

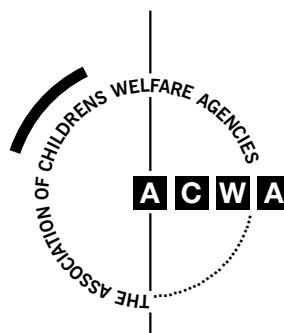
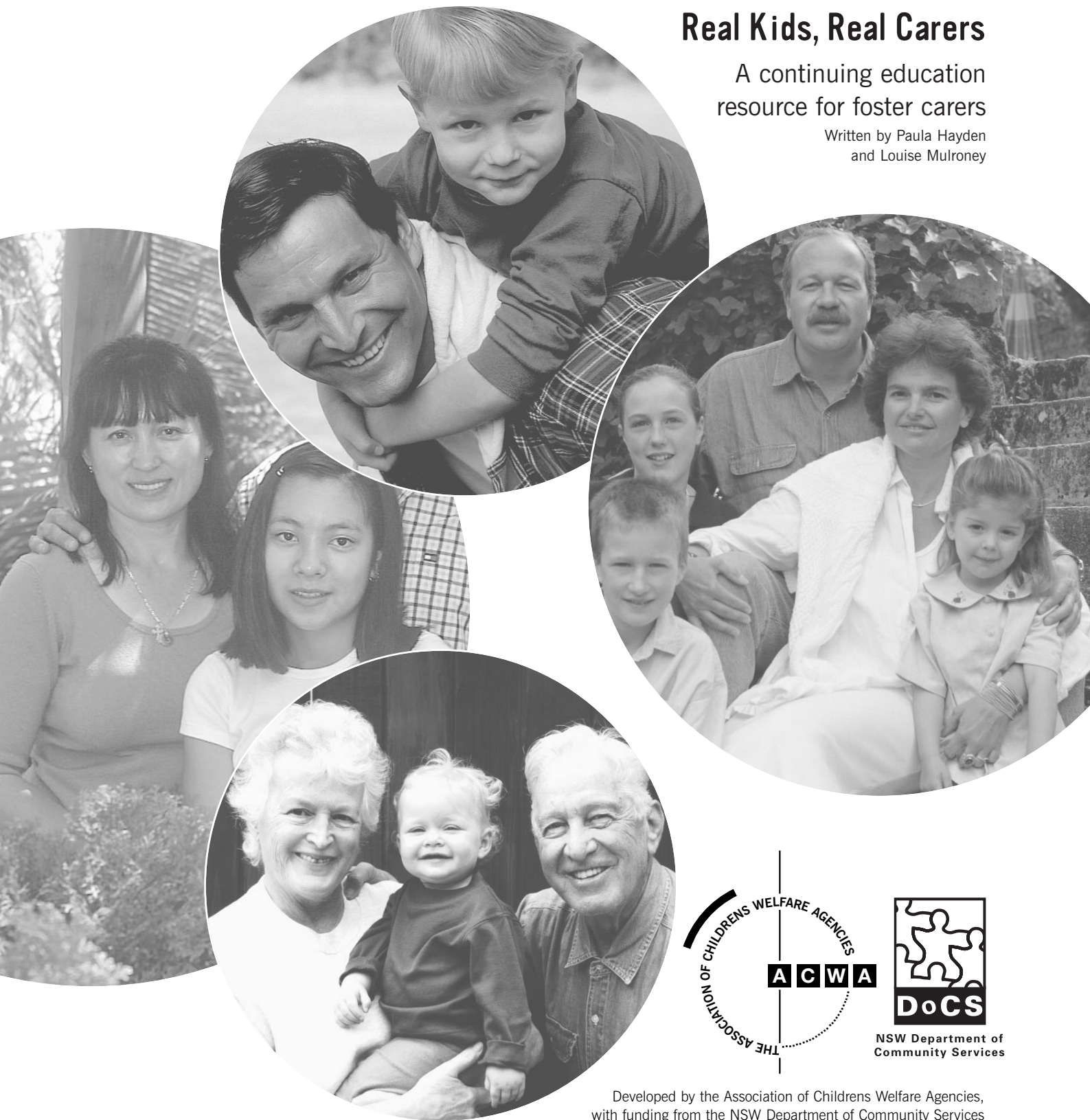
Reality fostering

The impact of fostering on carers and their families

Real Kids, Real Carers

A continuing education
resource for foster carers

Written by Paula Hayden
and Louise Mulroney



NSW Department of
Community Services

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Additional copies

Additional copies of this booklet can be downloaded from
www.acwa.asn.au/realkidsrealcarers/

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About Real Kids, Real Carers

This booklet is part of a continuing education resource for foster carers called *Real Kids, Real Carers*.

