Section 3.
Recruitment and retention of foster carers

The heightened demand for out-of-home care in parallel with the decreased availability of foster carers has meant that one of the challenges lies in the area of enhancing the recruitment, training and support of foster carers. Furthermore, over-representation of Indigenous children and young people in out-of-home care and the continuing placement of these children into the care of non-Indigenous families, heighten the need to identify culturally appropriate solutions to this challenge. In this section, a brief discussion is presented on what is meant by “cultural competence”, following which Australian and international research findings are presented in relation to: motivations to become a carer, effective recruitment practices, assessment of foster carers, training of foster carers, foster carer retention and satisfaction, and support of foster carers. Cultural comparisons are made and the implications of these research findings for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are discussed, key messages are identified in relation to each area. It is important to note when reading this review and the subsequent review presented in Section 4 that the recruitment, assessment, retention, training and support of carers are discussed as discrete areas, however in reality these factors are tightly interwoven; changes or problems in one area will directly impact other areas.

In general, there is a lack of research on practices and polices that are employed in out-of-home care. Much of what is accepted as best practice in Australian out-of-home care is based on international research, particularly research from the United States (Barber and Gilbertson 2001). Barber and Gilbertson (2001) also highlight that there are significant differences between both the US and Australia in out-of-home care legislation and the culture of carers and children in the out-of-home care system. This undermines the relevance of international research to the Australian context (see also Ainsworth 1997, 2001). The lack of research is particularly apparent in the areas of the recruitment and retention of foster carers. The majority of out-of-home care research that has been conducted in Australia and internationally has actually focussed on home-based care, particularly non-relative foster care.

Cultural competence

The term “cultural competence” is often used to describe ways of thinking and behaving that enable members of one cultural, ethnic, or linguistic group to work effectively with members of another cultural or ethnic group. It is used to describe a set of values, knowledge, and skills that workers and institutions in helping professions must develop in order to be effective with culturally diverse clients. There are few empirical models for cultural competence, particularly for Indigenous people (Libesman 2004). This is most evident with regard to out-of-home care where few policies and practices for Indigenous people have been documented in Australia, and internationally. In this section, we outline issues in the recruitment and retention of Indigenous foster carers and highlight research into aspects of culturally competent practices that are employed in these areas.

A review of the literature on specific areas of the out-of-home care framework is provided in relation to the recruitment and retention of carers generally, followed by
discussi

discussion of issues relating to the recruitment and retention of Australian Indigenous carers. Firstly, motivations and disincentives to becoming a foster carer in the Indigenous community are discussed and compared with non-Indigenous motivations to foster. Following this, effective recruitment practices for Indigenous and non-Indigenous foster carers will also be contrasted. Finally, research into the retention and support of Indigenous and non-Indigenous carers will be discussed. Although it is evident that the recruitment, retention and support of carers are highly interrelated, these areas were discussed separately to draw out the issues that are relevant to each.

Motivations to become a carer

In this section, Australian research conducted with non-Indigenous carers is reviewed to determine the motivations and barriers to becoming a foster carer. These studies showed that there were both individual and social issues that impacted on people’s motivation to foster. Only individual issues were identified as a disincentive to foster in Australian research. International research was reviewed to determine whether this was consistent with other research and systemic issues were identified as a disincentive to foster. The findings from these international studies are presented.

Motivations and disincentives to becoming a foster carer in the Indigenous community are discussed and compared with non-Indigenous motivations to foster.

Australian and international research with the wider community

Australian studies that examined retrospective reports of current carers suggest that the key aspect that motivates an individual to become a carer is altruistic feelings of wanting to help a child. That is, many foster carers report that they had always wanted to become a foster carer (Australian Foster Care Association 2001; McHugh, McNab, Smyth, Chalmers, Siminski and Saunders 2004). The Victorian Department of Human Services (2003) reported on a survey of existing carers conducted by the Victorian Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare that identified the following motivations for potential carers:

- genuine affection for children;
- a sense of being a caring person;
- a general desire to be a parent; and
- benefits for the carer’s entire family.

Other documented attractions for existing carers to foster are: they knew a specific child in need of care; had responded to positive media portrayals of fostering; or responded to a request made to their church or community group (McHugh et al. 2004; South Australian Department of Family and Community Services 1997).

The carers surveyed by the Victorian Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare identified the following barriers for those considering foster care:

- a person’s doubts about whether they would be a good parent;
- the huge commitment that fostering was perceived to involve;
- a fear of the problems and challenges associated with difficult children;
- the disruption of other family members; and
- the costs involved.
International studies of the views of existing carers also suggest that poor public perceptions of foster care discourage prospective foster parents (Jarmon, Mathieson, Clarke, McCulloch and Lazear 2000; US Office of Inspector General 2002a). The study by Jarmon (2000) showed that foster parents and agency staff cited extensive negative media attention as a barrier to recruiting, as it was felt that such attention resulted in negative perceptions of foster children and foster parenting. Respondents felt that until the support system for current foster carers in the US was improved, there would remain difficulties in recruitment. Functioning of the foster care system and problems with administration negatively affect perceptions of fostering.

In brief, Australian research suggested that a desire to be a parent and a person’s doubts about whether they would be a good parent were often cited by foster carers as being influential in their decision about whether to become a foster carer. Similarly, social and structural factors acted as both an incentive and a deterrent to fostering. Australian research suggested that media campaigns and church or community group endorsement of caring acted as an incentive. International research presented also suggested that poor public perception of foster care and the foster care service system was a disincentive to fostering.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context

In this section the Indigenous cultural practices, social structure, and history that influence Indigenous volunteering in general and specific motivations and disincentives to foster children removed from the care of their parents are described.

