

# Recruiting carers for children and young people in care aged 9+

## Literature Review Summary



Institute of Open Adoption Studies



My Forever Family NSW  
Caring for those who care for kids

### Background

The *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (2009-2020)*, recognises the need for children to have stable and secure placements, whether that be with their natural parents or in out-of-home care. Over the last two decades there has been an annual increase in the number of children in out-of-home care (OOHC). Once in care, children are staying longer (AIHW, 2019). As a result, recruitment of carers and supporting permanency for children in OOHC are identified as high priorities at national and state levels.

In NSW the *Permanency Support Program* is reframing of the role of foster carers and the structure of the NSW OOHC system. There is an increased emphasis on establishing permanent placements for children within the first two years of their entry into care to reduce the length of children's contact with statutory OOHC (FACS, 2017). This initiative requires targeted recruitment and training of potential carers able to support different types of care.

Adopt Change was commissioned in 2018 by the then NSW Department of Family and Community Services (now Department of Communities and Justice) to operate the new *My Forever Family Program (MFF)*. The purpose of the program is to provide recruitment, training, support and advocacy to a range of carers including foster carers, kinship carers, guardians, and adoptive families for children from statutory care in NSW.

The sector has indicated there are greater challenges in recruiting carers for children aged nine and older. There is limited Australian research on the factors influencing the decision to foster middle childhood aged children.

The Institute was commissioned by MFF to explore the characteristics and motivations of people who are more likely to consider caring for an older child, rather than young children. This research project aims to address the current gap in understanding the motivations and barriers to caring for children aged 9+ years.

The first stage of the study is a literature review analysing Australian and international research related to foster care recruitment practices, with a specific focus on recruitment of carers for older children. The second stage includes the development of media messages based on the literature review recommendations, which will be tested with a representative sample of the NSW public along with a survey on their views of fostering older children. This research will inform the development of a targeted recruitment campaign that aims to increase the number of people caring for children aged 9+ years.

### Key recruitment strategies

for children aged 9+ years include:

- Recruitment campaigns should consider persuasion theory, appealing to logic, emotion and character to deliver messages.
- Appeals to emotion should aim to elicit cognitive empathy by facilitating an understanding of the young person's perspective.
- Messages should be positively framed to motivate people to consider foster care.
- Recruitment should be informed by what young people in OOHC consider to be the key characteristics of a 'good' carer.
- The messages in recruitment campaigns should target carers who hold similar values and characteristics of a 'good' carer.
- Recruitment campaigns should target groups who are most likely to consider caring for young people and are most capable of meeting the needs of young people.
- Targeted recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and CALD carers is important for offering culturally matched placements for young people.
- Large-scale government run initiatives to small-scale grassroots approaches are needed to promote awareness and attract potential carers

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## Carer motivation



While the motivation to become a carer is diverse, there are 2 common characteristics:

1. **Altruism** – wanting to help children and do something positive for the community
2. **Responsibility**– for children in one’s kinship network, community or cultural group

In addition, religious beliefs and values may be a key motivator for faith-based communities to provide foster care.

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## Future foster carers



Recruitment campaigns for foster carers need to target people from all walks of life, including:

- **same-sex couples**
- **single carers**
- **human services professionals**
- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples**
- **People from diverse ethnic backgrounds**

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## Timeframes



There is often a significant time lag from the initial enquiry in response to an agency follow-up and carer assessment.

Few campaigns have been evaluated to determine if this delay results in decreased motivation to become a carer.

## Motivation to care for older children

International and Australian research reports corroborate the finding that it is more difficult to recruit carers for children above the age of 9 years.

The motivations and barriers to becoming a carer for a young person aged 9+ years differ from the factors influencing interest in caring for younger children. Older children are commonly reported to have experienced more complex trauma prior to entry into care and often experience higher than average levels of placement instability than younger children. As a result, older children are often the primary recipients of intensive and therapeutic foster care interventions that require carers with specialised training (Avery, 2010; CWI, 2013; Vandivere, Malm, Zinn, Allen, & McKlindon, 2015).

