



PIP - Foster Care System

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Introduction

I chose this topic because I have a personal interest in understanding how childhood trauma can affect a child's life and the development of it. On a personal level, I wanted to learn more about the lasting effects of trauma and why some children struggle after entering foster care. This topic also interested me because of how important the roles of the foster carers and child protection services play in supporting these children and because I wanted to understand how Australian society can improve their support provided to children who have experienced early childhood trauma. This project also considers cross-cultural differences, particularly the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the Australian foster care system, and explores how cultural background and historical experiences can influence children's experiences of trauma, identity and wellbeing.

Although attitudes, laws, and support services for children in care have gotten better over the years, there is continuity in the lasting effects of childhood trauma. Similar to the impacts experienced by the Stolen Generations, many children in foster care continue to experience emotional and psychological challenges well into adulthood, including difficulties with trust, relationships, identity, and mental health.

This topic contributes to a better understanding of society and culture by examining the concepts of persons, identity, power, and authority through the way early childhood trauma and the foster care system shape children's emotional and psychological development, sense of identity, and future opportunities within Australian society.

To investigate my focus question, I used secondary research, including AIHW reports, academic articles, and agency publications, because they provided reliable statistics and expert information about foster care in Australia. I also used content analysis of the documentary *Foster* and other first-hand videos to identify recurring themes and gain a deeper understanding of children's lived experiences. Finally, I conducted a personal interview to collect first-hand qualitative data, allowing me to explore personal perspectives and experiences that statistics alone could not provide.

Chapter 1: Understanding Early Childhood Trauma & The Foster System

Foster care is a system that provides a safe and temporary home for children and young adults who are unable to live with their parents or guardians. Children may enter foster care due to abuse, neglect, family violence, parental illness, substance abuse, or other circumstances that place their safety and well-being at risk. In Australia, foster carers are approved and trained adults who provide stability, support, and care while child protection services determine the best outcome for the child. The main goal of foster care is to ensure that children are safe and being taken care of emotionally, physically and educationally while they are unable to live with their biological families, eventually to be returned to their biological families or adopted by another permanently.

Often, early childhood trauma is characterised by anything that continues to affect the way a child behaves and feels relationally, socially and emotionally throughout their lives. Trauma can comprise events that are seemingly insignificant at the time but continue to have long-lasting psychological effects, or trauma can be due to direct action that can be easily intervened in and prevented by removing that child from their unsafe environment. The most common forms of trauma experienced by children both prior to and whilst they are in the foster care system are various types of abuse and separation.

Abuse is any action or behaviour that causes harm, or has any potential to cause harm, to a child's physical, emotional, psychological, or social well-being. Abuse can occur within families, schools, communities, or other environments where adults have responsibility for a child.¹ Child abuse can have short-term and long-term effects on a child's development, mental health, relationships, and sense of safety. Physical abuse involves purposefully causing physical harm to a child through direct actions such as hitting, kicking, shaking, burning or other forms of violence. Emotional or psychological abuse entails repeated behaviours that make the child feel as though they are not good enough, damaging the child's self-esteem, confidence and emotional well-being. This can come in the form of constant criticism, rejection, threats, humiliation and isolation, which is experienced. Sexual abuse is characterised by involving a child in sexual activities that they are unable to consent to because they do not understand them and are not developmentally ready. Neglect is one of the most common reasons children enter the foster care system; however, it is also one of the most common experiences of children while they are in foster care. Neglect is a form of child abuse where a parent or carer consistently fails to provide a child with basic necessities that ensure their health, safety and emotional support. Neglect is often characterised by the absence of care rather than direct harm. This includes not providing a safe place to live, adequate food, clean clothing, medical care and supervision, increasing the risk of mental health issues, difficulties at school, and problems forming healthy relationships.