There is limited research on the motivations of Indigenous people to foster. However, it has been argued that Indigenous individuals – by the very nature of their culture – have always had a strong commitment to contribute to the benefit of their community (Atkinson and Swain 1999). Empirical evidence of Indigenous communities’ commitment to volunteering is provided by the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survey. This report highlighted the significant amount of voluntary work occurring in Indigenous communities. Notably, it was found that 29.9 per cent of Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over (20 per cent, if hunting and gathering activities are excluded) engaged in voluntary work compared to 19 per cent of their non-Indigenous counterparts (Altman and Taylor 1996).

According to Kerr (2001), Indigenous Australians’ commitment to community can be explained in terms of complex and sophisticated personal, familial and social obligations of kinship relations that have been central to the political economy, social and spiritual life of Indigenous communities for many thousands of years. The maintenance of this commitment in spite of the incursion of European culture is linked to the shared experience of perceived or actual exclusion or isolation from the dominant (Anglo-centric) culture and mainstream organisations and services, and an understanding of the need to address the poverty and economic disadvantage that is experienced by Indigenous communities (Kerr et al. 2001).

Although there is a high level of impetus for Indigenous people to volunteer compared to non-Indigenous people, Kerr and colleagues (2001) found that Indigenous volunteers reported both structural and attitudinal barriers to participation, including:
• racism and feeling of exclusion from recognition for efforts;
• lack of information about volunteer supports or opportunities;
• lack of culturally/linguistically appropriate information and training;
• financial costs (for example, reimbursement of expenses; assistance with training costs); and
• lack of support from government departments and other organisations that could assist respondents (for example, the nature of police checks; lack of culturally sensitive policies within organisations).

There is some evidence that Aboriginal people also have a relatively strong willingness to care for children removed from their parents. Recent data collected by the South Australian Aboriginal Family Support Service showed that in South Australia 1 out of 170 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults become a carer, compared with 1 out of 1470 adults from non-Indigenous communities (South Australian Department of Communities and Families 2004). There is very limited research of Aboriginal motivations for fostering, however such research suggests that family and kinship obligations influence propensity to provide care for children.

For instance, McHugh et al. (2004) found that Indigenous carers in New South Wales cited a view that traditional foster care (that is placement of Indigenous children into the care of non-Indigenous families) is detrimental to Indigenous children. They also found that carers were motivated by a desire to prevent the destructive practices associated with the Stolen Generation where another generation of children would be lost from Indigenous communities. On the other hand, it has also been highlighted that the personal impact of the Stolen Generation can act as an inhibitor for other Indigenous people. Departmental and Indigenous agency out-of-home care workers interviewed by the Victorian Department of Human Services (1998) suggested that a widespread mistrust of the welfare system deters some Indigenous people from seeking support from outside their community (feelings of distrust can also translate to Indigenous agencies, although to a lesser extent). Potential foster carers may have experienced foster care themselves, or had relatives in care, and do not want to expose their family or others to what they experienced. For this same reason, others want to foster, hoping to provide a more positive experience than they had received.

In addition, there is some anecdotal evidence indicating that the recruitment of Indigenous carers includes inadequate training, support and respite for carers, and criminal history checks prevent approval for some carers (for example Queensland Crime and Misconduct Commission 2004).

Cultural comparison

Australian research suggested that for non-Indigenous families a general desire to be a parent and a person’s doubts about whether they would be a good parent influenced their decision whether to become a foster carer. However, for Indigenous families, research suggests that there are unique social and structural factors that act as an incentive and a deterrent to fostering. Aboriginal culture is associated with high rates of volunteering, however, structural and attitudinal barriers within the dominant (Anglo-centric) culture may prevent Aboriginal people from volunteering. In relation to fostering, there are strong cultural obligations for children to be shared among the
community. The history of the Stolen Generation acts as both an incentive and a disincentive for Aboriginal people to become foster carers. Aboriginal people may be motivated to foster to help prevent another generation of children being disconnected from their people and their culture; Aboriginal people may be disinclined to foster due to their own negative experiences with out-of-home care or due to mistrust of the public welfare system. As such, these cultural differences motivation suggest that recruitment programs employed for the wider Australian community are unlikely to be applicable to the Aboriginal community. Services and programs that aim to recruit and retain Indigenous carers need to ensure that their practice reflects the motivations of Aboriginal carers rather than the non-Indigenous community.

**Key Messages**

- Australian research shows, that for non-Indigenous individuals, perceptions of self and foster children were both a barrier and an incentive to foster.
- There are likely to be unique social and structural factors that act as an incentive and a deterrent to fostering for Indigenous families. There are strong cultural obligations for children to be shared among the community. The history of the Stolen Generation acts as both an incentive and a disincentive for Aboriginal people to become foster carers. Structural and attitudinal barriers within the dominant Anglo-centric culture may prevent Aboriginal people from volunteering.
- Recruitment programs, evaluations and research conducted within the wider Australian community are unlikely to be applicable to the Aboriginal community.
- Services and programs that aim to recruit and retain Indigenous carers need to ensure that their practice reflects the motivations of Aboriginal carers, and not impose the motivations of the wider Australian community. Further research needs to be conducted to document culturally appropriate practices in these areas.
- Further research needs to be conducted comparing the motivations and barriers to fostering in the Aboriginal and Anglo-centric communities.

**Effective recruitment practices**

In this section, research that evaluates the effectiveness of recruitment practices is reviewed. While a number of publications have documented what they claim to be good practice in the recruitment of foster carers, few studies have evaluated the effectiveness of specific efforts to increase the numbers of foster carers. It must be highlighted that such evaluation is difficult due to the broad based nature of recruitment campaigns (see Freimuth, Cole and Kirby 2001). For instance, as everyone in the community receives some form of exposure to campaign messages, it becomes difficult to make a comparison with a “no treatment” control group that has not been exposed to the campaign. Furthermore, there is difficulty in isolating the effects of new community-based approaches, given that in many communities the new approach often complements or extends pre-existing campaigns, rather than replacing them entirely. This limits the ability to identify the specific campaign components that have the most effect on increasing the number of carers recruited. As highlighted by the US Office of Inspector General (2002a), the lack of performance indicators and information about recruitment expenditures renders many departments and agencies unable to measure the success of their recruitment efforts, therefore
undermining the ability to identify which methods of recruitment are most beneficial and cost effective.