Some carers report feeling a sense of responsibility to care for older children. A study by the Los Angeles Child Welfare Initiative found that ‘exceptional carers’ able to care for young people aged 10-17 years with ‘emotional or mental disturbances’ had a sense of ‘calling’ to this type of work. Many of the carers identified their faith as their main support in helping them cope with the unique challenges of this role.

Others were motivated by a desire to prevent intergenerational patterns of abuse and neglect. Many were older carers with adult children who appreciated ‘the energy of young people’ and felt able to help a child move from destructive behaviours into an environment of safety and trust (CWI, 2013).

## Australian recruitment campaigns

For the last two decades, the demographic of Australian foster carers has been fairly stable: primarily females; aged between 35-54; not participating in the paid workforce; no post-school qualifications; and speak English as their first language (McHugh, et al., 2004; Smyth & Eardley, 2008).

Yet the potential carer population is more diverse. Specifically, recent studies have noted that same-sex couples, single carers and people from helping profession backgrounds show a higher than average interest in fostering (McGuinness & Arney, 2012). This is reflective of a predominant change in carer recruitment methods over the last decade that have attempted to broaden the diversity of people becoming foster carers. The predominant message that has underpinned campaigns has been to encourage people from all walks of life to explore foster care (Richmond & McArthur, 2017).

Evidence suggests that mainstream foster carer recruitment strategies are less effective than targeted campaigns. Recruitment strategies need to reflect the broad cross-section of the cultural and family structures that exist within the Australian population.

Targeted approaches may be considerably more effective in recruiting new carers of children aged 9+ years than mainstream approaches (Richardson, Bromfield, & Higgins, 2005; McGuinness & Arney, 2012). McHugh et al. (2004) recommends that the recruitment of carers for children who are harder to find placements for, such as adolescents and children with disabilities, should target professionals in therapeutic and caring professions. This approach is supported by current carer population trends, which identify that people in helping professions are more likely to be foster carers (McGuinness & Arney, 2012).

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## Limited evaluations of recruitment campaigns

There has been very minimal evaluation of the effectiveness of the wide variety of recruitment campaigns. Recording the number of enquiries following the release of a campaign does not measure the number of people who then progressed through the assessment phase to become authorised carers.

## Recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be overrepresented in OOHC. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people identified connection to family, culture and community as important factors that impact on their wellbeing (Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2005; McDowall, 2016; Higgins, Bromfield, Higgins, & Richardson, 2006; Moore, Bennett, & McArthur, 2007). The importance of connection with family for Indigenous children is not just with parents. They place a high priority on remaining, or having contact, with their siblings when in OOHC (Higgins, Bromfield, Higgins, & Richardson, 2006; Moore, Bennett, & McArthur, 2007).

Across Australia, approximately 65% of Indigenous children are placed with kinship carers or other Indigenous carers. In NSW the majority of Aboriginal children are currently placed with kinship carers (AIHW, 2019). As a result, family finding services continue to have a significant role in the recruitment of carers for Aboriginal children. This aligns with the most predominant message in OOHC policy and practice for Aboriginal children that emphasises the importance of culturally matched placements.

Evidence suggests that the most effective campaigns for Indigenous carers are run by members of the local community (Higgins & Butler, 2007). These campaigns use low-key community-based recruitment methods such as local radio and newspaper advertisements, as well as attendance at community events. Word-of-mouth referrals are reported as the most effective method of recruitment (Thomson, Watt, & McArthur, 2016; Delfabbro, Borgas, Vast, & Osborn, 2008; McGuinness & Arney, 2012; Higgins & Butler, 2007; Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2005; Richardson, Bromfield, & Higgins, 2005; AbSec, 2013).