Real Kids, Real Carers contains 6 separate booklets covering topics of importance to foster carers.

The titles in the series

- ✦ Independence and connections: caring for adolescents
- ✦ I'm an individual: children and young people with disabilities
- ✦ Participation: creating opportunities for children and young people to contribute to decision-making
- ✦ Reality fostering: the impact of fostering on carers and their families
- ✦ Whose job is this? team work in foster care
- ✦ Whose problem is this? understanding and responding to challenging and difficult behaviour

Full copies of all titles in the series can be downloaded from www.acwa.asn.au/realkidsrealcarers/

Using these booklets

Each booklet sets out a two-hour education session. Experience has shown that foster carers are more able to access training that can be completed in a half day or evening.

The learning opportunities will be enhanced if sessions

- > involve an experienced foster carer as part of the training team
- > include agency workers as participants.

These sessions provide an introduction to the topic under discussion, though follow-up sessions may be required to explore the topic in depth.

These sessions are designed for all carers, whether very experienced or currently in their first placement. Children of foster carers, particularly those who are older teenagers and young adults, will also benefit from participating in these education sessions.

Training resources

These booklets provide detailed guides to all activities, including handout material to be photocopied for participants. Handout material can be found at the back of each booklet.



The booklets include “scripts” for trainers which are indicated by the use of the talking head icon.

Such scripts are not meant to be prescriptive, but provide input material that trainers can use and present in their own style.

Session information

Learning outcomes

At the end of the session, participants will be able to identify

- > identify the impact of fostering on carers and their children
- > describe the issues raised by allegations made against carers and strategies for providing safe caring
- > describe strategies for dealing with the pressure and challenges fostering presents for carers and their children.

Material required in session

- > Whiteboard or butchers paper
- > A workbook for each participant, made up of Handouts 1–6
- > Evaluation form for each participant (see the example at the end of this booklet)
- > Resources for carers to borrow from your agency relevant to the topic (eg posters, booklets, videos, agency policies on dealing with allegations of complaints against carers etc)

Length of session

- > 2 hours minimum

Training should include opportunities for carers to informally exchange information and build their networks. Ideally training will include additional time allocated for a meal or coffee breaks.

Background material for trainers

Responding to allegations of abuse against carers

Trainers need to be prepared for a range of responses to the issue of allegations of abuse against carers. It is likely that in any group of experienced carers, there will be some who have been subject to such an allegation and may bring with them strong personal responses.

It is important that to note that this workshop only deals briefly with this topic, in the context of creating a safe environment for all family members. All carers should be given comprehensive training on this topic separately which covers

- > what constitutes an allegation
- > agency policy and procedures for responding to allegations
- > the role of the NSW Ombudsman when there is an allegation of abuse.

It is critical that trainers are aware of the relevant policy for dealing with allegations of abuse made against carers, so any comments from participants can be responded to appropriately. However any complex questions, or ones that involve specific situations, should not be discussed within the workshop. Participants with such questions or comments should be referred to appropriate agency personnel.

For further background information, the following websites may be helpful

www.ombo.nsw.gov.au

This is the websire of the NSW Ombudsman. Look under “child protection” for information about how allegations of child abuse made against carers are to be investigated and reported.

www.kids.nsw.gov.au

This is the website of the NSW Commission for Children and Young People. It includes information about the Working with Children Check that all carers are subject to and guidelines re disciplinary procedures.

Session Outline

1. Introduction (15 minutes)

Activity

Go around group (if group members don't already know each other) and have each person say

- > his/her name
- > a word or sentence that says something about the impact of fostering on their life and that of their family.

Briefly introduce yourself

Explain any necessary housekeeping details eg location of toilets, length of session, need to turn off mobile phones, arrangements for refreshments etc.

Explain group rules

Highlight the importance of

- > maintaining confidentiality ie not discussing personal details about any child, young person or adult in a way that means that other people in the group could identify them
- > respecting other people in the group by listening to their opinions, even if not the same as your own.

Explain purpose of session

Distribute workbooks.

Go through Handout 1. Check with participants that the learning outcomes on the top of Handout 1 fit their expectations of the session.

Activity

Brainstorm: What motivated you to become carers, what keeps you in fostering?

Write responses on whiteboard.

Introducing the topic



“It’s important to think about why you continue to foster and what helps maintain your commitment.

