

# Independence and connections

Caring for adolescents

## Real Kids, Real Carers

A continuing education  
resource for foster carers

Written by Paula Hayden and  
Louise Mulronev



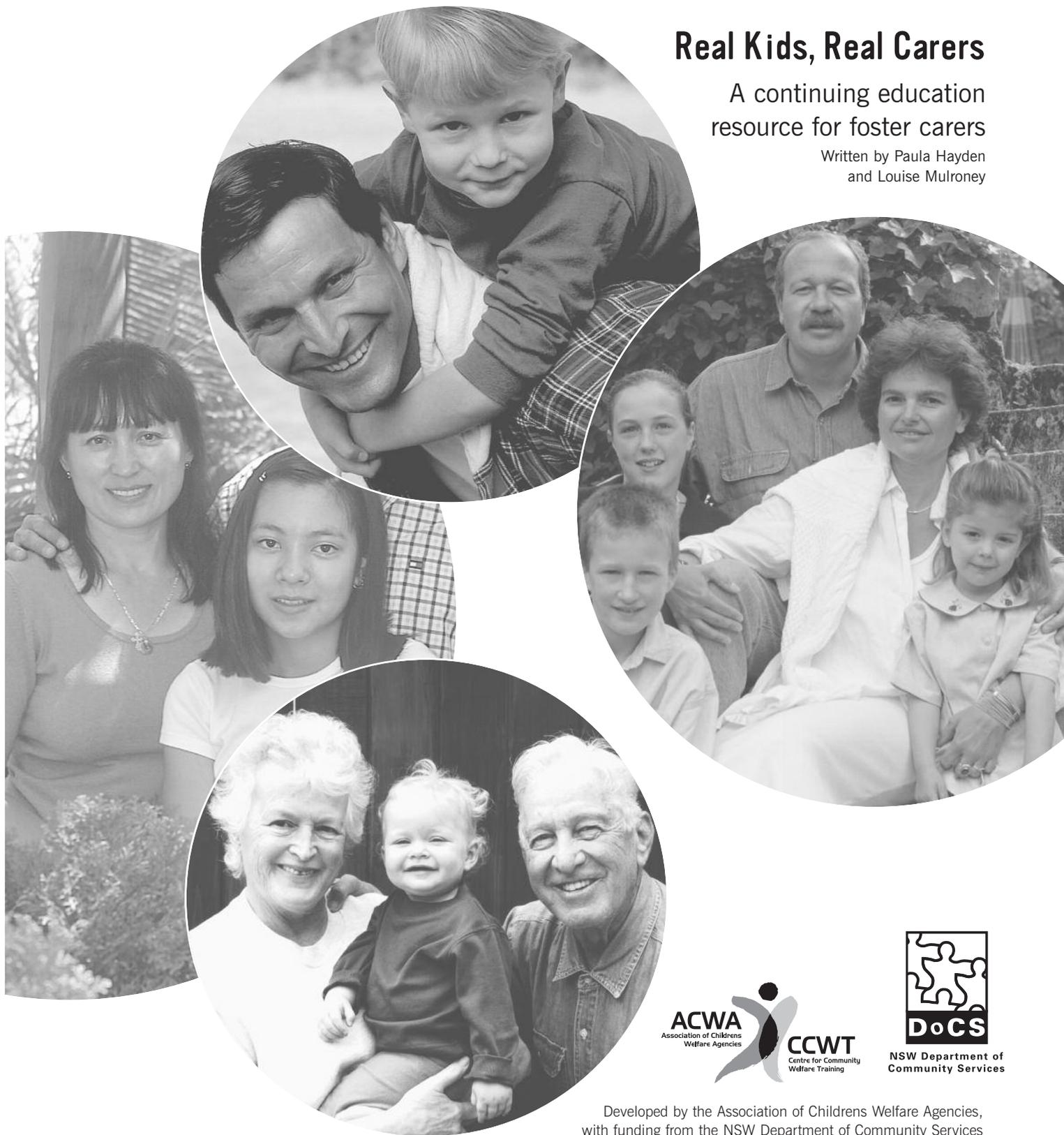
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**ACWA**  
Association of Childrens  
Welfare Agencies



**CCWT**  
Centre for Community  
Welfare Training



**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/](http://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/](http://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

- > key issues for adolescents
- > the impact of being in care on adolescent development
- > strategies to appropriately care for adolescents who are in care.