¹ Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), *Types and Indicators of Abuse: Safeguarding Adults*, SCIE, <https://www.scie.org.uk/safeguarding/adults/introduction/types-and-indicators-of-abuse/> [accessed 31 July 2026]

Separation occurs when a child is removed from their parents or family members and is no longer able to live with them. Separation is often necessary to protect children from abuse, neglect, or other unsafe situations. Separation from parents is one of the most traumatising challenges when going into foster care. Although removal from the family home is often necessary to protect a child from abuse, neglect, or other unsafe situations, it can be a highly traumatic experience for the child². The child may feel confusion, loss, grief, and anxiety as they are separated from the environment they have grown up in. Many children struggle with feeling abandoned and may find it hard to make new relationships and find trust in them. Separation can also impact a child's sense of identity, belonging, and emotions, which may affect their mental health, education, and overall development.

These early forms of childhood trauma affect the emotional and psychological development of children in foster care in different ways depending on the stage of life the child is in when these traumas are experienced.

Babies and toddlers depend on their parents for a sense of safety and security. They need emotional nurturing through reassuring interactions. This is how babies and toddlers develop and grow; therefore, during their first months and years, babies and toddlers are very sensitive³. As a result, seemingly insignificant aspects of their early lives can form a part of their lifelong trauma that they will likely not understand as adults. Consistent separation and absence of parents are the biggest contributors to this trauma, leading to fear, sadness or overwhelm. Additionally, the general atmosphere of their household affects babies through conditions like excess noise, general household stress and distress or an unpredictable routine where they are unsure of what will happen next. Additionally, during this time, babies are inextricably linked to their parents, so therefore, if a primary carer is being affected by stress, violence, or neglect, the baby will also likely be affected by this. Need stats.

Children aged one to three years tend to respond to this stress with temper tantrums, irritability and sadness, while those aged three to five may start to act younger than they are. For example, they may have accidents even though they are potty trained, suck their thumb, or become clingy and anxious when they are apart from parents or carers. They may also be irritable, sad, act out, or have physical symptoms like stomach aches. Need stats.

Psychologically, over time, children who experience trauma at this age demonstrate poor verbal skills, often starting to talk at a significantly older age, as well as exhibiting memory problems. Their emotional development is also affected by excessive screaming and crying with no obvious cause, leading to poor appetite, low weight and digestive problems as a result.

<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/>

Young children aged five to ten experience both behavioural and physiological symptoms associated with trauma. Unlike older children, young children cannot express in words whether they feel scared, overwhelmed or helpless. Young children suffering from traumatic

² ¹ *Towards Truth*, 'Contemporary Grounds for Child Removal (1969–Present)', *Towards Truth*, <https://www.towardstruth.org.au/themes/kinship/child-removals/93-forced-removal/sub0227-contemporary-grounds-for-child-removal> [accessed 31 July 2026].

stress symptoms generally have difficulty regulating their behaviours and emotions. They may be clingy or develop separation anxiety, become fearful of new situations, or frightened easily. Additionally, they can become increasingly difficult to console and aggressive or impulsive. They may also have difficulty sleeping and, as a result, be constantly tired, losing recently acquired development skills and showing regression in functioning and behaviour. The psychological effects of this long term include difficulties learning or focusing at school, potential development of learning disabilities, and poor skill development, as well as extreme anxiety causing stomach aches or headaches. On top of this, their emotional development is affected, whereby they may act out in social situations, become verbally abusive or aggressive, become unable to trust others or make friends. This leads to a lack of self-confidence and a belief that they are to blame for the events that have traumatised them.

PTSD symptoms in children this age are similar to those in adults. Like adults, they may relive events they find traumatising, which is called re-experiencing. Additionally, they may avoid things that remind them of the trauma, be keyed up, and have more negative thoughts and feelings than before the trauma. However, the way these symptoms appear can often look different than they do in adults. Reexperiencing symptoms may take the form of repeating certain parts of the traumatic events in their mind or during their playtime. For example, a child might want to play shooting games over and over after seeing a school shooting. While adults experience flashbacks or problems remembering parts of traumatic events, children may not do this in the same way. Children may remember events in the wrong order or deny that the events took place at all. They may become triggered when a present event brings forth a memory of the events, showing ongoing fear and sadness, as well as irritability and anger. The developmental effect of this is that they become withdrawn, numb or lacking in emotional expression; even positive expression of emotion becomes difficult. This results in feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, often triggering physical symptoms such as stomach aches and headaches.

