

Understanding foster care

We all share the responsibility for child safety

**LIFE
WITHOUT
BARRIERS**

Matching carers and kids

Making a good match – The process of matching for care arrangements

Matching children in care with the right foster carers is a crucial step in ensuring that children receive the support, care, and environment they need to heal and thrive. A successful match can help foster children build trust, stability, and security. Considering matching carefully can help carers develop therapeutic connections with children through shared interests, relevant skills, and experience to meet their needs. In Australia, several key considerations and best practices are used to effectively match foster carers and children.

So what's considered when finding the right care arrangement for a child?

1. Understanding the needs of the child

The first step in matching is understanding the unique needs of each child in care. Children come into the foster system with various backgrounds and experiences, and these factors influence their needs.

- **Age and developmental stage:** Matching children with carers who are experienced and capable of providing age-appropriate care is crucial. For instance, the needs of an infant or toddler differ significantly from those of a teenager. Whilst carers do not need to have had children of their own, understanding the needs of children and having had exposure to children throughout their lives is important.
- **Health and disabilities:** Children with physical or mental health challenges may need carers with specialised training or experience, particularly if they require extra medical care or support for developmental issues. Carers for children with complex needs often have experience in caring roles for a living. Children living with complex health needs or disabilities usually require a significant time commitment to attend medical and therapeutic appointments, which requires carers with the time and capacity to facilitate.

- **Emotional and behavioural needs:**

Children who have experienced trauma, neglect, or abuse may have specific emotional and behavioural needs, such as a heightened need for reassurance or structure. Carers must be equipped to manage these behaviours effectively. Responding to pain-based behaviours requires empathy, patience, and a level of understanding about the underlying needs that behaviours are trying to communicate.

- **Putting the child's needs first:**

When matching for successful care arrangements, a child's best interests are always the foundational principle that guides ensuring their needs come first, and they are given the best chance to thrive, heal and maintain lifelong connections.

2. Cultural and ethnic considerations

- **Cultural sensitivity:** Children from diverse cultural or ethnic backgrounds benefit from being placed with carers with similar cultural or community backgrounds. This helps maintain cultural connections and provides a sense of identity. At Life Without Barriers, we believe First Nations children are best placed to be cared for within their communities. Therefore, we commit to the transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children being cared for within Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations where possible.
- **Language:** For children from non-English speaking backgrounds or with specific language needs, matching them with carers who speak the same language or understand their cultural context is important for their emotional and social development.

3. Assessing the foster carer's capacity

Foster carers must be carefully assessed to ensure they can meet the children's needs. This involves:

- **Experience and training:** Carers with previous experience, training in trauma-informed care, or experience with specific age groups or special needs are ideal for children who require those skills. Understanding that caring requires an ongoing learning commitment, we aim to provide learning opportunities for all carers, no matter how long they have been fostering. This can include self-paced learning, external courses or one-on-one coaching provided through supervision and support relationships with care teams.
- **Family dynamics:** It is important to assess the whole family dynamic of the fostering household. This includes understanding how other children or family members in the household might react to a new care arrangement in the home. The age and needs of your children will be considered when making recommendations around the ages of children you might care for, with every family situation considered individually.

- **Time and availability:** Different children, due to their age, development stage or individual needs, will have different levels of support required. For all children in care, committing time to be available for their day-to-day care, developing relationships of trust, and fostering their interests is critical in meeting their needs and helping them reach their potential. When matching children and carers, the time you have available to commit to caring will be considered in terms of the types of care you might be best placed to provide, or which children you'd be a good match for.
- **Space in your home:** All children benefit from a private space as a sanctuary from the everyday, and somewhere they can feel safe and secure when experiencing big feelings or needing some time to themselves. Having a dedicated room for fostering, as other household members have, also promotes a sense of belonging. The physical care environment of your home will be considered in terms of how it will contribute to meeting a child's needs when matching a child and carer.
- **Support network:** A strong support network, including extended family, friends, and local community services, can help foster carers provide a more stable environment for children in care. Like any caregiving role, having practical and emotional supports to rely on when needed is important for all carers.
- **Carer references:** Some carers may prefer the age or gender of children they feel most comfortable caring for. Whilst this is certainly considered, carer assessors will work with applicants during the assessment process to make recommendations of suitability based on a person's experience, skills in caring and household dynamics to ensure the best fit for carers and children alike. Carers must be open to these recommendations, as having fixed or narrow preferences can make it difficult to make good matches.