## Material required in session

- > Whiteboard or butchers paper
- > A workbook for each participant, made up of Handouts 1–8
- > 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)

## 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.*

# 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
- > the ages of the children in their home (foster children and any of their own).

### 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.

### Introduction to topic

**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.

**Ask participants to say two or three words** that describe their experience of being a teenager. Write these words on whiteboard/butchers paper.

*Encourage participants to be brief, rather than provide details of their teenage experience.*

## Explain purpose of session



“This session will not provide all the answers about how to deal with adolescent concerns. But it will open up the topic of what is going on for adolescents, particularly those in care, and how we may be able to understand their behaviour a bit better. This will help us select some useful ways of responding to the issues that arise when caring for adolescents.”

## 2. Understanding adolescence (25 minutes)

### Explaining adolescence as a time of significant change

**Highlight** that adolescence can be a time of mixed emotions and change.

Refer to responses from previous brainstorm to indicate the range of experiences.

**Go through Handout 2** with participants.

**Highlight** that each stage of adolescence is necessary on the way to independence from parents/carers control. Different young people go through these stages at different ages depending on their experiences, personalities etc.

**Ask for questions** or comments.

### Activity

**Ask groups of 2-3** to look at the stories on Handout 3, and discuss

- ❖ What stage of adolescence may the young person be?
- ❖ How does the story relate to the issues of identity or participation in decision making?

*Make sure some groups start with the last story and work up the page so that each story is covered by at least one group.*

**Ask each group to give feedback** on one story.

### 3. Independence/Interdependence (10 mins)

#### Explanation of the concept of interdependence



“Often we talk about young people becoming independent. In fact, no well balanced adult is totally independent. While they are no longer dependent on their parents or carers, they are actually interdependent with others.

This means that they are part of a network of contacts where they both give and receive practical and emotional support in order to survive and function. Their parents/carers may be one part of this network.

Sometimes it seems like young people have to break some of their close connections with parents/carers in order to change the patterns of dependence. However, this may be one step towards reforming a new pattern of interdependence.

Adolescence is an important time in life. It is the period where young people are involved in developing skills to equip them for life as an adult.”

#### Activity

**Ask for examples** of when a person went from being dependent on their parents/carer to being in a relationship of interdependence.

*The purpose of this exercise is to establish that the group understands the concept of interdependence eg a two sided relationship of support between parents and their adult children.*

#### Explain the role of carers and education in adolescence



“Parents and carers play a critical role in the life of young people. Their supportive and understanding attitude and responses can allow a young person to do the necessary experiments with problem solving and decision making skills, and constructively learn from their inevitable mistakes.

Carers also have a critical role in advocacy and encouragement to promote educational outcomes for a young person. Research has shown that good outcomes for people leaving care and fitting into their community are often linked to them being able to achieve their educational potential.”

## 4. Double jeopardy: young people in care (20 minutes)

### Activity

Go through Handout 4

In groups of 2-3, read Asher's story on Handout 5 and discuss

- ◆ What factors may have delayed Asher's progress through the stages of adolescence?

Ask small groups to highlight issues that they had identified.

## 5. The carer's role (20 minutes)

### Activity

Get participants in pairs to complete table on Handout 6.

Get feedback from pairs.

Go through Handout 7 with participants.

Ask for questions or comments.

## 6. Putting it into practice (20 minutes)

### Activity

Ask each participant to complete Handout 8 based on a situation where a young person was in their care.

*This can be a situation known to participant if they have not had the experience of caring for or parenting a young person.*

Encourage participants to ask for assistance if needed.

Ask for feedback on any thoughts or discoveries that came from doing that activity.

## 7. Conclusion (10 minutes)

### Activity

Ask participants to tell the group about something useful that they are taking away from this workshop.

Ensure participants have completed the evaluation forms.  
(See the example at the end of this booklet)

# Learning outcomes of session

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

- > key issues for adolescents
- > the impact of being in care on adolescent development
- > strategies to appropriately care for adolescents who are in care.