Young people's social relationships during their middle years, 8-14, can affect their current and future health, learning and performance in education, as well as peer and family relationships.

As children enter adolescence between the ages of 14 and 18, the effects of early childhood trauma often become more noticeable in their emotions and behaviour. Teenagers who have experienced trauma may show symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that are similar to those seen in adults. They are also more likely to engage in impulsive, risky, aggressive or self-destructive behaviours as a way of coping with overwhelming emotions. Many adolescents continue to experience fear, anxiety, sadness and anger, while also struggling with low self-worth, difficulty trusting others and feeling isolated from those around them. Some young people may also turn to self-harm or the misuse of drugs and alcohol as unhealthy ways of managing the emotional pain caused by their traumatic experiences. These ongoing challenges can affect their relationships, education and overall wellbeing, demonstrating that the effects of early childhood trauma can continue throughout adolescence if appropriate support is not provided.

The Australian foster care system involves a bunch of different individuals and organisations working together to support children who aren't safe in the environment of their home. Child protection services are responsible for looking into and investigating reports of abuse or neglect at the kids' home and figuring out whether a child requires out-of-home care. Once a child enters foster care, caseworkers and support services regularly monitor the child's mental well-being. Foster carers and kinship carers provide a safe, stable, and nurturing home environment, while biological families may remain involved in the child's life when it is considered safe. Schools, healthcare professionals, psychologists, and community support services also play an important role in meeting the child's educational, physical, and emotional needs. By working together, these individuals and organisations aim to ensure that children in foster care receive the protection, stability, and support necessary for healthy development and wellbeing.

The Australian foster care system, foster carers, social welfare workers, and parents all play important roles in helping support children and young adults. Foster carers provide a safe and stable home environment while meeting the child's daily emotional, physical and educational needs. Social welfare workers, also known as caseworkers, are responsible for assessing a child's wellbeing⁴, developing care plans for the short term, and working with families and carers to ensure that all the child's needs are met. Parents continue to play an important role where it is safe and appropriate, maintaining contact with their child and working with support services to help address the issues that led to the child's placement in care. Together, these individuals work collaboratively to promote the safety, wellbeing, and long-term development of children in foster care.

¹ NSW Government, *What Is Foster Care*, NSW Government, <https://www.nsw.gov.au/community-services/foster-relative-and-kinship-care/become-a-foster-carer/what-foster-care> [accessed 31 July 2026].

In some cases parents may be unable to care for their children due to their personal circumstances that affect the ability to raise their kid in a stable environment. The circumstances can include things like substance abuse, alcohol abuse, mental illness, imprisonment, domestic violence, or chronic illness⁵. For example, parents who are struggling with a disability are unable to meet the child's basic everyday needs. Similarly, a parent who is struggling with alcohol abuse can't afford a stable environment to stay in, so the child doesn't have access to food, a shower, a bed, etc. While these situations do not necessarily involve intentional harm towards the child, they can place the child's safety, wellbeing, and development at risk. In these circumstances, child protection services may place the child in foster care to ensure they receive the care, stability, and support they need.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *Child Protection Australia 2022–23: Supporting Children*, AIHW, Australian Government, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child->

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[protection/child-protection-australia-2022-23/contents/insights/supporting-children](https://www.aishw.gov.au/child-protection-australia-2022-23/contents/insights/supporting-children) [accessed 31 July 2026].

15.3 Children aged 0–4 years accounted for 15.3% of all children in out-of-home care, representing approximately 6,870 children across Australia. 27.4 Children aged 5–9 years accounted for 27.4% of all children in out-of-home care in Australia, representing approximately 12,300 children. 21.7 Children aged 10–14 years accounted for 21.7% of all children in out-of-home care in Australia, representing approximately 9,700 children.