Several Australian publications examine the issue of recruitment and make recommendations about recruitment practices (for example, Keogh and Stvensson 1999; South Australian Department of Family and Community Services 1997; Victorian Department of Human Services 2003). However only two Australian studies attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of different recruitment practices (see Lawrence 1994; McHugh et al. 2004). The findings from international research that evaluated the effectiveness of specific efforts to increase the numbers of foster carers are also presented.

**Australian and international research with the wider community**

Lawrence (1994) conducted an empirical evaluation of the effectiveness of a broad-based media recruitment campaign that aimed to recruit a general pool of long-term carers, as well as carers for specific children in selected geographic areas of Sydney. The campaign was multi-faceted in using newspaper and other advertising outlets such as flyers, radio, agency newsletters, stalls, and the backs of taxis. Public speaking and information stalls for Children’s Week were also used. In addition, the non-government organisation involved, revised its procedures for the processing of applicants such as how initial enquiries were received. Overall, the campaign was successful in attracting 205 enquiries and 17 new carers. There were also additional enquiries (approximately 100) that were not associated with the campaign. For instance, enquiries came from individuals who were connected with the agency, heard about the agency through word-of-mouth or were referred to the agency by another organisation. This suggests that past campaigns may have been having a trickle down effect, and points to the need for long-term evaluation of recruitment campaigns. The highest number of enquiries came from radio announcements and newspaper advertisements. Limited enquiries resulted from public speaking and information stalls for Children’s Week. The study also documented the progress of enquiries through the application procedure. Only 17 individuals of the 331 who enquired became carers and at each stage of the application procedure, individuals withdraw or were rejected. This shows that recruitment is an extremely time consuming activity. Overall the campaign appeared to be successful, however, as Lawrence pointed out, evaluation of effectiveness is difficult due to the multitude of specific varying components. This limits the ability to identify the specific campaign components that have had the most effect on increasing carers.

In another Australian study, 91 people who enquired about fostering were followed up by a telephone survey (Keogh and Stvensson 1999). It was found that of the 96 per cent who had decided against fostering, half made the decision for personal reasons, but half reported that they had been discouraged by the response they received when contacting the agency.

Other Australian research suggests that additional strategies need to be used in recruitment. McHugh (2004) examined retrospective reports of what attracted existing carers to fostering. Notably, McHugh (2004) found that approximately 60 per cent of 450 carers in NSW reported being influenced by advertising or promotional material. However, a minority (20 per cent) said that they had actually responded to media
promotion. Most had always planned to foster or had known a specific child in need of care. Qualitative interviews of stakeholders, workers and carers strongly supported the notion that one of the “best” recruiting strategies is the use of current and experienced carers to recruit by word of mouth. Ways to improve recruitment include: targeting professional groups who could care more effectively for children with difficult or challenging behaviours; government departments working more closely with other agencies and community groups; and the provision of greater levels of support to existing carers to encourage recruitment by word of mouth. It was also highlighted that more procedural approaches being taken in assessing and training all carers could be intimidating to some Indigenous families who were then reluctant to become involved in fostering (McHugh et al. 2004).

Based on North American data, Moore and colleagues (1988) highlighted that community awareness of the out-of-care system and the needs of children in care were the most crucial aspects in the recruitment of foster carers. A three-year study of market research techniques in Minnesota by the authors found that mass media, especially television, was the most effective recruitment tool in that it was best able to enhance public awareness of the out-of-care system (Moore et al. 1988). The US Office of Inspector General (2002a) found that foster agency managers reported that media campaigns using billboards, television advertisements, public service announcements that cast a wide net were successful in increasing the volume of foster families. However, many families recruited in this manner were unwilling to care for school-age children, teenagers, and children with special needs. These children constitute the largest proportion of children in care, thus there is a need to adopt recruitment methods that target families for these particular types of children.

Many foster families and agency workers believed that current foster parents were the best recruiters (Casey Family Programs; Jarmon et al. 2000). Consistent with this, an evaluation of a New York recruitment program run by a welfare agency, found that recruitment by friends or family already fostering was more effective than recruiting via media, and trained recruiters were more successful than untrained recruiters (Smith and Gutheil 1988). In this study, recruitment using trained foster carers and a monetary incentive or finders fee of US $100 for those successful in recruiting new parents, resulted in a 49 per cent increase in foster families.

Existing foster parents recruited through social contacts, group meetings and talking to strangers who ask parents about fostering (Jarmom et al. 2000), however Casey Family Programs (2002) also documented the use of foster families as “foster family developers” in the recruitment and support of foster families. To facilitate the support role, existing foster families can be given training about: community organisations; cultural sensitivity; about the child welfare system; and communication skills. Informal community information sessions for potential foster families, and hosted by departmental staff or foster families (already residing in those communities), were found to be effective (Casey Family Programs 2002). The Children Services Society of Wisconsin (1991) found that 53 per cent of agencies used civic and religious groups in recruitment efforts and reported an increase in approved families and a 26 per cent increase in their retention.

Consistent with Australian research, the US Office of Inspector General (2002a) found that departmental/agency delays in response to enquiries about becoming a
foster parent, stringent requirements, and the length of time involved in becoming a foster parent also adversely affect recruitment efforts and reinforce existing reservations about fostering.

Particular recruitment practices have been documented as “good practice”, but have lacked supporting empirical evidence of their effectiveness. It is generally highlighted that recruitment practices need to recruit homes that meet the specific needs of the children in need of care (Casey Family Programs 2002; Research in Practice 2003; US Office of Inspector General). This requires documentation of information on age, the level of physical and mental health, behavioural difficulties and ethnic and racial diversity of children in need of care (Research in Practice 2003). Recruitment strategies should also target families that possess the characteristics and competencies that research has found to be associated with successful foster care placements (Casey Family Programs 2002). Local agencies and/or departments should have in place adequate management information systems so as to identify the needs of the children in need of care and to assemble accurate profiles of their existing carers so that they know where to pitch their campaigns (Research in Practice 2003).