## Session outline

1. Introduction
2. Understanding adolescence
3. Independence/interdependence
4. Double jeopardy: young people in care
5. The carer's role
6. Putting it into practice
7. Conclusion

# Understanding Adolescence

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The teenage years are an important time in a person's life. It is the time when the young person is no longer a child, but not yet an adult.

Adolescence is a time when young people identify their own goals as well as practicing different ways of dealing with responsibility and decision making.

It is a time of change. This can be exciting, but can also bring stress.

## Adolescent stages

**Early** adolescents are

- > very aware of body changes
- > still value adult role models.

**Mid** adolescents

- > value peer approval more than parental/carer approval
- > are aware of and starting to explore romantic/sexual relationships.

**Late** adolescents

- > make own decisions re life style and future directions
- > look to peers for support and company more than parents/carers.

*The task* of parents/carers is to support the young person through those stages.

*The challenge* is to balance the provision of guidance and limits while enabling the young person the freedom to develop and learn new skills and behaviour.

## The adolescent tasks

The main task of an adolescent is to learn how to be able to survive independently of parent/carers control.

The main ways they do this are

- > developing their own **identity**
- > learning skills of **decision making**.

# Identity and decision-making

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## Harry's story

*Harry has been playing soccer for a district club for five years. His carers are active in the club and his foster dad is a referee. His foster parents are really pleased because there is a chance this year that Harry may be chosen in a rep team. They are bewildered and upset when Harry says he doesn't want to try out for the team because he has plans with his mates to go dirt bike racing that day.*

## Jemma's story

*Jemma locks herself in the bathroom and takes ages to get ready whenever the family is going out. She can never decide what to wear. When her carer tells her to stop hogging the bathroom, Jemma says she's being picked on and bursts into tears.*

## Mai's story

*Mai's foster parents have always encouraged Mai at school. Mai is creative and caring and they think that she may be very happy working as a hairdresser or in child care. They would like to see her go to TAFE and do some training.*

*Mai and her friend are planning to get a job in a fast food shop. They want to save up and do some travel. Mai's carers are worried that Mai will never return to study and she will always be stuck in dead end jobs.*

## Mark's story

*Mark's carer finds what she describes as "pornographic" magazines hidden at the back of one of his cupboards. He is furious with her when she says she doesn't want such filth in the house. Mark accuses her of spying on everything he does. He says she has no right to touch his things and she is never to go in his room again.*

## Discussion questions

- ❖ What stage of adolescence may the young person be?
- ❖ How does the story relate to the issues of identity and/or making decisions?

# Young people in care

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Young people in care have to take the same steps towards interdependence as all other young people. These steps are to

- > develop own **identity**
- > learn skills of **decision making**.

However, young people in care may also have to deal with additional issues that can make it harder to take those steps.

## Identity

Limited knowledge or contact with birth family may raise issues about identity.

Identity issues can also be complex when young people are aware that they are in care because of their parent's limitations (eg drug dependence, abusive behaviour).

## Decision making

Being put into care is usually a process over which the child/young person has little or no control. It can set a pattern for the child/young person where major (and minor) decisions are made on their behalf and they are given little or no experience of being responsible and accountable.

Placement disruptions produce periods of chaos for a young person which can erode confidence and undermine trust and security. A lack of a secure base can limit the ability of a young person to exercise responsibility for themselves and others.

# Asher's story

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*Asher is twenty years old. He has been in trouble with the police for petty theft and vandalism. He always blames others for the difficulties that arise in his life, and comes back to his former carers, Jim and Ellen, and demands that they let him stay or sort things out for him.*

*Jim and Ellen say they have done all they can to help Asher and they are fed up. They enrolled him in a course and paid his fees up-front, but he left after two weeks when he had an argument with his course teacher. Asher says the teacher was racist. Jim and Ellen pay his fines. They organised a suit for him when he explained he had a job interview, but they found out later that he hadn't even put in a job application. They say that he is totally irresponsible and he is no longer welcome in their house. Jim will not even take his telephone calls.*

*However, Ellen feels terrible because she know that he has no other people to help him. She meets him occasionally and buys him lunch so she can see that he is getting something to eat. Asher never stays long, and always borrows a bit of extra money. Ellen is worried that Asher may be using the money to buy drugs.*

