Foster Care

1940s –

Details

Foster care is a home-based service provided to children and young people up to 18 years of age who are temporarily or permanently unable to live with their families of origin. Foster parents are paid an allowance to help cover the cost of maintaining the foster child. The foster care system was historically managed by the same child welfare departments that managed children's institutions.

The term foster care is still used to describe children and young people's placements in private homes. Other related terms used include "therapeutic foster care", to describe home-based care that emphasises stability and provides additional supports for the child and carers. Kinship care is foster care provided by the child's close relatives.

Foster care was originally known as boarding out, with the language shifting to foster care by the mid-twentieth century. From the nineteenth century, child welfare systems all over Australia had mechanisms to board out children in private homes and pay an allowance to the carer. From 1941, child endowment was paid to foster mothers. In the 1950s and 1960s, research drew attention to the adverse affects of institutional 'care' on children, leading to child welfare departments starting to favour foster care over institutional placements (*Protecting Vulnerable Children*, p.75).

The Senate's second report from the Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care found that many children in foster care experienced abuse and neglect, and governments failed to ensure that many children in foster care were safe. The Senate heard stories of children being used as slave labour in foster care and suffering sexual, physical and emotional abuse and neglect.

A 1952 description of the foster care system in New South Wales, provided by the Director of the Child Welfare Department, RH Hicks, paints a rosy picture:

'To rehabilitate the family is the first objective of the Department – If we can get the home going properly again, then the children are returned to their parents.

The best way for a child to grow up is with its own family.

First, our trained social workers do everything they can to help the family, especially if the home is suffering through the ill-health of the mother or the desertion of one of the parents.'

Mr Hicks said that when these attempts fail the children are taken to special State homes, where they are medically examined before being sent to homes with other state wards.

'Because one of the most important influences in a child's upbringing is the spiritual and moral influence of good family life, we try to get foster parents for every child … In many cases the child may remain with the

foster parents for the rest of his childhood. In some cases the parents improve their conditions and have the child returned to them', he added.

Forgotten Australian Caroline Carroll shared her story of foster care in New South Wales in 2009, a stark contrast from the account given by the Child Welfare Department:

At two years I was placed in my first foster home in Coffs Harbour. My memories of this period of my life are not happy ones. Most days the foster parents drank, they would often become violent, screaming pushing even throwing knives at each other. I would huddle in my bed if it was night or stay well out of the way outside during the day. During this time beatings were common and other punishments such as being locked in the pitch-black garden shed covered in spider webs and crawling with mice and frightened with tales of to the point where I would wet myself and then be beaten.

I don't remember ever being hugged. I know I never felt loved, just lost and bewildered by my life.

I was at this foster home for about seven years and then I was returned to [Bidura](). *My file says "the ward seems quite a good type has not given too much trouble. She is quite bright but shows traces of nervous behaviour. Certainly quite placeable" (Sydney Morning Herald, 2009)*

The Bringing Them Home report (1997) stated that for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, foster care placements often became 'pseudo-adoptions' as they were very long-term and the child's contact with their family and community were restricted. In the early 1980s, the [Aboriginal Child Placement Principle]() was developed to keep children connected to their families, communities, culture and country.

From around the 1970s, child welfare departments were increasingly favoured foster care over placements in children's institutions. Efforts were also made to maintain contact between the child or young person in foster care and their family.

Foster care placements typically end when the young person turns 18. At this time, the state withdraws all formal support to the young person. In Victoria, the Home Stretch Campaign was launched in 2019, to extend support for 250 young people in foster and residential care to the age of 21. Advocates are pushing for similar reforms in other Australian jurisdictions.

[Click here to see the full Find & Connect glossary]()

Gallery

TV in a foster home, where three of our wards are sharing in a very happy family life

Description: This is a copy of an image published in the annual report for the Victorian Children's Welfare Department for 1957. The title is original to the report.

More info

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