

Community & Disability Services Ministers' Conference

**National Plan for Foster Children,
Young People and their Carers**

2004 – 2006



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Foreword

The Australian Government and State/Territory Government Ministers acknowledge the important contribution made by foster families in caring for children and young people and helping to develop capable, independent young adults. Foster carers provide an essential service in our communities. They provide day-to-day care for some of the most vulnerable, neglected, and abused children and young people. Many of these children and young people have complex needs and the task of caring for them can be both challenging and rewarding.

Governments recognise the role prevention and early intervention strategies can play in preventing children and young people entering out-of-home care. Evidence highlighting the importance of the early years has important implications for improving outcomes for children and young people in foster care. Linking this National Plan with existing and emerging early childhood policies aims to improve outcomes for children and young people in foster care.

Context

The National Plan has been developed and will be implemented in the following context:

- Responsibility for children and young people's welfare rests primarily with State and Territory governments. The Australian Government has an interest in longer-term outcomes for all Australian children and young people;
- Home-based foster care remains the main choice for providing a safe and supportive alternative home environment for children and young people unable to live with their parents. Foster care is one of several community responses being provided for children and young people where abuse and neglect is an issue;
- The number of children and young people in out-of-home care in Australia has risen steadily from just under 14,000 in 1996 to nearly 19,000 in 2002;
- Indigenous children and young people are over-represented in out-of-home care and there are insufficient Indigenous foster carers;
- There is an increase in the level and complexity of need of many of the children and young people coming into out-of-home care;
- Fewer people are becoming foster carers;
- There is a significant trend towards relative/kinship care;
- There is a need for new models of foster care to be developed and tested;
- There is a greater awareness of the many points at which children and young people in foster care are particularly vulnerable - including the transition of young people out of foster care to independent living;
- Several States and Territories have moved from direct service delivery to purchased provision through non-government agencies; and
- Links to other International and National Plans such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the National Agenda for Early Childhood, the National Mental Health Plan and the National Drug and Alcohol Plan require exploration.

Principles

In working together to develop and implement the National Plan the Australian, State and Territory Governments will commit to the following principles:

- Children and young people will have the right to be cared for in a safe and secure environment;
- Improved outcomes for children and young people will be achieved;
- The views of children and young people and their birth families will be heard, respected and their participation supported;
- The rights of children and young people to be raised in contact with their own cultures will be upheld, including the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle;
- Service delivery will be flexible, innovative and matched to the real needs of children and young people;
- Links with birth family will be valued and maintained;
- The role, status and commitment of foster carers will be respected and supported;
- Governments will work collaboratively on the implementation of this National Plan and respect any relevant resource constraints; and
- Differences between jurisdictions will be acknowledged and respected, as are differences of perspective between stakeholder groups within the sector.

Scope

The Plan focuses on supporting children and young people in foster care and their carers, through:

1. training;
2. research;
3. uniform data collection; and
4. support.

Proposed key areas for action and expected outcome for each of these are elaborated in the table below.

Definitional Explanation

This National Plan focuses on improving the wellbeing and life chances of children and young people in home-based foster care. It is acknowledged that the States and Territories use different terms to describe the various types of care provided for children and young people under statutory care and protection legislation. However, for the purposes of this National Plan, “foster care” means home-based care provided under statutory care and protection legislation for children and young people. The term “relative/kinship care” will be used to refer to foster care provided by people who have had a significant relationship with the child or young person prior to their being subject to statutory intervention.

1. Training

Safe environments and quality outcomes for children and young people require the promotion and sharing of good practice in recruitment, training and assessment of foster carers.