## **Asher's background**

*Asher's birth father went back to Malaysia to live when Asher was five. His birth mother, Kali, also had a two year old daughter. When she formed a new relationship, her partner found it difficult to deal with Asher and abused him. Kali left her partner for a while but found the loneliness and the financial strain so difficult that she returned to him. When Asher was seven he was placed in care under a court order.*

*Asher was in eight different placements from age 7 to 18. Two placements broke down because of health issues for carers. One carer unexpectedly became pregnant and so gave up foster caring. One family had to move unexpectedly and chose not to take Asher with them. Two placements broke down because the carers had difficulty dealing with Asher. The final placement, with Jim and Ellen, came to an end when Asher turned 18.*

*Handout 5 continues on next page >>>*

## Asher's story (Continued)

*Jim and Ellen cared for Asher from the age of 15. Asher moved from another area when he was placed with Jim and Ellen. He started a new school. He had been going to a youth club but that was near his old home and took half an hour to get to. Jim and Ellen spent a lot of time finding out about youth clubs in their area but when they told Asher about the one they thought was most suitable he wasn't interested.*

*Jim and Ellen knew how important it was for them to have a good relationship with Asher so they made sure they did lots of fun activities together. They were wary about Asher going out at weekends or nights because they were worried he may get in with the wrong crowd.*

*They were pleased when Asher joined a club at school which went on supervised excursions with a teacher. It was not till several months later that they found out the club had not operated for some time and Asher had been hanging out with some of the trouble makers from school. They grounded him for a month, but he often sneaked out at night. Jim and Ellen knew they couldn't lock him up forever, so decided to turn a blind eye as long as he was in his bed in the morning.*

*Asher talked about his birth family a couple of times, and wondered where his mother and sister lived. He had been upset because a letter he sent to them was returned "unknown at this address". Ellen told him not to worry and to forget about them. He had his whole life in front of him, and he shouldn't take it personally if they didn't leave a forwarding address for him.*

*Asher seemed to be fixated by his appearance. Jim found him one day trying to bleach his skin. Jim told him it was stupid and dangerous and locked up all the household bleaches. Asher got into lots of fights at school. He says that he was picked on and called names like "curry". Ellen told him to remember that "sticks and stone will break my bones, but names will never hurt me". Asher started truanting, but Ellen didn't want him to get into more trouble, so described it as his "stress leave". Asher left school early but didn't seem able to get a job.*

## Discussion question

- ◆ What factors may have delayed Asher's progress through the stages of adolescence to be able to live interdependently with others?

# The carer's role

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List some strategies that Jim and Ellen could have used to assist Asher reach the stage of interdependence.

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| Decision making skills |  |
| Developing identity    |  |

# 11 ways to assist adolescents who are in care

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1. Recognise and acknowledge the stage that the young person is in, and the issues with which they are dealing.
2. Balance the need to provide a secure base for a young person with the young person's need to experiment with independence.
3. Ensure that the young person participates in all decisions that affect him/her.
4. Provide plenty of appropriate opportunities for a young person to make decisions and be responsible and accountable for their actions.
5. Be interested in the young person's past and assist him/her to have a sense of their own life story.
6. Encourage any contact with birth family that is possible.
7. Ensure a young person can explore and claim particular aspects of his/her identity that you do not share eg race, religion etc.
8. Encourage the young person to develop a community network which includes peers.
9. Encourage a young person's to achieve their educational potential.
10. Ensure a young person has life skills such as budgeting, job or training readiness, household management.
11. Participate, with the young person, case workers etc, in preparing a leaving care plan well before the young person actually leaves care.

# Putting it into practice

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Think of a young person in your care. What stage of adolescence is the young person in? (see Handout 2) .....

|   | What you already do/did | Something else you could do/have done |
|---|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Provide a secure base                                   |                         |                                       |
| Let them experiment with independence                   |                         |                                       |
| Let them participate in decisions that affect them      |                         |                                       |
| Ensure they are responsible for their actions           |                         |                                       |
| Have interest in their past and life story              |                         |                                       |
| Encourage contact with their birth family               |                         |                                       |
| Explore their cultural identity                         |                         |                                       |
| Develop a network of peers                              |                         |                                       |
| Achieve their education potential                       |                         |                                       |
| Teach life skills<br>eg budgeting, household management |                         |                                       |
| Participate in preparing leaving care plan              |                         |                                       |