Fostering is both challenging and rewarding. The pressure of fostering can be overwhelming, and sometimes can undermine a carer’s confidence and motivation.

In this workshop we will be identifying some of those challenges and have an opportunity to discuss them. Clarity in these areas can help us be realistic in our expectation of ourselves, our families and for the children and young people in our care.”

2. The challenges of fostering (15 minutes)

Activity

Brainstorm: What are some of the pressures and challenges of fostering for carers and their children?

Note these on the board under the headings “for carers” and “for carers’ children”.

In groups of 3, get participants to complete Handout 2.

Assign each group different challenges from the list that were raised in the brainstorm.

Examples of challenges for carers may include:

- > *Dealing with challenging behaviour*
- > *Feeling unsupported isolated*
- > *Living with the impact of caring on carer’s children*
- > *Working within a system when it contributes to frustration rather than alleviates it*

Examples of challenges for the children and young people in carer’s families may include:

- > *Having to share your home and parents with a stranger*
- > *The intrusion of workers into the home*
- > *Dealing with the reactions from friends*

Feedback from small groups on strategies.

Acknowledge the range of strategies identified and the value of carers sharing their strengths, knowledge and experience.

3. Children who care count too (25 minutes)

Highlight the impact on children of foster carers



“There has been a growing recognition of the impact of foster caring on children of carers. They have to share their parents as well as their home. Often their input into decision making regarding the placement of children is limited. Some children can feel compelled to go along with their parents’ decision to foster, even if they are not happy with the idea.

The reality for children of carers is that they can be at the receiving end of very challenging behaviour and their needs and feelings can be overlooked.”

Activity

In groups of three, get participants to read through the case study on Handout 3 and answer the questions at the end.

Get feedback from small groups.

Read through Handout 4 together.

Ask participants to

- > tick ones that would work in your household
- > add in additional strategies that would support children and young people in families that foster.

4. Allegations against carers (10 minutes)

Highlighting issues relating to allegations of abuse



“Living and caring for a child or young person who has been physically or sexually abused involves protecting them from further abuse and also protecting your own family members.

One of the challenges facing carers is the risk that an allegation of abuse will be made against themselves or their children during the course of their caring career.

The close personal nature of foster care, and the fact that is provided in the privacy of the carer’s own homes, makes children vulnerable to abuse.

It is a fact that some children and young people are abused in care. Careful and swift action needs to be taken to end the abuse and ensure it does not happen again.



Allegations can also be made that are not true. These can have a negative impact on all those involved. Children and young people may make false allegations for several reasons.”

Activity

Read through **Handout 5** with participants.

Check if there are any questions or comments.

5. Providing safe caring (30 minutes)

Minimising risk



“Abuse and allegations of abuse are less likely to occur when children and young people

- > know their bodies and know the difference between good and bad touch
- > understand their rights and can assert them
- > feel comfortable in expressing fears concerns and anxieties
- > have carers who are aware of how their behaviour could be misinterpreted.

In order to make caring safe for everyone we need to clear about what constitutes risky behaviour.”

Activity

In pairs, get participants to work through the list on Handout 6 and identify risky behaviour.

Get feedback on each situation. In any situation where some risk was identified, ask “what would make this a safe situation for the child and their carer?”

If the impact of gender does not arise in the feedback session, ensure that participants consider whether changing the gender of the carer or the child in any of the situations would affect their responses.

Questions to discuss

- ❖ What household rules do you have in place or might develop to minimise the impact of risky behaviour?
- ❖ What are some of the ways you can involve your own children and the foster children in your care in developing a set of house rules?

Dealing with allegations



“To protect children and ensure that all complaints are dealt with properly, all allegations of abuse of foster children in care have to be reported to the NSW Ombudsman by the agency responsible for overseeing the placement.

Provide a very brief summary of the agency/departmental procedure for dealing with an allegation of abuse in care.

Support for children, young people and carers is vital whilst processing allegations. Carers can obtain support from the Foster Care Association, the Aboriginal Foster Carer Support Project or their local foster carer support group.

As with most things prevention is better than cure. Creating a safe space for all family members is the best way of reducing the risk of allegations being made against carers or their children.”

6. Conclusion (5 minutes)

Importance of caring for carers



“Longevity in foster care is linked to carer’s ability to ask for help and to take care of themselves.

Children and young people need carers who can stay in for the long haul. Carers who take care of themselves a more likely to maintain their commitment to care and provide good role models for children and young people in care.”