In terms of good practice recommendations, Casey Family Programs (2002) also highlighted that well-designed recruitment strategies should be targeted to specific communities that can provide specific types of carers. Therefore agencies need to compile demographic data to identify suitable communities. Local authorities need to be able to respond to enquiries efficiently if they are to sustain the interest of potential carers (Research in Practice 2003). Clear information about the types of fostering available and the different rates of allowances and/or fees is also beneficial (Research in Practice 2003). As such, agency and departments need to formulate detailed response protocols that include specification of responsibility for receiving and responding to enquiries and time deadlines for completing tasks such as responding to enquiries.

In summary, research suggests that effective recruitment practices of non-Indigenous carers require some broad-based media components in order to enhance community awareness of the out-of-care system and the needs of children in care. However research also suggests that informal practices are particularly important in engaging families to contact agencies to become foster carers. The involvement of existing foster parents was one particular tool that was cited as being effective. Notably, bureaucratic procedures of foster care agencies and how they interact with foster carers are also important in shaping recruitment of new foster parents. Issues that often prevent more effective recruitment of foster parents are the: lack of a clearly defined role for carers, and carers; lack of status carers have with child welfare agencies and communities. Agencies need to formulate response protocols that address these issues.

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context**

In this section, documented practices that are employed to recruit Indigenous foster carers in Australia and internationally are outlined. In general, very few authors have described strategies that are being employed in the recruitment of Indigenous carers. There is also an absence of empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of such strategies.
Two qualitative studies of the views of out-of-home care workers and carers regarding the recruitment and support practices for carers included some discussion of Indigenous issues in recruitment (McHugh et al. 2004; Victorian Department of Human Services 2003). These studies did not employ empirical measures of the effectiveness of documented recruitment practices for Indigenous carers, however both cited the importance of localised and low-key promotion to attract potential Indigenous carers (Victorian Department of Human Services 2003). For instance, word of mouth referral from existing carers or through others in the local community was highlighted as being successful in attracting carers (McHugh et al. 2004). This might include the agency worker approaching families that were considered to be appropriate: in most of these cases they agreed to foster. The report by the Victorian Department of Human Services (2003) also suggested that such low-key recruitment strategies built awareness and understanding of out-of-home care in Indigenous communities. However, this is likely to be mediated by the level of local knowledge, rapport and respect of the worker. More formal recruiting practices used by agencies (such as pamphlets) were less common, low key, brief in content, and conducted through local community organisations (McHugh et al. 2004).

Another theme emerging from the literature is that the recruitment of Indigenous carers requires understanding of complex matters of kinship and social structure and also knowledge of local community. For instance, a view expressed in the survey conducted by McHugh et al. (2004) is that it is important for potential Indigenous carers to know an Indigenous worker’s background so connections and relationships could be developed and maintained. Furthermore, recruiting in areas where the departmental or even Indigenous agency workers were less well known to local communities was also problematic, as many Indigenous people had experienced events within their wider family that were difficult to discuss with a “stranger” (McHugh et al. 2004). A skilled approach was required to make potential carers feel comfortable and to get accurate information on their suitability. In reviewing the effectiveness of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, Lock (1997) highlighted the importance of knowledge of Indigenous communities and suggests that the involvement of Indigenous people with experience and expertise in the area of Indigenous child welfare is critical for successful recruitment strategies. As such, effective recruitment of Indigenous carers requires Indigenous agencies and/or departments to recruit Indigenous workers. This is reflected in international literature with a review of UK foster recruitment strategies highlighting a clear relationship between strategies for employing out-of-home care staff from black and other ethnic minorities and the availability of carers from such backgrounds (Research in Practice 2003).

An overview of recruitment practices in the US provided by Casey Family Programs (2002) outlined the components of a strategy to recruit Indigenous carers in Alaska that is built on sensitivity to race and culture. The authors also highlight that word of mouth is the basis of recruitment, and because of this families need to understand that the agency will support them. Furthermore, as tribes are often completely closed and independent communities, recruitment occurs through existing networks in the community. A representative body such as a tribal leader groups is an important vehicle for recruitment. Individuals who are already in and connected to the village residents such as the Public Health nurses are also effective in identifying people who
may be likely candidates. It is therefore important for a community foster agency to develop relationships between members of the tribes, and the welfare department.

**Cultural comparison**

Research conducted with non-Indigenous samples has shown broad-based media campaigns to be an important component of recruitment campaigns. In comparison, with regard to Indigenous carers, the literature particularly highlighted the effectiveness of localised, low-key recruitment strategies (that is, word of mouth) to build awareness and understanding of out-of-home care in Indigenous communities. There was little documentation of such low-key strategies. An understanding of complex matters of kinship and social structure and also knowledge of the local community also appears important. International research indicated that use of existing networks (for example, representative bodies, health bodies) within Indigenous communities is important in relation to this issue. A strong reputation in the community is important to enhance the agency’s standing within the community, which relies on demonstrating a track record of supporting existing carers.

**Key messages**

- There is very little literature that documents strategies that are being employed in the recruitment of Indigenous carers. There is also an absence of empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of such strategies.
- The literature suggested the effectiveness of localised, low-key recruitment strategies (that is, word-of-mouth) to build awareness and understanding of out-of-home care in Indigenous communities. An understanding of complex matters of kinship and social structure and the use of existing networks (for example, representative bodies, health bodies) are important to facilitate recruitment.
- Broad-based media campaigns are unlikely to be effective in recruitment Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers.

