



SSI multicultural foster care

strengthening children through culture

Becoming a foster carer

This booklet provides an overview of the SSI Multicultural Foster Care Program, the application process and induction training, and the support available for new carers



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Introduction

Settlement Services International

Settlement Service International (SSI) is a community organisation and social business that supports newcomers and other Australians to achieve their full potential. We work with all people who have experienced vulnerability, including refugees, people seeking asylum and people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, to build their capacity and enable them to overcome inequality.

Multicultural Child and Family Program

The Multicultural Child and Family Program (MCFP) is an area within SSI that works towards meeting the unique needs of children and families from CALD backgrounds. The program is funded by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ).

Within this program sits our specialist foster care program for children and young people (aged 0 – 18 years) from CALD backgrounds. The service operates in parts of metropolitan Sydney and the Hunter/Central Coast area. SSI Multicultural Foster Care emphasises maintaining the bonds of ethnic background, religion and language when providing a foster home for children.

Thank you

Thank you for showing interest in becoming a foster carer with SSI. Fostering is possibly one of the most rewarding roles that you can undertake. This booklet is designed to give you more information about fostering to help you decide if it is right for you and your family. We understand this is a big decision and we hope the information contained within this booklet is helpful in guiding you towards a future in fostering with SSI.

Section One

What is foster care?

Foster care offers children a home while their own family is unable to provide them with a safe home environment.

Children in foster care are aged from 0 to 18 years. Depending on their circumstances, a child may be in foster care for a few days, a few weeks or for many years. Sometimes they may remain permanently in the care of foster carers.

In NSW, there are about 20,000 children who are not living with their birth parents. Of these, about 15% are from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background.

Why do children need foster care and/or kinship care?

Many children who need foster care have experienced trauma and various forms of abuse and as a result cannot continue living with their birth family. Wherever possible, the intention is to get children back living safely with their birth families. Some parents may be physically or mentally ill, suffer from drug or alcohol addiction, be in a violent domestic relationship, or have experienced childhood trauma themselves.

When a child has been separated from their family because of ongoing child protection concerns, the Children's Court and Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) are involved in making decisions about what is best for the child.

DCJ is a NSW statutory government body responsible for ensuring that children are protected. When DCJ assesses a child being at serious risk of significant harm and their parent's care to be unsafe, DCJ seek out family members or a foster carer, to care for the child.

Who can be a foster carer?

Anyone can apply to become a foster carer. You can be single, married or in a de-facto relationship. You can be working full-time, part-time or not at all. You can be residing in a home you own or rent.

SSI would like to attract carers who enjoy spending time with children and who are motivated and committed in sharing their lives and homes with vulnerable children. Most important of all, is having a big heart and a lot of patience. At minimum, a carer must be:

- Over 21 years of age
- An Australian citizen or permanent resident
- In good physical and emotional health
- Be able to obtain a NSW Working With Children Check and a favourable National Criminal History Check.

What is SSI looking for in their foster and kinship carers?

The important qualities of a foster carer include the ability to:

- Make a commitment to being a significant person in a child's life
- Provide a safe, loving and caring home environment
- Respect the culture and religion of the child and their biological family
- Be willing to learn and understand the impact of trauma on a child
- Be patient, flexible, creative, a problem solver and a good listener
- Have a sense of humour
- Balance your family's needs with the needs of the child
- Manage your family's finances with the addition of another child
- Maintain your other interests and family supports
- Participate in meetings and training
- Work as part of a larger team

What to expect as a foster carer

Every child and their birth family is different, and the impact of the trauma they have experienced will influence the child's brain and emotional development and how they learn to behave and react to situations. Some children may show their anxiety, fear and confusion by rejecting love and affection, while others may show behaviour that could be described as difficult or challenging, such as talking back, being angry, not listening, not eating or sleeping, not being able to regulate their emotions, throwing tantrums, or even trying to run away.

Some children have never had routine in their lives and will need extra amounts of love, understanding and patience to help them learn new ways of behaving. The longer a child has not had stability and emotional support, the more time they will need to accept a different way of being cared for.

