

Royal Commission into Family Violence in Victoria Foster Care Association of Victoria submission

The Foster Care Association of Victoria (FCAV) would like to address term of reference 1B, relating to early intervention to identify and protect those at risk of family violence and prevent the escalation of violence, and 2, relating to systemic responses to family violence in the child protection system.

International studies have reported that as many as 85% of children in foster care have been a witness to violence¹. They are also significantly more likely than the general population to have directly experienced violence themselves². The long-term effects of this exposure can include a propensity to use violence in future relationships, including towards primary caregivers.

While the FCAV and foster carers across Victoria have long been aware of the problem of violence towards foster carers and their birth children, there have been a growing number of news reports of particularly violent incidents, including a recent high profile case from Queensland which had a horrendous and life changing impact for the foster family³⁴⁵.

It is well known that children in care, often as young as 3 or 4, regularly exhibit violent and aggressive behaviour, and therapeutic foster care programs have even been developed to specifically target children with these needs⁶. Many

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ˆ Stein, BD, Zima, BT, Elliott, MN, Burnam, MA, Shahinfar, A, Fox, NA, & Leavitt, LA. 2001. *Violence Exposure Among School-Age Children in Foster Care: Relationship to Distress Symptoms*. Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Vol 40. No 5, p. 588—594.

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ˆ Burns, BJ, Phillips, SD, Wagner, HR, Barth, RP, Kolko, DJ, Campbell, Y, & Landsverk, J. 2004. *Mental Health Need and Access to Mental Health Services by Youths Involved with Child Welfare: a National Survey*. Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Vol 43. No. 8, p. 960-970.

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ˆ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/mother-tongue/9492242/Whod-be-a-foster-parent.html>

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ˆ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1197703/Social-workers-betrayed-reveals-foster-mother-says-failed-mention-teenagers-violent-past.html>

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ˆ <http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/child-safety-department-tells-three-sisters-they-shared-blame-for-sexual-assault-by-foster-child/story-e6freoof-1226527760277>

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ˆ <https://www.anglicarevic.org.au/blogs/foster-care/education-back-on-track-with-foster-care>

children in foster care in Australia may exhibit aggressive behaviour, including sexualised aggressive behaviour and violence towards others⁷.

The FCAV believes that family violence directed at foster carers and their children by children and young people placed in their homes by the Victorian Government requires the attention of this Commission. In most cases 'the system' is aware that these children and young people have a violent history, and in some cases foster carers are not informed of this history. Full disclosure and informed consent is the first step towards ensuring the safety of foster carers and their families.

Not only is it important to protect foster carers and their families from violence, but it is vital for the wellbeing of young people in care that violent behaviour they exhibit be appropriately reported, documented and treated. Violence and aggression in children indicates the presence of underlying unmet emotional needs, and appropriate supports must be put in place to help children and young people manage these needs.

The FCAV believes that an expansion of therapeutic foster care models to include all children and young people exhibiting violent and aggressive behaviour is necessary. Therapeutic approaches to care have consistently been shown to reduce levels of violence and aggression in children and young people in foster care, and improve stress levels within foster care households⁸.

Foster carers require appropriate training, support and resources to safely manage children and young people with high care needs. The FCAV believes that, at present, the State is knowingly exposing many volunteer foster carers and their children to an extremely high level of risk of experiencing family violence.

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⁷ Queensland Government. 2011. *Specialist Foster Care Review: Enhanced Foster Care Literature Review and Australian Programs Description*.

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⁸ Fergeus, J, Humphreys, C, Harvey, C, & Herrman, H. 2015. *Carer Impacts on Mental Health of Children and Young People in Foster Care*. BASCPAN Congress presentation. <http://www.baspcan.org.uk/congress2015.php>