Activity

Ask each participant to provide one piece of advice they would give to prospective carers which would help them stay in fostering.

Invite participants to complete the evaluation form.

(See the example at the end of this booklet)

Learning Outcomes of Session

At the end of the session, participants will be able to

- > identify the impact of fostering on carers and their children
- > describe the issues raised by allegations made against carers and strategies for providing safe caring
- > describe strategies for dealing with the pressure and challenges fostering presents for carers and their children.

Session Outline

1. Introduction
2. The challenges of fostering
3. Children who care count too
4. Allegations against carers
5. Providing safe caring
6. Conclusion

Challenges

Strategies

For carers:

For carers:

For children and young people
whose family provides foster care:

For children and young people
whose family provides foster care:

Franco and Anna's story

Franco and Anna's twin sons Vaughan and Vinnie are aged 10. When Franco and Anna decided to foster they requested girls. Franco and Anna were keen to have the experience of raising girls and for the boys to know what it was like to have "sisters".

After some initial training and a brief assessment two girls, Marie aged 12 and Andrea aged 14, were placed with Franco and Anna. The first six months went reasonably well, apart from a few minor incidents involving stealing and not coming home on time. Overall by the end of the first six months Franco and Anna were feeling that their decision to foster had been a good one.

This belief was shaken when Franco and Anna discovered that Andrea had stolen Vaughan's collection of matchbox cars (his most prized possession), and sold them in order to buy a new bag.

Andrea's response to Vaughan's distress was to say "Only little boys have matchbox cars, you're too big for those, I'm going to tell every one in school you collect baby cars!"

Discussing this later in the day Vaughan says, "I never really wanted a sister, we were alright before they came. Those foster kids get everything, they can do what they want."

- ❖ How might Vaughan be feeling?
- ❖ What are Vaughan's needs?
- ❖ What strategies need to put in place to meet those needs, while at the same time recognising Andrea's needs?
- ❖ How might you involve Vaughan in devising and implementing the strategies?

Strategies for children and young people

Some strategies to help children and young people to deal with the challenges of fostering

- > Set time aside regularly to check out how fostering is going for your own children eg every fortnight, month.
- > Give your own children opportunities to participate in decision making eg the frequency of respite, age of kids to be placed, timing of placements.
- > Allow your children to express their emotions about fostering without making them feel guilty.
- > Respect your children's rights and needs to have time out from fostering.
- > Arrange for them to meet with other children whose family provides foster care.
- > Encourage the workers to acknowledge the contribution of children and young people in your family.
- > Involve children and young people in foster carer training.
- > Have family times with your own children remind them why they are special to you.
- > Explain why foster children are behaving in a particular way.
- > Be prepared. Plan with your children strategies for dealing with change eg how to let parents know if they need time out.
- > Mark the end of placements with a special meal or family treat during which your children's contribution to fostering can be acknowledged.
- > Be assertive, protect and take care of yourself and your children.

Allegations of Abuse

Why children and young people may make allegations

- > To get action to stop abuse. It is an unfortunate fact that some children and young people are abused by foster carers. Children and young people must have avenues to report abuse.
- > She or he may misinterpret an innocent action e.g. a child who was regularly abused in bed following a goodnight kiss may believe that a goodnight kiss is the start of more abuse.
- > As a way of drawing attention to previous abuse for the first time. This may be a sign that the child or young person trust the carer to deal appropriately with such information.
- > As a way of exercising some control over life and other people, perhaps because they are feeling angry or powerless.
- > To try and leave the foster placement without losing face.

Why a carer might abuse a child or young person

- > Some adults become carers to access vulnerable children.
- > Carers become isolated and personalise the behaviour of children in care.
- > Carers become tired, frustrated and are overloaded.
- > Carers lose sight of why children behave in a challenging way and respond inappropriately.

Risky Business

	Safe	Carries some risk
A child occasionally gets into bed with his carers for a 'cuddle'.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A child wears a dirty T-shirt because the carer has done no washing for over a week.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Adults and children walk about with no clothes on in the home.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A carer drags a child forcefully by the arm, to get them out of the way of a car that is ignoring the pedestrian crossing sign.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Carers play wrestling and tickling games with foster children.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A young person is made to scrub the toilet every time they have used it.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Children go into other children's bedrooms whenever they want.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A child is not allowed to eat if his clothes are dirty when he gets home after playing cricket.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A carer's 17 year old son occasionally looks after foster children alone.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A carer sleeps with an 11 year old foster boy who is sick.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A carer tells a young person "I'll kill you if you don't turn that music down!"	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

