

Emotional readiness to foster

Fact sheet for prospective foster carers

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Why this matters

Children who come into foster care have experienced trauma, grief, and loss — often repeatedly. They may have lived through neglect, abuse, family breakdown, or the death of a loved one. Even removal from their home can be deeply traumatic for a child and contribute to grief and loss.

To provide healing, safety, and security, carers must understand how trauma affects behaviour — and be emotionally prepared to support it. This extends beyond the trauma and loss a child experiences and calls on those considering fostering to be aware of the impacts of grief in their own lives too.

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You can't support a child through their healing if you haven't started yours.

Understanding trauma, grief and loss

Understanding what we mean by trauma, grief and loss is important for those navigating the potential place of fostering in their home. There are differences in the impact of each, and for most children that have a care experience, a complex combination of all elements.

Trauma

- More than just a distressing event — trauma is the lasting impact on a child's sense of safety and trust.
- It affects brain development, emotional regulation, and behaviour.
- Children may struggle with:
 - Anger or aggression
 - Withdrawal or fear
 - Hypervigilance or shutdown
 - Difficulty trusting adults

Grief and loss

- Children who are removed from their family home will always grieve what was familiar to them, including their family, siblings, friends, pets, school, community or culture.
- Loss in foster care is often complicated, ongoing, and unacknowledged.
- Grief can appear as sadness, defiance, clinginess, or regression.

The carer's role: a healing relationship

Foster carers provide more than shelter — they create safe, trusting, emotionally responsive environments that help children begin to heal.

But doing this effectively requires emotional strength, patience, and self-awareness.

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Fostering eventually felt like a natural development, but it was important for us that we waited until we felt we were in the right place in life to be able to prioritise the care of a young person, before we jumped in.

Chris and Sophiaan - [Chris and Sophiaan | Life Without Barriers](#)

Why your own history matters

People come to fostering with their own life experiences, the ups and downs in their own journeys which leave an imprint in all people. This history is important to consider when deciding on the right time to take the next step.

Many people have experienced:

- Childhood trauma or neglect
- Infertility, miscarriage, or child loss
- Relationship breakdowns
- Grief from losing loved ones
- Vicarious trauma through work or caregiving

These experiences can make you more empathetic — but unresolved pain may be triggered by caring for a child with trauma.

For example:

- A child's rejection may echo a past personal loss.
- A child's behaviour may remind you of someone from your history.
- Their grief may tap into your own unprocessed emotions.

Why emotional readiness is essential

The process of becoming a carer asks you to call upon your past experiences and demonstrate your emotional resilience. This in itself can be a confronting experience if you're in a place of emotional change or challenge. Stepping into the role of carers, combining your lives with the experiences of a child and family needing your care and assistance can be hugely rewarding but brings with it an emotional toll.

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There are always some tough times and its how you work through those times and deal with issues that defines you as a person.

Gwen - [Gwen | Life Without Barriers](#)

Carers need:

- **Emotional regulation:** To stay calm in the face of pain-based behaviour. Children that have experienced trauma often act out their pain in ways that are often perceived as challenging. Staying curious about the why behind behaviour will help carers stay grounded in the difficult moments and teach children to understand what they are feeling.
- **Clear boundaries:** To provide structure and safety in the everyday. Boundaries help to give clear expectations and consistency which is vital for children in unpredictable situations who have lacked the foundation of stability in their early experiences.
- **Empathy without over-identifying:** To support without becoming overwhelmed. Being an empathic and connected carer is key to building trust and felt safety for children, however it is critical that carers are able to do so without over-identifying, especially where they have their own experiences of trauma, grief and loss.
- **Self-awareness:** To recognise personal triggers and avoid reactive responses. Understanding oneself is important when becoming a foster carer, knowing that you will be helping a child or young person navigate some of the hardest moments of their lives. Understanding where you are at in your own journey is key to identifying things you may find personally challenging and seeking support.

Steps to strengthen emotional readiness

Being aware of and prepared for the potential emotional weight of fostering is best mechanism for ensuring that you are ready to take on the important task of building healing relationships with children. There are some steps below that can help you get ready for your caring journey.

1. Reflect on your own experiences

- What have you lived through?
- What remains unresolved?
- How might those experiences shape your responses as a carer?

Consider journaling, therapy, or guided self-reflection. All great tools to draw on throughout your caring journey.

2. Seek support early

- Engage with a counsellor, social worker, or therapist.
- Join a carer support group to talk with others on the journey.

3. Educate yourself about trauma

- Learn about attachment, developmental trauma, and trauma-informed care.
- Understanding the “why” behind behaviour builds empathy and patience.

4. Give yourself permission to pause

- If you’re navigating grief, a loss, or unresolved trauma right now — it’s okay to wait.
- Fostering requires emotional availability — timing matters.

Remember: it’s not about being perfect — it’s about being prepared

You don’t need to have a perfect past or all the answers. But you do need to be aware of your own emotional landscape and willing to do the inner work. It’s important to ensure your emotional safety and wellbeing along the path to caring, as well as those you may come to care for.

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Emotionally resilient carers help children become emotionally resilient adults.

Trauma, grief, and loss are part of the fostering journey — for children, their families and sometimes for the carers. By doing your own healing work first, you can offer the emotional stability and compassion that foster children need most.

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