**Assessment of foster carers**

The assessment and selection of foster carers is based on identified specific individual, family and home environment characteristics that are likely to promote the behavioural and emotional adjustment and safety of foster children. Assessment provides a means of identifying training and support needs of selected carers and therefore provides a means to increase their competency. Effective screening should also prevent breakdown of placement and ultimately retention of carers. In addition, assessment is designed to screen out applicants with specific undesirable characteristics (for example, convictions for child sex offences).

**Effective assessment practices in the wider community**

Little has been written specifically on the assessment and approval of new carers (Berridge 1997 382). However, according to Asquith and Beesley (2002), comprehensive investigation of parents should include a number of assessment instruments of potential carers:
• interviews;
• written statements from carers;
• references;
• criminal history checks; and
• measures of psychosocial functioning of parents and families.

Assessment instruments are based on a premise that there are desirable parental and familial qualities influencing the recruiting agency’s choice of foster parents and families. This is because these desirable parental qualities are associated with positive outcomes for children. A number of publications have described key foster parent competencies and skills (for example, see Table 2), however, there is a lack of research on the influence of foster parent behaviour, home environment and family and marital functioning on foster child outcomes (Lindsey 2001; Orme and Buehler 2001). Lindsey (2001) argued that research into key aspects of foster families such as demographics, parental mental health, and social support is so scarce “as to be little direct value to practitioners” (p. 20). As such, instruments used in the assessment of foster carers are based on a large amount of research on children and families in the general population (Orme and Buehler 2001). Little reference is made in the literature to the use of standardised, valid, and reliable instruments to assess parenting behaviour as part of the screening and selection process for foster carers (Lindsey 2001). This is an area of major concern, as researchers contend that there are differences between the experience and skills and qualities needed to foster children (particularly those with special need and complex behavioural and emotional behavioural difficulties) and those demonstrated or needed in parenting biological children (Sinclair, Wilson and Gibbs 2004b).


Table 2: The core competencies employed by the majority of the Agencies in the UK and on which the British Association for Adoption and Fostering assessment model is based (Asquith and Beesley 2002).

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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><strong>Caring for children:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• An ability to provide a good standard of care to other people’s children that promotes healthy emotional, physical, and sexual development as well as their health and emotional achievement.</td>
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<td>• An ability to accept and provide care appropriate to the individual child as he/she is.</td>
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<td>• An ability to work closely with a child’s family, and others who are important to the child.</td>
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<td>• An ability to setting appropriate boundaries and manage children’s behaviour within these without the use of physical or other inappropriate punishment;</td>
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<td>• Knowledge of normal child development and an ability to listen to and communicate with children appropriate to their age and understanding.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td><strong>Provide a safe and caring environment</strong></td>
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<td>• An ability to ensure that children are cared for in a home where they are safe from harm or abuse.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• An ability to help children keep themselves safe from harm or abuse and to know how to seek help if their safety is threatened.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• An ability to recognise the particular vulnerability to abuse and discrimination of disabled children.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td><strong>Working as part of a team</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• An ability to work with other professional people and to contribute to the department’s planning for the child/young person.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• An ability to keep information confidential.</td>
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<td>• An ability to communicate effectively.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• An ability to promote equality, diversity and rights of individuals and groups within society.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><strong>Own development</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• An ability to appreciate how personal experiences have affected themselves and their families, and the impact fostering is likely to have on them all.</td>
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<td>• An ability to have people and links within the community that provide support.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• An ability to use training opportunities and improve skills.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• An ability to sustain positive relationships and maintain effective functioning through periods of stress.</td>
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*Note.* This table provides an example of an assessment framework. Its inclusion is not an indication of its adequacy to assess foster carers.

To summarise, there is a paucity of literature on: the assessment and approval of new carers (Berridge 1997); and on the use of standardised, valid, and reliable instruments to assess parenting behaviour as part of the screening and selection process for foster carers (Lindsey 2001).

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context**

Assessment is conducted on the premise that there are certain qualities and characteristics of parenting that are associated with a child’s optimal development. However, it has been strongly argued that the concept of “good” or “optimal” parenting is socially constructed and is influenced by culturally bound beliefs. That is, different cultures have unique views about what constitutes a competent and successful child and/or adult and as such there are different cultural perspectives on what parent practices are desirable in order to encourage the successful development of children. For instance, it has been suggested that Anglo-European cultures place higher emphasis on socialising children to be independent, competitive achievers,
whereas African-American and Asian cultures place greater value on interdependence and therefore socialise children to be cooperative, obedient and to respect authority without question (Barlow, Coren and Stewart-Brown 2002). This has led some child welfare practitioners to contend that families belonging to these ethnic groups have a tendency to use higher levels of restrictive and demanding parenting including more punitive and forceful discipline.

Generally, assessment models of prospective foster families and other families in the welfare system are based on dominant (Anglo-European) cultural beliefs and standards concerning parenting. It has been argued that the use of such models to assess the ability of Indigenous and other minority families to care for children can lead to culturally-biased and discriminatory outcomes because Indigenous parenting practices can be incorrectly viewed to be indicative of risk to the safety and wellbeing of the child (Fontes 2005). There is little documentation of assessment instruments and practices for Indigenous foster carers in an Australian context (Vicary and Andrews 2000), however a critique by Yeo (2003) of the applicability of assessments of the bonding and attachment of Australian Indigenous children to their carers provides an example of how assessments may lead to culturally-biased information concerning the ability of Indigenous families to care for children.

Yeo (2003) described how the core tenets of attachment are inconsistent with Indigenous values of relatedness and childrearing practices. For instance, consistent with the collective nature of Australian Indigenous culture where there is greater tendency for individuals to think of themselves in terms of affiliation to others and their community, Indigenous children can often be cared for by different women interchangeably in addition to their natural mothers. Children may also have lengthy absences from their birth parents for reasons of cultural ceremonies (for example, “sorry business”). In addition, with older children, some Indigenous communities place more importance on a child’s development of self-reliance, early independence and a capacity to defend themselves when threatened. Children can therefore be given more autonomy in daily functioning, such as feeding themselves, and non-compliance with adults’ directives is permissible. Yeo argued that on the basis of the theoretical tenets of bonding and attachment, such characteristics of Indigenous childrearing might be misconstrued as the birth parent’s lack of sensitivity to the needs of their children and limited connectedness between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their birth parents.