4. Matching based on gender and sibling groups

- **Gender of the child:** While gender matching is flexible, it's important to consider the gender of both the child and the foster carers. Some children may feel more comfortable with carers of the same gender, particularly when dealing with sensitive issues. Some children may have experienced abuse or trauma involving a particular gendered adult, and this may need to be considered in promoting safety.
- **Siblings:** Whenever possible, children from the same family should be cared for together to maintain their relationships and provide emotional support to each other. Sibling care arrangements help minimise trauma and help children feel less isolated in an already challenging time.

5. Keeping the child's relationships in mind

- **Maintaining Connections:** Whenever feasible, carers must be open to supporting the child's ongoing relationships with their family, if it is safe and in the child's best interest. This may include facilitating regular visits or communication with siblings, extended family members, or significant others in the child's life. Cultivating normal, healthy relationships with family members helps promote security for children in care and models behaviours of respect within relationships. Where visits aren't possible, carers need to be willing to engage creatively with ways to maintain those connections.
- **Schooling and community connections:** Keeping children in their local schools or communities, if possible, can help provide continuity and stability. Being cared for near friends or familiar environments can help ease the transition to foster care. Minimising the disruptions and disconnects that children have in their lives helps them resolve trauma they have faced due to their experiences and maintain lifelong connections.
- **Creating a strong caring community:** Developing strong care team relationships around a child is critical in ensuring a child's wellbeing is first and foremost. When adding to a child's caring community, such as through respite care, carers must be willing and able to develop strong and communicative relationships with the child's primary carers and support staff, family and significant others.

6. Matching for emotional support

- **Trauma-informed care:** Children who have experienced trauma (e.g., abuse, neglect, domestic violence) often require carers who are well-versed in trauma-informed care. Foster carers should be trained to provide appropriate emotional support and create a safe and predictable environment. At Life Without Barriers, we help carers understand the needs of children experiencing pain-based behaviours due to trauma.
- **Emotional availability:** Foster carers must be emotionally available, patient, and understanding. Some children may take longer to trust or bond with carers due to their past experiences. Matching children with carers who can offer unconditional support and empathy is vital for their recovery. Carers must understand that a child's resistance to form a connection is not a personal insult, but a reflection of their pain.

7. Review and flexibility

- **Ongoing monitoring and feedback:** The matching process doesn't end once a child enters care. It's essential to continuously assess the relationship between the foster carer and the child. Regular reviews allow for additional support and adjustments if the child's needs evolve over time.
- **Adaptability:** A good match may still require some flexibility. Children's needs may change, or foster carers may require additional support or training as they adjust to the child's specific needs. Ongoing communication and collaboration between care teams, foster carers, and other professionals ensure the match remains appropriate.

8. Involving the child in the process

Children have a right to be a part of important decisions made around their lives and matching them to a great care environment is no exception.

- **Respecting the child's preferences:** Whenever appropriate (and depending on the child's age and maturity), children should be involved in discussions about their care arrangements. Allowing children to express their preferences regarding the type of foster care they need can help make the transition easier.
- **Understanding the child's feelings:** It's important to recognise that children in care may feel a range of emotions about being cared for by people new to them. Providing emotional support, stability, and reassurance can ease this transition. Carers must be empathic, sensitive and pre-empt ways to help a child feel comfortable in their home.

Matching children with the right foster carers is essential for providing them with the care, safety, and emotional support they need to thrive. The comprehensive process considers the child's age, developmental needs, health, culture, emotional state, and previous relationships. Likewise, it ensures that foster carers are equipped with the skills, experience, and resources to care for the child. A successful match results in a safer, more stable environment, which fosters healing, trust, and a positive future for children in foster care.

Got more questions?

If you have any questions about the matching process or what you could offer to foster a child through fostering, get in touch today.

Phone: 1300 592 227

Email: carers@lwb.org.au

LIFE WITHOUT BARRIERS



LWBAustralia



Life Without Barriers



Life Without Barriers



Life Without Barriers

lwb.org.au