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community have a unique set of motivations and barriers for participating in foster care. In response, there has been a gradual move towards an increased involvement of Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations (ACCOs) in the development of culturally appropriate practices to recruit and retain Indigenous carers. NSW ACCOs have also partnered with statutory bodies to develop culturally appropriate assessment tools for carers (Higgins & Butler, 2007). Assessments conducted with a minimum of one Indigenous worker are used with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people applying to care for Aboriginal Children (Higgins & Butler, 2007).

### Motivations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers



- Sense of collective responsibility
- Desire to prevent another 'Stolen Generation'
- Culturally sensitive recruitment and assessment practices
- Community controlled OOHC services.

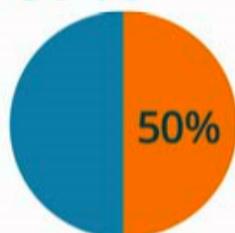
### Barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait carers



- Distrust of statutory agencies
- Poverty and disadvantage
- Shortage of suitable housing and overcrowding
- Lack of understanding about traditional child care practices
- Lack of culturally appropriate assessment



Half (50%) of children in relative/kinship placements were living with their grandparents



In 2017–18, the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children receiving child protection services was 163.8 per 1,000 Indigenous children, 8 times the rate for non-Indigenous children (19.7 per 1,000).



## Recruitment of CALD carers

In NSW culturally matched placements are prioritised for children in OOHC, influenced by Australian and international research that links connection to culture and community to increase stability and a positive sense of identity for children. In Australia, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) populations are significantly underrepresented among foster and kinship carers. At present, there is no reliable data recording the number of CALD children in OOHC, however child protection systems across Australia have reported an insufficient number of CALD carers to make culturally matched placements (McHugh, et al., 2004; Burke & Paxman, 2008).

Mainstream recruitment strategies have been found to be ineffective in recruiting carers from non-English speaking backgrounds. The Multicultural Recruitment Project, in NSW, found that the translation of advertising materials did not succeed in targeting the CALD population. The majority of respondents accessing translated advertisements were either too old or had recently arrived in Australia and were unable to provide care for a child (De Michele & Elliott, 2011). Other studies have also found that culturally targeted advertisements in newspapers are not a successful method of recruitment.

Research identifies that word-of-mouth and community relationships are the most effective methods of recruitment of CALD carers (Burke & Paxman, 2008; De Michele & Elliott, 2011; Richmond & McArthur, 2017). Targeted recruitment methods should focus on providing information about foster care through partnerships with migrant and refugee community development agencies and using grass-roots strategies, including advertisements in cultural newspapers and radio stations.

Specific approaches may be needed for particular communities. For example, building relationships with local pastors and churches is one of the strategies for reaching the African community. The Muslim community is likely to be motivated by messages related to self-preservation and religious duty (McHugh, et al., 2004).

A significant barrier to increasing the number of CALD carers is the lack of understanding of the child protection system and OOHC in Australia. Cultural perspectives on abuse and the concept of removal of children by a statutory body can become a barrier for people from collectivist cultures where child welfare concerns are addressed by elders within the community (De Michele & Elliott, 2011). In addition, mainstream recruitment and assessment processes can become a barrier for potential carers.

In conclusion, research suggests that effective recruitment involves messaging that outlines the problem, builds empathy and targets the character traits of 'good' carers. Different types of messages can be used in the same campaign to complement one another. It is important to feature messages that are distinctive to recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and CALD carers.

## Recruitment of CALD carers

- Grassroots and word of mouth campaigns are more effective with people from non-English speaking backgrounds.
- Partnerships with cultural and community-based groups are needed to build relationships.
- Community and religious leaders can be very influential.
- Translated materials from mainstream campaigns tend to have little success.



## Promising practices for recruiting CALD carers

- Establishment of foster care agencies that specialise in recruitment and retention of CALD carers
- Carer training and assessment processes in the native language of potential carers
- Consistent support throughout the application process
- Follow up support and engagement with CALD families



### For more information

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w <https://www.myforeverfamily.org.au/>

Full references included in the literature review



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