In addition to concerns relating to the lack of sensitivity to cultural difference in parenting practices and values, another issue relevant to the assessment of prospective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster families concerns material disadvantages that are experienced in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Material and personal resources are considered core elements of parenting and examination of these areas are key areas of assessment for prospective foster families. Assessments also consistently consider information on the parental and other family members’ history of criminal activities or actions or abuse or neglect. It is notable that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have higher rates of poverty and reliance upon welfare assistance in the Indigenous population. This also results in some families having lower levels of financial and material resources to care for children, translating into lower life expectancies, standards of housing, clothing and hygiene (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2003a). Furthermore, among
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults there are also greater rates of adult imprisonment, criminal history (and child maltreatment perpetration), suicide, drug dependence and substance abuse, and general medical conditions (ABS 2003b; Hogg 1994; Hunter 1995; Perkins, Sanson-Fisher, Blunden and Lunnay 1994). When assessed on these criteria Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are more likely to be deemed unsuitable to care for children, which is likely to contribute to systemic barriers to the recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families for foster and care for children.

**Cultural comparison**

Cultural differences in parenting and material disadvantages among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities indicate an acute need for assessment models that are adapted for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. On the other hand, researchers have cautioned that that the safety of Indigenous children in need of care should not be compromised in the adaptation of assessment instrument and practices (Lynch 2001), particularly with regard to the lowering of standards in relation to the assessment of the criminal history for Indigenous carers. Furthermore, some researchers also note that it seems likely that children have many common needs that transcend cultural differences, and that these needs may be better met by certain parenting practices than others. For example, it appears evident that parental warmth and responsiveness are necessary for healthy psychological adjustment, irrespective of cultural differences (Barlow et al. 2002?). Any adaptation of assessment models must provide a balance of the interests of the child and interests of the Indigenous community to care for Indigenous children.

**Key messages**

- Assessment of potential Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster families is likely to contribute to systemic barriers to the recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families for foster and care for children; however there is little information about how assessment models should be adapted for prospective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian foster families, nor those for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in general.
- There is a need to document the approaches used to assess prospective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster carers that are used in Australian jurisdictions and to examine the effect of assessment on prospective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster families’ willingness to provide care for children.

**Training**

Generally, foster care training programs provide instruction or advice about agency policies, legal procedures and potential problems in the care of foster children (Berry 1988 cited in Barber and Gilbertson 2001). In such programs, new foster parents may also be called on to reflect and discuss the causes and effects of problems in foster care. Due to the increased numbers of children entering care with complex difficulties, foster parent training programs in the past decade have also increasingly incorporated behavioural methods such as role-playing, audiovisual materials of interactions between parents and children, to increase the foster carers’ skills in dealing with difficult behaviour.
Although it has been recognised that individuals require a number of child management skills to effectively carry out the role of fostering, a common feature of foster carer training programs is a lack of evaluation (Berry 1988 cited in Barber and Gilbertson 2001). As such, there is little documented evidence that training and support is related to increased foster parent competence and enhanced child outcomes.

**Australian research with the wider community**

The Australian Foster Care Association (2001) conducted a major survey of approximately 800 Australian foster carers from each state and territory. The aim was to capture the views of carers about the whole foster care sector to assess the appropriateness of the support that they were receiving. The Association reported that most carers (over 70 per cent) reported that introductory and initial training received a rating of either extremely good or very good. Subsequent training received a somewhat lesser rating with only 59 per cent of carers saying that it was very good or extremely good. For training concerning for specialist skills for children with high needs, the number of respondents rating it as either very good or extremely good was a little higher at 62 per cent.

A survey of foster carers by McHugh and colleagues (2004) reported that foster carers’ views in relation to training were mostly positive: two-thirds of the carers surveyed reported their initial training as “good”; 20 per cent found it “reasonable”; and only three per cent found it poor. Over a third (39 per cent) of carers said they would like additional training but close to two-thirds said they would not. Two-thirds of carers felt well prepared to foster the children most recently placed with them. When carers were asked what could have prepared them more for caring, the most common response was the provision of more background information about the child.

Australian research indicates that most non-Indigenous carers are positive in their views toward training. However little documented evidence exists to show that: the relationship between training and foster parent satisfaction and/or retention; and that training and support is related to increased foster parent competence and enhanced child outcomes. As discussed in a later section, there is some evidence from international studies that a lack of training contributes to placement disruption and to carers discontinuing (Denby, Rindfleisch and Bean 1999; Rhodes, Orme and Buehler 2001).

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context**

In the previous section it was highlighted that there are different cultural perspectives on what parent practices are desirable in order to encourage the successful development of children. Research from other western countries suggests that parents from the dominant ethnic group (that is, Anglo-European parents), are more likely to use parenting programs than ethnic minority carers, and that minority ethnic parents are more likely to drop out prematurely (Farrington 1991; Holden, Lavigne and Cameron 1990). It has been suggested that this may relate to the mismatch between programs that have been designed for the socio-cultural needs of white parents and the experience of being a minority ethnic parent (Barlow, Shaw and Stewart-Brown 2004). As such, the absence of training programs that have been adapted to the socio-
cultural needs of Indigenous carers may be a disincentive to their retention.

In the study by McHugh and colleagues (2004) in which the availability of foster carers within New South Wales was investigated, the authors reported that, according to an Indigenous agency worker, Indigenous carers often attend ongoing training sessions however, some carers were not comfortable with accessing mainstream training sessions and accessing training sessions for all Indigenous carers is difficult (many female carers did not have access to a car, or have the financial capacity to meet childcare costs to attend training). It was noted that childcare was provided by the agency and a small fee paid to carers for attending to assist Indigenous carers to attend training sessions.