Children will be deeply upset and confused about being separated from their family. It is scary being taken away from what you know, even if what you know is not good for you. Some children may find it easier to adapt to their new situation and settle in quicker than others. No two children are the same, and foster carers often deal with a variety of different personalities, experiences and characters throughout their fostering career.

Types of foster care

There are different types of foster care in both the length of time and type of care provided to a child.

Respite care

is regular periodic care. Children are looked after for short periods of time to provide birth parents or foster carers with a break, for example over school holidays or weekends.

Emergency or crisis care

is required when there is immediate concern for a child's safety. The duration can be from one night to a few weeks.

Short-term care

is required when there is a possibility that the situation that caused a child to be removed from their birth family may be resolved and they will be able to return within a few months to 2 years.

Long-term or permanent care

refers to a situation where the child is not expected to return to their birth family or other suitable carer. This type of care is provided until the child turns 18.

Guardianship

refers to when foster carers who have a family or kin or an established relationship with a child become the legal guardians for the child.

Adoption

is when foster carers who are committed to caring for a child into their adult years want to commit to adopting the child. This is not a preferred option for Aboriginal children.

Importance of culture

Children in care who are supported to maintain a connection to their ethnic background, religion and language have better outcomes as they grow up. These connections help children to develop their sense of belonging and identity.

SSI Multicultural Foster Care provides foster carers and casework support for all children, with a strong focus on children from CALD backgrounds. Helping children stay connected can also help if and when children are returned to their birth parents. SSI need carers who are culturally responsive and are able to maintain cultural identity for children and young people.

Role of the SSI Multicultural Foster Care services

SSI Multicultural Foster Care is the lead program in NSW that focuses on delivering a culturally appropriate model of foster care for CALD children and young people. The program is staffed by bilingual caseworkers and managers with cross-cultural and foster care casework skills and knowledge. They work closely with community organisations and community leaders, women's groups, religious organisations and other relevant services in the recruitment and support of foster carers.

Research shows when children are unable to live with family or within kinship care, a child is better able to maintain their connection to their ethnic background, religion and language through a culturally matched foster home. These connections may lead to better outcomes as they grow up as they help children to develop their sense of belonging and identity.

At SSI we believe children in foster care need to live in a safe and caring environment, know what the plan is for their future, and be connected to their family, community and culture. We believe that children who are supported in learning and maintaining their connection to their culture, heritage, religion and language have a better understanding of their past, which will help them develop a positive sense of belonging and identity.

SSI Multicultural Foster Care is committed to providing services in culturally diverse languages and/or connecting carers to bi-cultural workers. The team works closely with foster carers to ensure they have the support they need. A range of support services are available, including:

- A professional caseworker; bilingual if required
- Regular home visits
- 24 hour on-call support for crisis situations ONLY
- Initial and ongoing training
- Language specific peer support groups
- Respite care
- Financial support



Section Two

Key steps

Once you have decided that you are interested in becoming a foster carer, there are **four key steps** you will go through to become an approved foster carer with SSI. These are:

- 1 **Application and probity checks.**
- 2 **Completing mandatory training.**
- 3 **Participating in individual home based interviews with you and your family members.**
- 4 **Carer Assessment review by a panel of authorised staff and endorsement by SSI's Principal Officer.**



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STEP ONE

Application and probity checks

This is where you will complete SSI's carer application forms and pass a home inspection check. This gives SSI consent to conduct probity checks for you and usually other people over the age of 16 who live with you. These checks include:

- Working With Children Check
- National Police Check
- Medical Health Check
- Home Environment Safety Check
- DCJ Community Services check for any child protection history
- Carer Register Check

This information will be recorded on the NSW Carers Register, a database of carer applicants, authorised carers, and household members of carer applicants with the NSW Office of the Children's Guardian.

Having a criminal history does not automatically disqualify you from being a carer. The nature of the offence will be taken into consideration as part of the assessment.

