

# Becoming a carer

## Safeguarding children - background checks

## LIFE WITHOUT BARRIERS

Becoming a foster carer is a deeply rewarding commitment, but it also comes with responsibilities that ensure the safety and well-being of children and young people. In Australia, background checks are a vital part of the foster carer application and assessment process.

### Here are some of the main reasons why these checks are important:

#### 1. Ensuring Child Safety

The primary concern when fostering is the safety and protection of children, to ensure no further trauma or harm is caused to them. Background checks help to identify and deter individuals who may pose a risk to the child, ensuring that those who are approved as foster carers can provide a safe, supportive environment. We know approved care households include more than just the carers themselves, so it is required that household members (which may include regular visitors) undertake background checks also.

#### 2. Protecting the Vulnerable

Emergency foster care is intended to be a temporary solution, typically lasting from a few days to a few weeks, while a child's situation is assessed and plan made for their next steps, such as reunification with family, care by members of their kinship network, or a longer-term foster care arrangement. The timeframe of care can change at short notice. Children in foster care have often experienced trauma, neglect, or abuse. It's vital that anyone entering their life as a foster carer does not have a history that could further harm or destabilise them. A thorough background check is essential for identifying individuals with a history of abusive or criminal behaviour and ensuring that those approved to care for children and young people are suited to doing so based on the patterns of past behaviour.

#### 3. Building Trust

Foster care agencies, carer approval bodies, and the child's family must have confidence in the carer's ability to provide a nurturing environment. Background checks are an important step in building this trust, demonstrating that a potential foster or kinship carer has been thoroughly vetted for the safety and well-being of the child.

## 4. Meeting Legal Requirements

In Australia, all foster carers are required to undergo mandatory background checks before approval. This requirement is mandated by the relevant legislation and regulations in each state or territory. This typically includes:

- **Police Check:** To identify any criminal history or past charges.
- **Working with Children Check (WWCC)/Working with Vulnerable Person Check/Blue Card:** To ensure that the individual has no history of child-related offenses.
- **Community Services/Child Safety Check:** To ensure that applicants have not had significant contact with child protection authorities around abuse or neglect of children they have cared for.
- **Health Checklists & Medical References:** A self-assessment checklist and GP reference ensure that carers are healthy and well and that no undue medical strain would be caused by fostering.
- **References:** From members of a person's support network, family or employer to speak to the character of the applicants and dynamic of their households.

These checks are mandated by law to ensure a standard level of safety and accountability for all foster carers. They also help ensure that fostering is something that is likely to have a positive impact on a person's life rather than causing undue stress or triggering of past life events.

## 5. Preventing Abuse or Neglect

Background checks help prevent individuals with a history of child abuse, neglect, or perpetrators of domestic violence from becoming foster carers. This reduces the risk of re-traumatizing children who are already in vulnerable situations.

## 6. Creating a Positive Foster Care Environment

Foster children deserve to grow up in a home that is not only physically safe but emotionally nurturing. Ensuring that all carers undergo background checks is part of creating a positive, supportive environment where children can heal, grow, and thrive.

## 7. Identifying Any Risk Factors

A background check can also identify patterns of behaviour that may not be criminal but could pose a risk to the well-being of children, such as a history of substance abuse, financial instability, or untreated mental health challenges. These factors are important to consider ensuring that potential foster carers are fully prepared to meet the needs of the children in their care. Where risks are identified a transparent process of exploring these will occur, with your input.

## **8. Promoting Accountability and Responsibility**

By requiring background checks, the fostering system promotes accountability. Individuals who choose to become foster carers must understand the gravity of their role, and the background check process serves as a reminder of the responsibility that comes with caring for children in need.

## **9. Ensuring the Well-being of Carers and Families**

Background checks also ensure that foster carers are in good standing within community and can help prevent any potential disruptions in the household that could affect the child's welfare. Carers should be able to demonstrate stability and a commitment to maintaining a healthy home environment for themselves and the children they care for.

## **10. Supporting the Fostering Community**

Foster carers are part of a larger, interconnected network of families, professionals, and support services. By undergoing background checks, carers contribute to maintaining a fostering community that is safe, responsible, and supportive of each other and children's needs.

## What Background Checks are Required

Becoming a foster carer in Australia is a significant responsibility. As part of the approval process, various background checks are required to ensure the safety and well-being of children placed in foster care. Below is an overview of the background checks required for potential foster carers in Australia.

### 1. Criminal History Check (National)

- **Purpose:** To ensure that individuals who wish to become foster carers have no history of serious criminal activity that could endanger a child. To identify patterns of behaviour that might impact on a person's capacity to provide a safe and stable care environment.
- **Scope:** The check typically includes any convictions or charges for violent offenses, sexual offenses, child abuse, drug trafficking, or other crimes that may pose a risk to children. If you've lived overseas we may ask that you undertake an international police check in addition to completing a National Police Check through our Probity & Screening team.
- **Process:** Applicants and household members over the age of 16 must provide consent for a police check, which is most often completed through an online application form. National Police Checks are required to be submitted every 3 years and when a new household member joins the home.
- **Outcome:** A history of criminal offenses, particularly those involving violence or abuse, may disqualify an applicant from becoming a foster carer. For other criminal charges or convictions that do not pose an immediate threat to children and young people, a risk assessment and right to respond process will be undertaken.

