Long-term carers need to approach fostering with the expectation that there will be difficulties at times that need perseverance and resilience, just as you would have in parenting. Children in care need someone to believe in them and stand by them even when the going gets tough.

### 2. Emotional readiness

Children in long-term care often have complex emotional needs due to past trauma. Carers must be prepared to provide a stable, nurturing environment while navigating pain-based behaviours, such as learning to trust and build relationships, as well as regulating their own emotions. It's important that people considering becoming long-term carers are not experiencing any emotional strain, major changes in their lives, or unresolved grief and loss, so that they can be prepared to devote their emotional energy to supporting others.

### 3. Resilience and patience

Children in care may have experienced significant trauma and may not initially trust adults or caregivers. Patience and resilience are vital qualities to help them heal and grow in a stable home environment. It's important that carers have the awareness not to take things personally and be able to see the need behind the behaviour. Some pain-based behaviours may be triggering for carers who have had difficult experiences themselves, so it's important to ensure these are something you have worked through to ensure your own wellbeing is not impacted.

### 4. Financial stability

In Australia, there is financial assistance available for carers. However, it is important to understand the financial support and resources available in your state or territory. For long-term carers, there may be access to government financial supports dependent on their situation, but it's important to consider the potential impact of caring, such as needing to take time off work at short notice if a child experiences difficulties with things such as health or schooling.

## **5. Strong support networks**

Foster carers are provided with ongoing support, which can vary by state or territory. This might include training around therapeutic caring, respite care, and connections to foster carer networks. Ongoing professional support is crucial to address the needs of both carers and children, as is a commitment to engage in ongoing learning about caring and the specific needs of children you care for. At Life Without Barriers, your care team will offer regular support and coaching, whilst our National After-Hours service is available outside of hours for difficult situations and emergencies that might arise. In addition to this, it is critical that those considering caring have a strong network of personal support they can lean on for practical and emotional support throughout caring.

## **6. Impact on your family**

Long-term fostering can affect your entire household, through both rewarding moments and those that challenge. You need to take time to consider how fostering will impact your relationships, work, and other children in the home. It's essential that all family members are supportive and ready for the role, which means having open and realistic conversations about what fostering might mean for all of you. We have some handy resources available for chatting with family about fostering and what to think about from a practical perspective. If now turns out not to be the right time for your household, we offer a nurturing program for you to learn more about caring until the time is right.

## **7. Willingness to connect with family**

While embracing a child as part of your family is a huge part of long-term caring, finding ways to celebrate and connect with a child's family in whatever way is safe, healthy, and possible is also a part of long-term caring. Children have lifelong connections to their family and communities and do better when these are supported in a natural and informal way whenever safe to do so. It may be natural to feel a little apprehensive or out of your depth in supporting family relationships in foster care. However, it's important that carers are open to developing relationships with a child's family.

## **8. Be a team player**

Long-term carers will need to attend meetings, appointments and reviews to determine the child's ongoing care needs. Foster carers will also need to manage aspects like health, education, and other matters related to the child, alongside their care team. Long term carers will need to be great team players that are able to take on board the advice and coaching of care team members, whilst advocating for the needs of children the care for. Carers need to be willing to welcome agency staff into their home on a regular basis.

## **9. Be open to learning**

The best long-term carers know that learning and adapting never ends, with opportunities to build wisdom in everyday moments. Learning as a long-term carer can take many forms, but the most important part is that you are open to taking learnings from whatever comes your way. Care Teams and support staff are here to coach and support you to understand the needs of children in your care and adapt your home environment to help them feel safe and secure. More structured learning opportunities may come your way through invites to in person training, online learning or external opportunities. Most importantly though, everyday life as a carer will provide you moments in which you can learn and grow.

## **10. Look after yourself**

In any caring role, devoting time to caring for oneself is important in maintaining good health and well-being. Long-term care is immensely rewarding, but it does not come without challenges, as with any caregiving role. Long-term carers benefit from building in ways to look after their own physical and mental health in what can be a fast-paced and demanding role.

## **11. Realistic expectations of long-term care**

Understanding the realities of fostering can help long-term carers make sense of when big changes happen, or things get tough. Helping children heal and grow is often a key motivator for people who become foster carers. However, growth can be slow going and might look different than anticipated. Colin and Andrea explain “it does take a little while to see the rewards, there’s no textbook, and it’s a hell of a learning curve, but it really is such a rewarding experience.”

Whilst it is important that long-term carers have a willingness to make an indefinite commitment to children, there is always the possibility that families will make the changes needed to become a safe space and that children may return home from long-term care. Additionally, family members may come forward and express a desire to care for themselves. It’s important to come into long-term care being open to forming strong and healthy attachments to children and remaining aware that nothing is guaranteed to be forever, and there may be a time to say goodbye. When reunification becomes a possibility for children in care, it’s vital their carers are there to support the process wholeheartedly.



## Are you ready?

Long-term foster care can be both a rewarding and challenging experience. It requires a strong commitment to the child's emotional, physical, and psychological well-being. Carers must be patient, understanding, and prepared for a long-term relationship with the child and their family. By providing a loving, stable environment, foster carers can make a significant positive impact on a child's life, giving them the opportunity to thrive and build a better future.

If you'd like to chat more about whether long term fostering is something you can commit to, get in touch:

**Phone: 1300 592 227**

**Email: [carers@lwb.org.au](mailto:carers@lwb.org.au)**

# LIFE WITHOUT BARRIERS



LWBAustralia



Life Without Barriers



Life Without Barriers



Life Without Barriers

[lwb.org.au](http://lwb.org.au)