

What is short-term foster care?

Short-term fostering is a type of foster care where children are cared for by a foster family for a limited period, ranging from a few days to several months, while decisions are made about their long-term care. Short-term fostering aims to provide children a safe and stable environment during a transitional period, whether they are waiting to return to their family or kinship carers, move to a long-term foster placement, or look at other permanency options.

Key features of short-term fostering

There is often uncertainty about short-term fostering, but there are common factors that we can consider.

- **Temporary**

The duration of short-term fostering can vary widely, but it is typically for a few weeks to a few months. In some cases, it can last up to two years, depending on the child's circumstances and the time it takes to make more permanent care arrangements. [Jenna](#) shares her experience of embracing this important yet temporary role, saying, "Your perception of foster care changes when you know this is the role that you are playing in their long life. And once you can accept where your role starts and ends, you know you've had an impact."

- **Purpose of care**

Short-term fostering is used when there is uncertainty about the child's future. The child may be in care while child protection authorities assess the possibility of reunification with their family, consider other family members for kinship care, or explore permanency or long-term fostering options. Short-term carers must be willing and able to support the lifelong connections children have. [Minna and Zubin](#), short-term carers, share, "Ultimately, the goal for every foster carer should be to give children the best of care before they can hopefully be happily reunited with their family."

- **Flexibility and adaptability**

Foster carers who provide short-term care must be adaptable and able to manage changes, as children might come and go with short notice. They need to provide emotional stability to children during what can be a confusing or unsettling time for them. Saying goodbye can be tricky, so resilience is a characteristic short-term carers must have in spades.

- **Variety of circumstances**

Children placed in short-term fostering may be dealing with a range of situations, including family breakdowns, parental illness, or court proceedings that determine their future care arrangements. They may have many questions around why they are in care and may even blame themselves in part for being separated from their families. Short-term carers must be able to provide for various needs during their time with children, which may not always be immediately known.

- **Support during transition**

Foster carers play a crucial role in helping children through a period of uncertainty. They offer emotional and practical support while deciding on a permanent solution for the child's care. Having a good understanding of the care system can help short-term carers provide stability and reduce their feelings of uncertainty when providing care.

Why children need short-term care

The reasons children need short-term care are varied, but some common reasons are explored below.

- **Assessment and investigation**

Short-term fostering is often needed when children first come into care, and the courts require time to assess a child's home situation. This can include investigations into neglect, abuse, or other circumstances that require temporary removal from the family home.

- **Parental crisis**

A child may need short-term care if their parents are temporarily unable to care for them due to health issues, incarceration, or other personal crises. Once the situation is resolved, the child may be able to return home.

- **Transition between care arrangements**

Short-term foster care can serve as a bridge between a child's removal from their family and their next care arrangement, whether that's a permanent foster home, being cared for by kinship carers, or reunification with their family. This can also be the case when a foster care arrangement ends and the need to find another more permanent arrangement.

Characteristics of short-term foster carers

Short-term foster carers play an important role in establishing consistent routines and stability for children, whilst preparing for and supporting them through changes as they approach. Short-term carers should:

- **Provide stability and routine**

Short-term foster carers ensure children have a stable, caring environment during transition. This includes helping them adjust to their new surroundings, attending school, and maintaining routines as much as possible. A calm home and predictable routine can help children feel grounded during what may be a very confusing time. [Angela](#) shares how they prepare their home for children coming to stay, saying, "We make sure that everything's clean and quiet and that they've got all the things they could need".

- **Emotional support**

Foster carers provide emotional support to children who may feel anxious or confused about their future. They help children process their feelings and provide reassurance during uncertain times. Warm, open and supportive care is critical in short-term care, where children undergo rapid, destabilising transitions and need help to feel safe.

- **Teamwork**

Short-term foster carers often work closely with social workers, attending meetings and providing feedback on the child's progress. They help contribute to the assessment process that informs the child's long-term care plan. Great short-term carers are fabulous communicators who ensure that care teams and children are always informed.

