

Understanding foster care

We all share the responsibility for child safety

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BARRIERS**

How does the Child Protection System work? How do children come into care?

Understanding the nature of the child protection system in Australia and how children come to need foster care can help carers grasp the potential pathways that care experiences may take. While child protection systems across Australia are state-based and vary, the fundamental ways authorities protect children's well-being and safety are largely consistent. In the following we will explore some of those essential elements.

In Australia, children come into foster care when they are deemed to be at risk of harm or neglect and cannot safely remain in their family home. This process typically involves several steps:

- 1. Report of concern:** Concern for a child's safety can be raised by various people, such as teachers, doctors, family members, neighbours, or even the child themselves. Reports of neglect, physical or emotional abuse, or any other form of harm may prompt intervention. In all states and territories of Australia, foster carers are mandatory reporters of child abuse and neglect. This means foster carers must legally report concerns about a child's safety and well-being to the relevant child protection authorities.
- 2. Investigation by authorities:** Once a report is made, the state or territory's child protection service (such as the Department of Communities and Justice in New South Wales or the Department of Child Protection in Western Australia) will assess the situation. Social workers or caseworkers will investigate the concerns, which may involve speaking with the child, the family, and others involved in the child's life (like school or medical professionals).

- 3. Risk assessment:** The authorities assess whether the child is at risk of harm. They look at factors like whether the child's basic needs (food, shelter, education, etc.) are being met, if the child is physically or emotionally safe, and if the family environment is stable and nurturing. An assessment will be made about the harm and the child's protective needs, including whether the family can be supported to keep children at home safely.
- 4. Decision to remove a child:** If it's determined that a child is at significant risk of harm and cannot be kept safely at home, a decision may be made to remove the child from their family. This is usually done as a last resort. Our court systems make orders regarding a child's entry to care after reviewing the evidence provided
- 5. Foster care arrangement:** Once a child is removed, the child may be cared for by a foster family, kinship carers (such as grandparents or other extended family members), or a residential care facility. The decision about where the child is cared for depends on the child's best interests, the availability of suitable carers, and the child's specific needs. It is always hoped that time in care is temporary, and children can return home when safe.
- 6. Ongoing case management:** After a child is placed in foster care, caseworkers continue to monitor the situation and work with the family to resolve the issues that led to the child's removal. This might include providing support to the biological family, such as parenting programs, counselling, or substance abuse treatment. In some cases, where serious abuse or neglect has occurred or where parents/caregivers

cannot guarantee the safety of their child, it may not be possible for children to return to their parents. Long-term care may be needed, and a care team will continue to support children in reaching their potential and staying connected to their families and communities.

Got more questions?

If you've got more questions about how the child protection system works in your state, reach out and chat with our specialists.

Phone: 1300 592 227

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