While approximately 6,870 children aged 0–4 years, 12,300 children aged 5–9 years, and 9,700 children aged 10–14 years were living in out-of-home care in Australia, adoption statistics show that most local adoptions involve children aged 4 years and under. This suggests that as children grow older, their likelihood of being adopted decreases significantly, resulting in many older children remaining in foster care for longer periods. Older children, because they have more independence, are more likely to have relationships with their biological families, siblings, communities, and cultures, making adoption more complex⁶. Many older children have also experienced trauma, abuse, neglect, multiple placements, or separation from family members, which can affect the child's mental health and the way they behave in general. In addition, prospective adoptive parents often prefer to adopt younger children, believing they will have fewer complex needs and will adjust more easily to a new family environment. In addition, prospective adoptive parents often prefer to adopt younger children, believing they will have fewer complex needs and will adjust more easily to a new family environment. For children who are never adopted or permanently placed in a home, remaining in the foster care system for long periods of time can have effects on the child's wellbeing. Frequent placement changes, being uncertain about the future, and ongoing separation from family can make the child struggle with feeling instability, loss, grief, and loneliness.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *Home*, AIHW, Australian Government, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/> [accessed 31 July 2026].

Many young people in long-term foster care experience difficulties developing a sense of identity and belonging, as they may feel disconnected from both their biological family and their foster family. Research has also shown that children in long-term foster care are at greater risk of having mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and finding it difficult to form trusting relationships. As they transition into adulthood, some young people leaving care may face challenges related to education, employment, housing, and social support due to growing up with the lack of support from all these things. These outcomes highlight the importance of providing children in foster care with stable placements, strong support networks, and opportunities to develop lasting relationships that promote their long-term wellbeing and future success.

In Australia, if a child is not reunited with their birth family or adopted, they may remain in foster or residential care until they turn 18. At this age, they usually transition out of the out-of-home care system and begin living independently or with ongoing support from

communities and foster care. Many states in Australia now allow young people to stay in care until age 21, recognising that most young adults still need family support. Despite these improvements, care leavers remain at greater risk of homelessness, unemployment, financial hardship, and mental health challenges compared with other young Australians.

Onyx entered foster care in Western Australia when he was just four years old after it was determined that he could no longer live safely with his birth family. Although being separated from his family was a difficult and emotional experience, he was placed with foster carers who provided him with a safe, stable and loving home throughout most of his childhood. Onyx describes his foster carers as the "closest thing to a mum and dad" he has ever had, highlighting the strong bond they developed over the years. Growing up in foster care was not always easy, as he had to cope with feelings of loss, uncertainty and the challenges of adjusting to a new family. However, the consistent care, encouragement and support he received helped him build confidence, resilience and independence. Now an adult, Onyx reflects positively on his experience, explaining that his foster carers played a significant role in shaping the person he has become and demonstrating how a stable foster placement can have a lasting positive impact on a child's life.

Before entering foster care, most children have experienced one or more forms of trauma that have placed their safety and wellbeing at risk. Many have been subjected to physical, emotional or sexual abuse, while others have experienced chronic neglect, domestic and family violence, parental substance abuse, mental illness, or the loss of a parent. Some children have witnessed violence within the home, which can be just as psychologically damaging as experiencing abuse directly. In addition, many children have lived in unstable environments where they lacked consistent care, supervision, emotional support, and basic necessities needed for healthy development. Even when children are removed from these unsafe situations, the act of being separated from their parents, siblings, and familiar surroundings can itself be traumatic. As a result, most children entering foster care have already experienced significant emotional and psychological trauma before they begin their journey in the care system.