Key areas for action	Proposed Outputs
1.1 Positive promotion of foster care and active, effective recruitment of a diverse pool of capable foster carers.	1.1.1 A compilation of good practice in foster care promotion and recruitment from all States/Territories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baseline standards for recruitment practice; • Examples of practices and materials for recruitment; and • Key messages for promoting the positive values and outcomes of foster care.
1.2 Quality competency-based training for foster carers.	1.2.1 Agreement on core foster care competencies, covering: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • introductory level; and • specialist levels. 1.2.2 Nationally agreed training standards for agencies and foster carers. 1.2.3 Options for the recognition and accreditation of training for carers.
1.3 Mandatory, quality assessment and regular reviews at agreed intervals of all foster carers against agreed standards.	1.3.1 National standards for carer assessment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Core standards (which may be supplemented by local requirements); and • Information about models of good practice in assessment.

2. Research

Further targeted, quality information on foster care in Australia would more effectively inform policy and program development.

Key areas for action	Proposed Outputs
2.1 An understanding of current research projects under way and gaps in knowledge.	2.1.1 A review of research-based literature and current research activities on foster care in Australia.
2.2 An agreed foster care research agenda and ways of influencing relevant research.	2.2.1 National foster care research plan and agenda to inform policy and practice, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Models of research management; • Current foster care research; • Stakeholders (government and non-government) views about research priorities; • A short list of high research priorities; and • Opportunities to inform and influence existing research initiatives, research bodies and alliances such as Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth (ARACY), Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), and the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS). 2.2.2 Mechanisms to ensure that foster care research is applied to learning and practice.
2.3 Investigate and develop emerging models of foster care, including trends in relative/kinship care.	2.3.1 A review of emerging models of foster and relative/kinship care both nationally and internationally.

3. Uniform Data Collection

Different legislation, policies and practices across jurisdictions mean it is difficult to compare data at a national level. Work is being undertaken by the National Child Protection and Support Services (a subgroup of CSMAC's National Community Services Information Management Group), the Productivity Commission and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to improve national out-of-home care reporting. This National Plan seeks to endorse and encourage these existing mechanisms.

Key areas for action	Proposed Outputs
3.1 Standardised statistical definitions, data collection processes and reporting.	1.1.1 Mechanisms to support and progress work already being undertaken.
3.2 Cross-jurisdiction information on foster carers	3.2.1 Feasibility report on compiling and sharing information across jurisdictions on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Registered foster carers; and • Deregistered foster carers.

4. Support

The National Plan encompasses support for children and young people in foster care and support for foster carers.

Key areas for action	Proposed Outputs
4.1 Strengthening case management.	4.1.1 Sharing of best practice case management arrangements in partnership with key stakeholders
4.2 Planning for children and young people as and when they make key transitions, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • entry into care; • movement between services; • movement between placements; • restoration to family; • education – changing schools as well as entry into the; education system; • leaving care; and • movement to permanent placement. 	4.2.1 National standards for the transition planning for children and young people in foster care: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Models, standards and training materials relating to transition planning and support; • Information about transition planning and independent living allowances for young people in foster care; • Assistance with changing relationships at times of transition for both carers and children and young people; • Information and assistance for young people entering independent living but wishing to pursue further education or training; and • After care for young people who have moved out of foster care.
4.3 Access to and information about allowances and services for foster carers, children and young people.	4.3.1 Consistent information about and application of entitlements for the Australian Government allowances, benefits and services. 2.2.2 Consistent information about and application of entitlements for the State/Territory allowances and services.
4.4 Information provision at the time of placement.	4.4.1 National standards on core information that should be provided to foster carers about children/young people at the point of placement. 4.4.2 National standards on core information that should be provided to children and young people in foster care at time of placement.
4.5 The over-representation of Indigenous children and young people in foster care.	1.1.1 Liaise with existing CSMAC Indigenous committees and Indigenous peak organisations. Report on the over-representation of Indigenous children and young people in foster care and identify possible areas for action.
4.6 Information about established, good practice Indigenous foster care arrangements.	4.6.1 Share good practice Indigenous foster care arrangements among government and non-government agencies and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
4.7 Examine ways of supporting relative/kinship carers.	4.7.1 A range of support models for relative/kinship care, based on examples of good practice.