Barlow (2004) conducted one of the few reviews of research evaluating the effectiveness of parenting programs that were designed to meet the needs of the parents and children of ethnic minorities. The authors found that there are several programs specifically designed for minority parents that recognise and address discrepancies between the practices and values that are promoted in the programs and the parenting practices and values of ethnic minorities. For instance, it was highlighted that one generic parenting program attended by Chinese parents recommended that they encourage their children to express negative and difficult feelings, whereas traditional Chinese culture has been characterised as recommending the punishment of children who express such feelings (Chau and Landreth, 1997 in Barlow et al. 2004). Various programs employed methods to support parents through the feelings that might arise through a challenge to their values through participation in a program.

Barlow et al. (2002) reported that qualitative evidence from studies of such programs suggests that enhancing and extending parents’ knowledge about their culture, (including the effects of particular traumas such as those associated with the impact of colonialism and past welfare practices on Indigenous culture and parenting practices) are effective tools in supporting parents through the feelings that arise when their practices and values are challenged. For example, in the US, the Effective Black Parenting Program (Thomas, unpublished as cited in Barlow et al. 2004) specifically aims to help black parents to understand the historical and cultural reasons for what is described as the “use of physical discipline within Black culture”, while also challenging its use and helping parents to develop different methods of discipline. Qualitative evidence also suggested that parents of diverse minority groups report a number of benefits from participating in culturally specific training in terms of more positive discipline, increased empathy, spending more time together, feeling less stressed and more in control, and better communications with their children. The authors also reported that evidence from quantitative evaluations was not sufficiently reliable or rigorous to reach firm conclusions regarding the effectiveness of different parenting programs.

Although the evidence base was not strong, on the basis of their review, Barlow et al. (2002) suggested that good practice might include the following:

- sensitivity to the fact that ethnic minority parents may hold different parenting practices as a result of their culture (program facilitators need consult research that examines whether this is the case);
• the values underpinning a program need to be explored and made explicit (for example, assumptions about gender roles, child rearing attitudes and practices);
• program developers need to recognise and support diversity in family composition, the parenting role of others in addition to the child’s birth parents, and other child-rearing attitudes and practices; and
• the program should provide extra support to minority parents whose value system and practices may be challenged by the values and practices of the parenting program (for example, enhancing and extending parents’ knowledge about their culture, including the role of particular traumas have played in terms of the development of parenting practices) (Barlow et al. 2002).

A review of literature indicated that overall very few documented Australian parent training programs that have been adapted to include the values and traditions of Indigenous or ethnic minority families. Very little Australian research has been conducted in relation to how training programs can be made more appropriate to the needs of Indigenous and ethnic minority carers. One of the few documented generic parenting programs in Australia to have been adapted to the needs of Indigenous communities is the Resourceful Adolescent Parent Program (RAP-P) (Clarke, Harnett, Atkinson and Shochet 1999a; Clarke, Harnett and Schochet 1999b; Clarke, Harnett and Scochet 1998). Adaptation of the program by (Clarke et al. 1999b) for Indigenous parents occurred in consultation with Indigenous service providers and community members. Although the Indigenous adaptation of the RAP-P has not been evaluated in terms of effectiveness in enhancing Indigenous parents’ knowledge, skills and experiences, it is notable that the adaptation incorporates some of the key tenets of good practice endorsed in review by Barlow et al. (2002). For instance, the program specifically aimed to address the traumas associated with the Stolen Generation, particularly the reduction of parenting skills, through attempting to acknowledge the link between past and present adversity facing parents so that they may develop strategies to avoid and control stresses that erode confidence and parenting ability.

Indigenous workers in the New South Wales Department of Community Services have developed a training package for use with Koori workers (McHugh et al. 2004), and the WA AICCA Yorganop has reported the development of a training program for Indigenous carers. These programs however have not been adequately described in the literature. Research is needed in relation to how training programs can be made more appropriate to the needs of Australian Indigenous carers. Firstly, research must examine the experiences of Indigenous foster carers who participate in mainstream foster care training programs and the extent to which training methods are a disincentive for Indigenous carers to continuing the fostering role. This includes examination of whether training is effective in increasing the knowledge and skills of carers and facilitating better outcomes for children in care. This examination should devote attention to whether training methods conflict with the values and practices of Indigenous parenting. There must also be documentation of the principles, content and methods employed in any training programs that have been adapted to suit the needs of Indigenous carers. This should include methods of support Indigenous careers whose value system and practices may be challenged by the values and practices of the training program.
**Cultural comparison**

International research shows limited use and premature dropout from parenting programs by ethnic minority carers. This may relate to the mismatch between programs that have been designed for the socio-cultural needs of white parents and the experiences of minority ethnic parents. Programs specifically designed for minority parents recognise this, and address discrepancies between the practices and values that are promoted in the programs, parenting practices and values of ethnic minorities. Evidence from studies of such programs suggests that enhancing and extending parent’s knowledge about their culture, including the effects of particular traumas such as those associated with the impact of colonialism and past welfare practices on Indigenous culture and parenting practices, are effective tools in supporting parents through the feelings that arise when their practices and values are challenged.

**Key messages**

- There are very few documented Australian parent or foster carer training programs that have been adapted to include the values and traditions of Indigenous or ethnic minority families. The absence of such training programs may be a disincentive to their retention.
- Very little Australian research has been conducted in relation to how training programs can be made more appropriate to the needs of Indigenous and ethnic minority carers.
- Research must examine the experiences of Indigenous foster carers who participate in mainstream foster care training programs and the extent to which training methods are a disincentive for Indigenous carers to continuing the fostering role.
- There must also be documentation of the principles, content and methods employed by any training programs that have been adapted to suit the needs of Indigenous carers.

