

What is the perfect placement?



The perfect placement

Participants at eight FCAV carer development sessions were asked to describe their perspective on the perfect processes and components for placing children in foster care. They were advised to be creative and consider that anything is possible.

There were five carer and care team FCAV development sessions held in 2012/13 and three to date in 2013/14. These sessions have been facilitated by Bryan Jeffery.

Carer development sessions were held in the following areas with attendance as listed:

Area	Number of carers in attendance	Number of others in attendance
Warrnambool	18	13
Morwell	45	19
Ballarat	27	11
Wangaratta	21	19
Mildura	27	29
Geelong	21	15
Horsham	22	30
Bendigo	15	40
TOTAL	196	176

*Others = agency staff and managers, sometimes education staff.

When asked to brainstorm and describe the perfect process of a child coming into their care attendees talked about strengthening foster care by improving support to carers and promoting foster care as a positive and valuable contribution to the community.

They called for **agencies** to be resourced appropriately to offer strong and sustainable support to carers. This would include regular care team meetings, consistent contact from workers and consideration of carers emotional needs. Additionally, shortage of agency staff was attributed to workers being unable to spend the necessary time with carers and foster children, new staff being unprepared for their roles and too many different case workers being involved with each placement.

Carers believe they need ongoing training and an active role within the care team. They want to know what has happened at access visits to ensure they can support young people appropriately and have their voice heard when decisions are made about kids in their care. Carers believe they can perform better with more support – this should include access to emotional assistance to help manage stress, cope with placements ending and understand and manage the behaviour of foster children.

* The following comments have been made by Victorian foster carers and are not necessarily the views of the FCAV

Pre-placement

- Ensure carers and their agency workers have a robust relationship so important issues can be raised to improve the foster care experience.
- Have agencies assess the needs of carer households to ensure placements are appropriate.
- Provide carers with adequate notice of the placement so they can prepare the room and basic provisions.
- Deliver referral information and paperwork before or at least with the child so there is time to read before their arrival (eg: life story, medical history, health issues, medication, Allergies and phobia's be highlighted). Referral information needs to be comprehensive, complete, open and honest. Carers value honesty – not sugar-coating of behavioural issues of the foster child.
- Send information about the child in advance so the foster family they can prepare for the placement
- Send emergency clothes with the child (eg: nappies, shoes, PJs), especially when the carer is a distance from shops.
- Provide initial lump sum or gift card at the time of placement to purchase essentials for the child.
- Provide immediate funds or provide establishment requirements as a placement is made – eg: bassinette, car seat, nappies, runners, school uniform etc.
- If the child has their things in a garbage bag, transfer into a backpack/bag before arriving at placement.
- Ensure that the child has some of their own clothes/toys with them.
- Offer medical attention prior to placement.
- Implement a system so the 'arrival/ info' pack is provided to each child at the start of a placement containing info about foster family, occupation, hobbies, names & photos of each f/c family member, occupation, photo of outside of house, pet etc.

Transitions

- Make sure that someone familiar to the child is present and involved with the first introduction and placement move. This could include family or previous carers.
- Introduce the child to carers prior to placement being made. This would ideally occur in a neutral place like a park. Introduction should be gradual so the child to meet the new foster family before the placement starts to get used to the idea of going to a new family.
- Creatively use the arrival/ info pack (possibly on an web-based application) so that children can be view it prior to transiting to the placement.
- Keep the child in the same school, sports activities, cultural zone to maintain continuity.
- Provide access visit to pets and people from previous placements to maintain relationships and minimise grief during transitions.
- Make sure that children arrive to a prepared, relaxed, welcoming, therapeutic home.

Placement

- Tell children in an age-appropriate way why they are not at home with their parents.
- Ensure the biological parents and worker are present at new placements and deliver message to the child that it's ok; "these people will look after you for a little while".
- Give carers the equivalent of one week's wages at the beginning of each placement to offset time off from work. Carers could also be offered funding to take the child away for a few days to help them get to know each other.
- Make sure the child arrives when all members of the carer household are home.
- Ensure that the child has some personal belongings like photos, toys etc from home or their previous placement.
- Drop the child off an hour before a casual meal with food served one of their favourites. Discussion should occur regarding least favourite foods ahead of time so they are considered when serving meals.
- Place siblings together.

- Do everything to offer continuity of people in the children's life – this includes agency workers, teachers, sport coaches, doctors etc.
- Establish a 'half-way house' for emergency placements (resi-type placement) to minimise the number of foster households before the child finds a permanent placement.
- Leave the child in their home and remove the parent/s causing the issue – that way they stay in their neighbourhood, their friends, their school.
- Place foster children with a family from same cultural background.
- Allow respite with family friend.
- Provide foster children with a personal counsellor and phone number to contact them outside 9am to 5pm business hours
- Provide computers to each carer household, along with basic training.

Ongoing placement maintenance

- Respect carers for their knowledge and expertise.
- Regard foster care as a profession and carers as a core member of the care team. This would require carers to be involved in care team meetings/placement plans/case planning.
- Establish male mentor program for children that have few males in their life.
- Engage community mentors to introduce older kids to theatre, football and other activities and lifestyle options.
- Set up a system (database) so foster carers can list issues as they occur. It could be used by the agency and carers as a mechanism for delivering updates and the child's previous history (rather than carers getting information over the phone or as a note on the back of an envelope).
- Introduce carers to parent/s and support the relationship between child and parent in a safe way.
- Provide services or funds for services to support placements as soon as issues are identified. This should include therapeutic support, counselling, educational assessment etc.
- Educate all children through schools to understand the effects of trauma.
- Make funds available to purchase larger vehicles or additional room in house so that foster carers can support more foster children.
- Provide all foster children with regular sessions with a mental health professional to assist them during time in care.
- Extend the age where young people leave care to accommodate university attendance or other training.
- Provide every foster child with access to a mental health professional.
- Regular care team meetings with the option to hold them in carers' homes.
- Avoid filling the child with junk food before dropping them off or following an access visit or placement.