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STEP TWO

Mandatory training – Shared Lives

The assessment process requires an applicant to complete Shared Lives carer training. This will help you think more about what is involved in being a foster carer. The training usually runs over two days and covers nine topics:

- Foster care in context
- Bonding and attachment
- Grief and loss
- Abuse and trauma
- Identity and birth family contact
- Responding to challenging behaviours
- Team work
- Maintaining cultural connection
- The story continues



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STEP THREE Individual home based interviews with you and your family

During the home based assessment comprised of approximately four to six visits, you will be asked many personal questions that at times may feel intrusive. The aim of these questions is to determine your:

- Motivation to become a foster carer
- Ability to work effectively as part of a team
- Capacity to promote positive development of children and young people in care
- Ability to provide a safe environment that is free from abuse

The assessment will also involve:

- Meeting with everyone in your immediate family including your children and obtaining their views
- Conducting a home inspection and looking at your living arrangements
- Asking about your family structure and support networks
- Exploring aspects of your childhood, employment and relationships
- Identifying strengths and areas needing development

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STEP FOUR Carer assessment and authorisation process

The authorisation process includes a review of the assessor's report on you as a carer by a fostering panel and then endorsement as required by regulations by SSI's Principal Officer. While SSI will authorise carers to care for a specific number of children between 0 and 18 years, the panel may recommend particular ages you are most suited to care for and the type of care you can provide. Once the agency decision maker has approved the recommendations, you will generally receive confirmation within 10 working days.

If your application is approved by SSI, you will:

- Receive a letter confirming that you have been approved as a foster carer.
- Be authorised as a foster carer. At minimum, an authorised foster carer participates in a carer review every 12 months from this date.
- Work with SSI to look after children matched to your capabilities.
- Partake in ongoing case management and support children with their growth and development.
- Once a year you must participate in an annual carer review to ensure you are meeting legislative requirements and for SSI to receive feedback from you about how things are going.

If your application is not approved by SSI, you will receive a letter stating the reasons for the decision and your right to review the decision.

It usually takes about six to nine months to go through the assessment process from application to approval stage, but sometimes it may take longer.

Working with the SSI team

The SSI Multicultural Foster Care team will support you every step of the way in your foster care journey.

Intake and Carer Services Team

The primary role of this team is to support you in the journey of becoming a foster carer from your initial phone enquiry to authorisation. They will also help match children to your home and will provide ongoing support and training throughout your time as an SSI carer.

You will work with this team through face-to-face meetings and via phone. They will introduce you to SSI's carer support network and link you to an experienced carer for additional support.

OOHC Casework Team

Once you are authorised and a child is matched to your home, a caseworker will be allocated to support you and your foster child. The caseworker's role is to help you to meet the needs of the child and/or young person you care for. This involves planning and supporting you in processes to ensure you are meeting the child and/or young person's needs such as:

- Maintaining their cultural identity and sense of belonging
- Educational needs
- Health needs
- Emotional and psychological well being
- Social and behavioural needs
- Maintaining birth family contact and relationships

Ongoing support and training

As an authorised carer you have the right to access relevant training to support you in your role. SSI requests all carers to undertake the following training when they are first authorised, prior to their first placement:

- First aid
- Prohibited and restricted practices
- Child protection

SSI will support your induction training over your first six months as a carer, including:

- Trauma informed care (repair parenting)
- Cultural support planning
- Supporting family relationships

Each year Carer Services will conduct an annual carer review which will help identify and support you with your ongoing training and development. You will have a tailored learning and development plan based on your identified training needs.

If your child has tailored behaviour support plan and a cultural support plan, you will receive training from an SSI staff member to implement these plans.

You also have the opportunity to access educational seminars run by SSI on a monthly basis that discuss how to support children and young people in your care. You will also have access to external training and development opportunities available in the community by places such as the local health centres, My Forever Family and/or the Centre for Children's Welfare Training.

Training options include attending formal training in groups, online modules, webinars and booklets for specific areas such as life story work.

Reportable conduct

Any allegations regarding risk to a child and/or young person's safety, welfare or wellbeing must be reported to the Child Protection Helpline. If there are any allegations made towards a SSI carer breaching the Carer Code of Conduct, it will be investigated by DCJ and/or SSI. SSI will determine if there may be ongoing risks to the safety, welfare or wellbeing of a child and/or young person within your care. SSI will support you during any investigation process.