Before the child is removed from their home, children living with abuse or neglect often experience significant emotional and psychological effects. They may feel constantly scared, anxious or unsafe, causing them to react emotionally rather than logically in situations outside of home, like at school and in social environments. Because their brains are constantly focused on survival, children may struggle to regulate their emotions. They may become easily overwhelmed, have frequent emotional outbursts, or withdraw from others as a way of protecting themselves from further harm⁷. Living in an unpredictable or neglectful environment also means many children are not taught consistent routines or boundaries, which can make structured settings such as school or social settings feel overwhelming or uncomfortable and the body constantly feel uncomfortable or "unsafe". As a result of experiencing unreliable or harmful relationships with carers, children may develop a fear of abandonment and struggle to form healthy, trusting friendships due to the neglectful home relationships. They may also have difficulty trusting adults, making them hesitant to ask for help or talk about what is happening at home. Over time, the ongoing stress and trauma of

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abuse or neglect can contribute to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and anger, affecting their emotional wellbeing long before they enter foster care. These emotional impacts often do not disappear once a child enters foster care. Instead, they can continue to influence how children adjust to new carers, build relationships and respond to the stability and support provided in their new environment.

¹ *YouTube*, 'Onyx Foster Care Story', YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiITOiGzrOw> [accessed 31 July 2026].

Removal is necessary when a child cannot be taken care of in their home, even after support and intervention have been provided to the family. The main priority of child protection services is to protect children from ongoing abuse, making sure they have long-term safety. Before a child is removed, authorities will generally work with families by providing support services to reduce the risk of continuous abuse toward the child. However, if these attempts are unsuccessful or the child is at immediate risk, removal of the child becomes necessary. Although being separated from familiar surroundings like parents or siblings and the child's environment can be a traumatic experience, remaining in an unsafe environment may lead to the ongoing exposure of the child to ongoing physical, emotional and psychological harm, leading to more severe long-term impacts on their mental health and development. By placing children in a stable and supportive environment, such as foster or kinship care, they have the opportunity to experience safety, consistency in routine and building trusting relationships while having their physical and emotional needs met. Stable routines and caring adults can help children begin to rebuild trust in their social life long-term, develop a sense of security and start recovering from the trauma that they have experienced. However, removal itself does not erase the past effects of past traumatic experiences. Many children continue to experience grief, anxiety, fear and difficulty trusting others, meaning ongoing therapy and getting support are often key to their recovery. While removal can be emotionally upsetting in the short term, it is intended to prevent further harm and provide children with the best opportunity for healthy emotional and psychological development in the future.

Early childhood trauma can significantly alter the way a child's brain develops, particularly when they have been exposed to ongoing abuse, neglect or domestic violence. During childhood, the brain is still developing and is highly influenced by experiences. When children experience repeated trauma, their brain adapts to survive in an unsafe environment. The amygdala, which detects danger, can become overactive, causing the child to remain in a constant state of fear or hypervigilance, even when no threat is present. At the same time, the prefrontal cortex, responsible for emotional regulation, decision-making and impulse control, may not develop as effectively, making it more difficult for children to manage their emotions and behaviour. Trauma can also affect the hippocampus, which plays an important role in memory and learning, leading to difficulties with concentration, remembering information and processing new experiences. These changes are the brain's way of helping the child survive ongoing stress, but they can continue to affect emotional, psychological and social development long after the traumatic experiences have ended.

Chapter 2: The impact on emotional and psychological development

This chapter examines how early childhood trauma affects the emotional, psychological and social development of children living in foster care. Chapter 1 explored the reasons children enter into foster care and the types of trauma they experience, whilst this chapter looks at the long-term impact that these traumatic experiences have on their development growing up. It investigates how trauma can change a child's brain development, affect emotional regulation, influence behaviour and relationships and affect mental health long-term. This chapter also explores how these experiences that happen so early in childhood can shape children's future wellbeing and life outcomes, showing the importance of stable, supportive caregiving and appropriate therapeutic intervention in promoting recovery.