## 2. Working with Children Check (WWCC)/Working With Vulnerable Person/Blue Card

- **Purpose:** This check assesses whether a person has been involved in behaviours that would make them unsuitable to work with children.
- **Scope:** The check includes a national criminal history review and may also involve other factors such as investigations into child-related offenses. All applicants and household members (which may include regular visitors) 18 years old or older, must complete these checks.
- **Process:** It is typically administered by state or territory governments and will involve ongoing monitoring throughout the foster carer's tenure. Checks are required to be renewed before expiry, which is generally every 5 years.
- **Outcome:** Foster carers must pass the WWCC/WWVP/Blue Card before they can care for children. Individuals with disqualifying offences will be barred from fostering. Those that encounter a bar or allow their checks to expire, will have a hold placed on the approval to foster.

## 3. Child Protection/Community Services Check

**Purpose:** To ensure that the applicant does not have a history of child abuse or neglect.

**Scope:** This check involves searching child protection databases for any reports or findings of child abuse, neglect, or harm involving the applicant. This check must be carried out for all applicants, household members of all ages and may include regular visitors.

**Process:** State and territory child protection agencies usually carry out this check and share the results with the Life Without Barriers.

**Outcome:** A history of substantiated child abuse or neglect may disqualify the applicant from fostering. A risk assessment and right to respond process is typically carried out if any adverse findings are disclosed.

#### 4. Health Checklist and Medical References

- **Purpose:** To confirm that the applicant and other members of the household are physically and mentally capable of providing safe care for a child.
- **Scope:** The health check typically involves a self-assessment checklist, whilst the medical reference is completed by your regular GP. If you have complex or chronic health conditions you may be asked to provide a reference from your treating specialist also.
- **Process:** The health checklist is filled out by the applicant/s asking them to describe their lifestyle habits and rate their health. The medical references are completed by your GP (and specialist if required) and details your health history, treatment of any conditions you may have and their professional opinion on your suitability to foster with your health in mind.
- **Outcome:** Serious medical or mental health issues that could impair the applicant's ability to care for a child might prevent them from becoming a foster carer. We will always explore your capacity to meet a child's day-to-day needs, as well as long term wellbeing, whilst ensuring that fostering will not cause any undue stress on your own personal health.

#### 5. Reference Checks

- **Purpose:** To verify that the applicant has a stable, supportive environment and is capable of being a positive caregiver.
- **Scope:** This check involves gathering references from people who know the applicant well, such as employers, friends, or community leaders.
- **Process:** Referees are asked to speak to the applicant's character, stability, relationship qualities and ability to care for children. The reference check is typically completed through calling identified references to discuss.
- **Outcome:** Feedback provided will be used in support of your application and noted throughout the carer assessment. Negative feedback from references may indicate issues that need to be addressed before approval.

## 6. Domestic Violence Questions

- **Purpose:** To explore whether an applicant or anyone in the household has a history of domestic violence, that might impact the safety of children and young people.
- **Scope:** This question relates to exploring the history of domestic violence within your household, including offences an applicant or household member may have committed or been accused of, as well as patterns of domestic violence within a person's life particularly if they involve any ongoing safety or protection orders.
- **Process:** This question is typically explored through the readiness conversation and foster care assessment, to explore the suitability of a household to provide a safe environment with healthy relationships. Many children in care have been subject to the trauma of domestic and family violence, and it is our responsibility to ensure that care environments do not perpetuate that trauma. Conversations are had in a respectful and non-judgemental manner with the interests of children in care at heart.
- **Outcome:** Evidence of ongoing domestic violence or a history of abusive behaviour may result in a refusal to approve the applicant. If an applicant has a current protection order in place and is at risk of violence you will likely be asked to hold off on applying until safety in your home can be guaranteed.

## Additional Considerations

- **Ongoing Monitoring:** Foster carers and members of their household are subject to periodic reviews and reassessments, including updated background checks, to ensure continued suitability for fostering. As part of caring, you will need to ensure updated background checks throughout your caring role.
- **Documentation Required:** Our background checks are generally initiated online and require applicants to provide information about their birth, citizenship and residency status over the last 10 years or more. It's key to ensure you have the required identity documentation at the ready, including any change of name or marriage certificates you may require.
- **Openness and Willing to Participate:** We are aware talking about your background, especially if there have been some troubled times, can be confronting. We also know that a few mistakes do not define a person. Whatever your history looks like it is important to approach these checks and associated conversations with openness, honesty and a willingness to participate. Failing to disclose past events that may appear on a background check may be more damaging to your application than the result itself. Our carer assessment staff are understanding, compassionate professionals who approach these discussions without judgement and honour the privacy of the information you share.



## How we support you through the process

Our assessors will support you through the process of applying to foster, including the completion of background checks. This can include those trickier moments of navigating risk assessments if there are moments in your history that need to be explored in detail.

Background checks are an essential part of the foster care system in Australia, ensuring that children are placed in homes where their safety, security, and well-being are the highest priority. As a potential foster carer, understanding the importance of these checks helps to reinforce the responsibility and trust placed in you as a champion of a child's future.

Your role as a foster carer can change a child's life as well as your own. Background checks help ensure that change is a positive one.

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