- **Flexibility**

Carers in short-term fostering need to be flexible, as the length of the care arrangement and the child's next steps may change based on the circumstances. Things may change suddenly or unexpectedly if family options or long-term arrangements are identified, meaning short term carers need to be prepared for sudden shifts.

- **Helping children return home**

In many cases, short-term care is provided whilst children's families get the support they need for home to be a safe place again. Short-term carers have an important role in supporting restoration where it is deemed safe, including the formation of supportive and open relationships with family to make the transition a positive experience for the children they care for. Learn from [Terrie](#) about her experience as a short-term carer helping children return home. She says, "If the circumstances are right, restoration is the primary purpose of why I'm doing this – to help get these children back home where they belong".

Some things to consider:

Short-term fostering offers many things to children who enter the care system. Short-term carers are important people who help children feel safe and secure during periods of change and upheaval in their lives. This role, whilst rewarding, doesn't come without challenges.

Uncertainty: One of the main challenges is the uncertainty of how long a child will stay or what their future holds. Foster carers must be emotionally prepared to say goodbye to the child when the placement ends and help the child cope with these transitions.

Attachment and separation: Building a bond with a child and then having to part ways when the arrangement ends can be difficult for the carer and the child. Children may feel unsettled by the temporary nature of care, and carers must manage the emotions around separation.

Complex needs: Some children in short-term fostering come from challenging backgrounds where they are impacted by trauma, and they may have behavioural, emotional, or developmental needs that require additional support and patience. Understanding the roots of pain-based behaviour is critical in helping short-term carers cope.

Caring with unclear outcomes: Foster carers must be able to work within a system where the outcome for the child is not always immediately apparent, and decisions about the child's future may take time. As part of a care team, you will feed back important information, including the child's voice, that helps set a pathway forward.

Building connections: With many children in short-term care returning home when it's safe to do so, short-term carers have the important role of building natural, supportive connections with a child's family and significant others. Helping children maintain these important relationships can be immensely rewarding for carers.

Immediate care: Short-term fostering provides children with immediate care when they are removed from their family home, ensuring they are safe, supported, and have their basic needs met. Preparing for children to arrive on short notice is important for short-term carers.

Time to plan for the future: Short-term care allows agencies, courts, and families the time to assess the best long-term option for the child's care without rushing decisions, ensuring that the child's best interests are prioritised.

Emotional and physical stability: During times of uncertainty, short-term foster carers can offer the child a sense of routine, stability, and care, which helps mitigate the emotional effects of being in care. These times of settling allow building lasting connections that may continue even after children return home.

Support for short-term foster carers

Whilst short-term carers support the needs of children in their care, they are provided with support from Life Without Barriers to fulfil this critical role.

Training: Carers are provided with training to help them understand the unique challenges of short-term fostering and how to meet the emotional and practical needs of children in transition. Building skills and knowledge around managing change for children who have had a tricky start helps prepare carers for the ups and downs and the inevitable goodbyes.

Ongoing support: Carers receive regular visits from their care team and have access to resources and support groups to help them navigate the challenges of fostering. Life Without Barriers offers a variety of support from both professionals and peers to help carers navigate the day-to-day.

Financial assistance: Short-term carers receive financial allowances to cover the costs of caring for the child. Depending on your circumstances and the length of time a child stays with you, additional federal government family assistance may be available. We will assist short-term carers in accessing services and financial support so that children can participate in various activities and ensure their health and educational needs are also met.

Are you ready?

Short-term care plays a vital role in providing children with stability and care during uncertain periods in their lives. It requires flexible, compassionate carers who can offer a nurturing environment, even when the duration of care is unknown. By providing short-term support, carers help children transition smoothly to the next stage of their lives, whether reunification with their family, other types of permanency, or long-term care.

If you think short-term care sounds like a commitment you are ready to make, call us to chat more about how you can get started.

Phone: 1300 592 227

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