First, this chapter looks at how early childhood trauma affects children's emotional development and their ability to regulate emotions, form trusting relationships and build confidence in people. Then, it explores the impact of trauma on children's mental health, examining how experiences of abuse, neglect and instability in the child's home environment can increase the risk of anxiety, depression, PTSD and other psychological challenges. Finally, this chapter investigates the long-term effects of childhood trauma by examining how these experiences can influence the impact on long-term teen or adult life, like education, employment, relationships and overall wellbeing in adulthood.

This chapter uses first-hand accounts, interviews and personal stories because they help show the real impact of childhood trauma in a way that things like numbers and statistics can't show. Statistics can tell us how many children have experienced abuse or neglect or have been in foster care but not explain what these experiences feel like or how they impact a child's life. Listening to people who have lived through foster care gives a better understanding of the emotional impact, challenges through trauma and long-term effects they have experienced. These stories, like Hannah's story, show how trauma can affect a child's ability to put trust into others, manage their emotions, build relationships with people and feel safe. They also help explain how these experiences can continue to affect people long-term as they grow into adulthood.

This addresses the focus question by explaining how early childhood trauma changes the way children develop emotionally. It explores how experiences such as abuse, neglect and getting separated from routine and family can affect a child's ability to put trust into relationships and how they manage their emotions and feel safe. By understanding these effects, it becomes clear that trauma can continue to influence a child's development long after they enter foster care.

However, children in foster care often move between many different homes before finding a stable place to live. Some children may experience multiple foster placements throughout their childhood due to changes in their lives, placements times finishing, or because a different home may be better to meet their needs. Each time a child moves, they are required to adjust to a new environment, new carers, new routines and sometimes being moved to a new school. For children who have already experienced abuse, neglect or other forms of trauma, these continuous changes can be extremely hard and can create feelings of confusion and uncertainty. Instead of having the opportunity to build a strong sense of

safety and belonging, children may feel like they are constantly having to start again and having to always adapt to new people and situations.

In babies, attachment develops when a carer takes care of their needs in a consistent and caring way. When a baby is settled when they cry, fed when they are hungry and shown love and affection when they are agitated, they begin to learn that trust can be built and that adults can be trusted to protect them. These repeated experiences help the baby understand that their needs will be met when needed and that the people around them are safe⁸. This creates a strong emotional bond between the baby and their carer, which is important for their long-term future relationships and emotional development as they grow older. This helps them develop a sense of safety and security, which supports them in having healthy brain development, emotional wellbeing and their ability to manage emotions comfortably as they grow older.

¹ Sydney Children's Hospitals Network, *Development in Babies (0–12 Months)*, Sydney Children's Hospitals Network, <https://www.schn.health.nsw.gov.au/kids-health-hub/growth-and-development/babies> [accessed 31 July 2026].

However, children in foster care often experience many changes in carers and may move between different homes multiple times before finding a stable environment to be placed in. Some children are separated from their parents or carers at a very young age, while others experience several foster placements throughout childhood due to changes in their circumstances or because a placement is no longer suitable. These repeated changes can interfere with the attachment process as a newborn and make it difficult for children to build trusting relationships and to find security. When a child repeatedly loses important carers, they may begin to feel uncertain about whether people will stay in their lives. This can affect their ability to feel safe and develop strong emotional connections with others. For children who have already experienced trauma, these disruptions can make it even harder to form secure attachments because they may fear being abandoned or hurt again.

Children in foster care often experience multiple changes in their living situations, with many kids moving between foster homes before finding a stable home and career. These changes can happen for multiple reasons, including placements ending, carers being unable to continue providing care, or the child's needs changing over time. Each move happens due to the child adjusting to a new environment, new carers, different housing routines and sometimes even being placed in a new school. For children who have already experienced trauma, these constant movements can create more distressing emotions of uncertainty for the kid. Instead of developing a consistent sense of safety and belonging, children may struggle to feel settled in general and they may find it difficult to trust that the people around them will remain in their lives to take care of them.