Section Three

Frequently asked questions

Q Do I need to be from a CALD background to apply to be a foster carer with SSI?

A While SSI has a strong focus on recruiting foster carers from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, we consider interest from people of any background who appreciate the importance of all cultures if they have a genuine desire to provide a safe and caring home for children.

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Q I don't have a spare room. Can I still foster?

A In most cases you will need to have a spare bedroom to ensure the child you foster has the privacy and space they require. The exception is with babies who can usually share a foster carer's bedroom up to the age of two.

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Q Do I need a separate bedroom for the child to sleep in?

A Although it is preferable that you have a separate bedroom for a foster child, children can share rooms if they are siblings. This will be dependent on the child or young person's care needs.

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Q Do you have to speak English to a high level to be a foster carer?

A You will need an adequate level of spoken English to be able to communicate with the child and professionals, support the child's education, make notes and keep records. If you have any particular communication needs, we would be willing to discuss this with you.

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Q We are a religious family. Will that affect our application to foster?

A It does not matter what your religion is and this should not affect your application to foster. Children should be placed with foster families that can meet their needs, including religious needs. When considering fostering you should consider if you could care for a child who does not share your religion. During the assessment process, you will have the opportunity to discuss issues such as alternative religious beliefs and sexuality with your social worker to ensure you will be able to abide by our policies.

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Q Can you foster if you have a health condition?

A It is important for foster children to have a stable family life without any preventable disruption, such as a foster carer becoming seriously ill due to a long-term health condition. For this reason, all prospective foster carers must complete a full medical examination by their GP. However, being overweight should not rule you out as long as it does not cause you to have serious health problems that could affect your care of a child.

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Q How much do I get paid as a foster carer?

A Foster carers receive a fortnightly allowance to meet the day to day expenses involved in caring for a child or young person. Expenses to be paid from the care allowance include but are not limited to: general clothing, footwear, basic medical needs, toiletries, recreational activities, school camps, sporting activities, education costs, uniforms, textbooks, school excursions, child care or pre-school fees, and food.

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Q Will fostering have an impact on my welfare benefits?

A If you currently claim welfare benefits you are likely to be able to continue with this arrangement whilst fostering. Foster carers are approved volunteers rather than employed staff.

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Q Can I continue caring for a child once they reach 18 years of age and still in full-time education?

A This arrangement usually occurs when the young person has been living with the foster carer for a prolonged period of time and a relationship has been established. Prior to turning 18 years old, the young person will agree to a pathway plan. The foster carer will no longer have day to day responsibility for the young person but will receive reduced allowances to enable the young person to continue living in their home. This arrangement will cease once their education is complete.

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Q What records do carers have to keep?

A Foster carers will need to keep a record of the foster child's life and be active in the life story work for each child. SSI staff will assist you in this activity.

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Q Do you accept carers with a disability?

A SSI supports the placement of children with carers who have a disability. This is assessed case by case.

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Q Why is fertility/infertility an issue?

A To be eligible to provide long-term care, an applicant must have finished their involvement with a fertility program for a period of no less than twelve (12) months. Applicants must demonstrate an acceptance of their infertility and an understanding of the impact of infertility, whether it is as an individual and/or as a family.

...

Q Do I have to supervise birth family contact?

A Although carers do not need to supervise birth family contact, it is encouraged they form a bond with the child's family if it is safe to do so. Carers must demonstrate an acceptance of the importance of ongoing contact between the child and his/her birth parents and a willingness to facilitate contact to show the child the importance of respectful relationships. Consistently children benefit when they see their carers communicating safely and respectfully with their birth family.

...

Q What if I have previously applied with another agency?

A Carers must advise of previous applications to become a carer with other agencies in Australia and overseas and the outcomes of those applications. Applicants will be asked for permission for this agency to contact others to whom you have previously applied.

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Q Is respite provided?

A This is dependent on the reason for the respite request. It is expected that you initially explore suitable family and/or friends who could provide care whilst you take a break. Prior to respite, speak with the caseworker first to explore alternative arrangements such as vacation care, after school care and behaviour management strategies.

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