As a result, many children begin to believe that people do not stay in their lives for long due to that being their “normal”. After experiencing repeated changes in carers and having important relationships taken away from them, children may start to expect that people will leave. This can create feelings of fear, uncertainty and insecurity when forming new relationships. They may become scared of getting close to others because they are worried they will be abandoned again or experience the same hurt they felt in the past. Some children avoid forming close relationships to protect themselves from being hurt again, as they believe staying emotionally distant will prevent further pain. While others may form attachments quickly and become very anxious when separated from the people they care about because they fear losing another important relationship. These different responses are often linked to the trauma they have experienced and the way it has affected their understanding of trust and safety due to always feeling like they are in fight or flight. These experiences can affect their emotional development by making it harder to trust others, regulate their emotions and build healthy relationships as they grow older in the long term.

For example, Hannah's experience shows the emotional impact that repeated changes in foster care can have on a child's ability to form secure attachments. Throughout her childhood, Hannah experienced uncertainty around where she would be living; she also struggled with a sense of identity and finding out who she really is – “I didn't know I would stay there forever, but I didn't trust I would be there forever” – and whether the people around her would remain in her life. Hannah's foster parents explain that “we really understood the importance of providing a safe, caring and loving home for Hannah.”⁹ Hannah had shown the difficulty she experienced with trusting those relationships: ¹⁰“She could only love her birth mother and couldn't let Sam in.” This shows that when children experience repeated separation from carers, they may struggle to believe that people will stay in their lives. Instead of feeling safe enough to build relationships, they may develop fears of abandonment and protect themselves from being hurt again. Hannah's story demonstrates how early childhood trauma can affect attachment development by influencing a child's ability to trust others, feel secure and form healthy relationships. This links to the focus question by showing how trauma experienced before and during foster care can continue to affect a child's emotional development over time.

This shows that early childhood trauma can have a massive impact on emotional development by affecting a child's ability to form secure attachments and trusting relationships and to feel safe. Hannah's experience provides a personal example of how the effects of trauma can continue even after a child enters foster care, demonstrating that providing a safe home alone does not immediately remove the emotional impact of past experiences. Instead, children often need consistent care, stability and support to rebuild trust and develop healthy relationships over time.

Trauma can also affect a child's ability to regulate their emotions. Emotional regulation is the ability to understand emotional regulation is referred to as one's capacity to control and regulate their emotions in a given social scenario. Most children learn these skills through consistent care and being taught through comfort and support from trusted adults. Most

⁹ **Stories that move.** [online video](n.d) < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjQryrXLdbo> > accessed 22 Jul. 2026.

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children learn these skills through being taught by a trusted adult. When a child grows up in a safe and stable environment, they learn to develop how to calm themselves when they feel upset and how to cope with difficult situations and express their emotions appropriately in situations. However, children who experience abuse, neglect or other forms of early childhood trauma often miss out on these important experiences. Instead of learning how to manage their emotions, they may spend long periods of time feeling extensive emotions and really heightened feelings of being scared, stressed or unsafe. As a result, they may find it difficult to control their emotions, becoming easily overwhelmed by feelings of fear, anger or sadness. These emotional responses are often a result of the trauma they have experienced rather than deliberate behaviour. Difficulties with emotional regulation can continue throughout childhood and adolescence, affecting a child's behaviour, relationships, learning and overall emotional development.

Emotional regulation is the ability to understand, manage and respond to one's emotions in a given social scenario and control emotions in a healthy and appropriate way. It helps children cope with hard situations, to have the ability to calm themselves when they feel upset and to express their emotions without emotions being heightened. In Chapter 1, this project explained how early childhood trauma can affect the developing brain, especially the areas responsible for managing emotions and responding to difficult situations, by exploring how these changes present themselves in a child's everyday life. Rather than simply affecting the child's brain, trauma can also affect the way children react to everyday situations and how they interact with the people around them. Instead of learning how to manage their emotions through consistent care and support, children who have experienced trauma may spend long periods of time feeling overwhelming, intense and heightened emotions such as fear, stress and anxiety. As a result, they may find it difficult to calm themselves down, control their reactions in situations or cope with situations that may trigger them from their past traumatic experiences. Some children may react with big outbursts of emotions like anger, while others may cry a lot, withdraw from others or become anxious in situations that remind them of their past trauma.

Children who have experienced early childhood trauma may show behaviours that are often misunderstood by adults. Foster carers may sometimes believe that a child is misbehaving or purposely being "naughty", when in reality their behaviour is often a response to trauma that they have been experiencing¹¹. This behaviour can include anger, being aggressive, emotional outbursts, refusing to follow instructions or becoming overly clingy to something or someone. Rather than being a choice, these behaviours are often the child's way of expressing their fear, stress or emotional pain that the trauma has caused. "We used to think that naughty kids and kids who behave badly; now we understand those responses of trauma."

An example of this cycle can be seen in the story of Bobby (Emily), who experienced 16 foster families and lived in 38 different homes before the age of 18, before she was eventually adopted by her teacher. After experiencing repeated placements throughout her childhood changes, Bobby felt emotionally drained and described feeling like she had "run out of options" by the age of 15. Each placement breakdown meant losing another home and another relationship, making it even harder to feel safe and trust adults attempting to

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support her. Her story highlights how repeated moves in foster care can increase a child's feelings of instability and emotional exhaustion, showing how placement breakdowns can reinforce the effects of trauma rather than reduce them.

¹ Challenge Community Services, *Understanding Behaviour: Why All Behaviour Has Meaning in Foster Care*, Challenge Community Services, <https://www.challengecommunity.org.au/understanding-behaviour-why-all-behaviour-has-meaning-in-foster-care/> [accessed 31 July 2026].

Conclusion

Early childhood trauma has a massive impact on the emotional and psychological development of children in foster care. With children, experiences such as abuse, neglect, and family separation can affect a child's ability to trust others, regulate emotions, and develop a positive sense of self. Although foster care can provide safety, ongoing placement changes and instability may continue to affect a child's wellbeing in the future.

Overall, the study shows that children in foster care are significantly impacted by early childhood trauma. For children to have the ability to heal, develop resilience, and grow in a healthy way, stable, encouraging, and trauma-informed care is crucial.

Log

For my primary research, I chose to use content analysis because it allowed me to explore the real experiences of children in foster care and understand the effects of early childhood trauma. I analysed the YouTube documentary *The Search for Identity in the Australian Foster Care System* and other first-hand accounts to identify common themes, including trauma, attachment, emotional wellbeing, and psychological development. This qualitative method provided detailed evidence that allows me to understand the comprehensive evidence this qualitative method provides. By enabling me to contrast my personal experiences with my secondary research, it also made the validity of my findings and offered much stronger insightful information about the long-term emotional and psychological effects of trauma in Australian foster care, which further reinforced my focal question.

For my secondary research, I used a couple of sources, including government reports, journals, videos and websites, to get a stronger understanding of the Australian foster care system. Because my topic is focused on early childhood trauma in foster care, it is important to first define key concepts on the topic, such as trauma, attachment, emotional development, psychological development, and out-of-home care before exploring their impacts. Using secondary research allowed me to compare different perspectives. It also guided me to explain how the foster care system operates in Australia, and why children enter care, and the long-term emotional and psychological effects that early childhood trauma can have on children living in foster care.

LOG

Term 4, Week 1

- Brainstorming and mapping
- Photo of mind map

Term 4, Week 2: Monday
20/10/25

Check-in and idea development with Mrs Donkey: my initial thought was something to do with mental health, which evolved into other things to do with legal requirements to do with crime, and I went off a specific question I had and broke it down with the teacher.

Term 4, Tuesday 28 october

Figuring out I'm doing foster instead of doing other things and found an article to look at and try and annotate.

Term 4, Wednesday 29 october

"How does early childhood trauma affect the emotional and psychological development of children in foster care?" found my question; now doing some research

Term 4 Sunday 12 Nov

Reading articles and annotating them