**Retention and satisfaction**

There is evidence that only a small number of people who express an interest in becoming a carer ultimately actually become carers. Some families complete training then decide not to pursue caring (Rodwell and Biggerstaff 1993). Rhodes (2003) found that almost 50 per cent of families who started pre-service training did not complete it. Recruiting new families is one way of ensuring an adequate supply of carers. However, recruitment is a costly, time-consuming activity that has not yielded enough foster families to meet demands for placements. Given the difficulties associated with recruiting new carers, greater priority needs to given to retaining existing carers and encouraging completion of pre-service training.

Effective retention of foster families decreases the reliance on recruitment and also increases the chance that children are placed with skilled, experienced foster parents, and ultimately experience placement stability (Rhodes et al. 2001). Changes to family dynamics and the increased demands of foster children have greatly intensified the challenges faced by foster carers (Denby et al. 1999) and, as a result, intensified the need for support and assistance from foster care agencies and caseworkers (US Office of Inspector General 2002b).
Australian research that has documented issues relating to the retention and satisfaction of foster carers will be described. As there is little Australian research in this area international research is used to supplement Australian research. Following this, there is discussion of research in relation to the satisfaction and retention of Australian Indigenous carers.

**Australian and international research with the wider community**

In their research relating to the availability of foster carers within New South Wales, McHugh and colleagues (2004) found that the existing carers surveyed indicated that carers cease to foster due to burn out, lack of support, effects on their families, the foster children being difficult, or changes to their own personal circumstances. A carer survey was employed to obtain information from foster carer families on their socio-demographic characteristics and fostering experience. According to carers, the negative aspects of fostering included contact with birth parents (14 per cent); stress and workload (13 per cent); and the challenging behaviours of fostered children (12 per cent). Both the carers and those stakeholders involved in the provision of fostering services agreed that the provision of better support for carers would ensure more carers were retained in the system. Specifically, carers wanted caseworkers to work with carers and to build up ongoing relationships with children.

A review of the retention and satisfaction of foster carers by the Victorian Department of Human Services (2003) was notable as it was the only study that included surveys of past carers. Past carers were significantly less likely to be satisfied than current carers and significantly more likely to have experienced difficulties in their fostering experiences. Most past carers surveyed (53 per cent) reported that they had stopped fostering due to a change in their personal circumstances, however, 38 per cent of carers left as a result of one or more negative experiences with foster care, including: the impact of fostering on their own family (26 per cent of past carers mentioned this), unreasonable demands by the system (18 per cent), and frustrations arising from dealing with the department (17 per cent). Qualitative analysis suggested that improved reimbursement packages, increased recognition and involvement (for example, input into decisions regarding foster children), and increased levels of support (for example, access to support services for carers) were particularly associated with satisfaction. These three factors along with improved assessment of – and information about – the child were associated with current carers’ willingness and ability to continue fostering. However, past and current carers were only compared on two aspects (satisfaction and fostering difficulty), despite profiles of past and present carers being described. There was a limited description of the study methodology, particularly in relation to the comparison of past and present carers.

Carer satisfaction and support was also discussed by Gilbertson and Barber (2003) who conducted qualitative interviews with 19 carers who had ended placements, with issues discussed including: placement deterioration, breakdown, provision of formal support and possible interventions to stabilise the placement. Although this research study involved a small sample size, the findings show that system factors were directly implicated in placement failure, and suggest that placement instability could be limited if carers were adequately informed, prepared, supported, and consulted (Gilbertson and Barber 2003).
The most useful information on retention comes from studies that have compared current fostering families with those who have ceased and/or plan to cease fostering on demographic information, satisfaction and/or experiences with out-of-home care. Several international studies have examined carer satisfaction regarding components of the out-of-home care system, or have surveyed former carers regarding the aspects of the out-of-home care system that have prompted them to cease fostering. Several studies employ this design (for example, Denby et al. 1999; Rhodes et al. 2001; Rhodes et al. 2003; Sinclair et al. 2004b; Triseliotis, Borland and Hill 1999), however there is an absence of such research that has focused on Indigenous or ethnic minority carers (or included sufficient numbers of such carers).

This literature suggests that aspects of agency support are linked to the retention of foster carers. For instance, compared to those who continued, Triseliotis (1999) found that those who discontinued to foster had significantly lower ratings of relationships with social workers and agencies. This dissatisfaction with the children’s social workers centred on carers’ views that to visit often enough or provide sufficient background information on the child, being unresponsive to requests for help and support when the child was being difficult, being unappreciative with the carer’s efforts and not being available when needed. Rhodes et al. (2001) found that fewer former carers than current carers received transportation for a child’s medical needs. Furthermore, continuing carers were more likely to have unmet health care costs that were not covered by social services, as compared to carers who planned to quit. Denby and colleagues (1999) reported that a strong affiliation with the agency, a readiness to call the child’s social worker, and not being treated like they “were in need of help” predicted desire to continue fostering. The authors also found that the extent to which carers felt that the social worker gave information and gave approval for good work predicted satisfaction.

Research suggests that agency support may be particularly important for the instances in which the carer experiences placement breakdown and allegations of abuse from children in their care. Qualitative work by Aldgate and Hawley (1986) showed that these are often highly stressful events for carers and children alike. Quantitative findings demonstrated that such negative events are associated with high levels of carer strain, less positive attitudes towards care and the frequency with which the carer has thought about ceasing fostering (Sinclair, Gibbs and Wilson 2004a).

Research suggests a less clear relationship between training and retention and satisfaction. (Denby et al. 1999) reported that carers’ perceived competency to handle children’s difficult behaviour were related to carer satisfaction, and perceived competency in the latter also predicted of reported desire to continue fostering. Urquhart (1989) examined how separation and loss affected foster carers. She found that current foster carers were more likely to receive training to prepare them for dealing with loss. On the other hand, Meadowcroft (1994) noted that specialist trainers who received intensive pre-service and in-service training do not remain in service as long as non-professional carers. Similarly, Sinclair (2004a) found that the number of hours of training provided before placement was significantly associated with satisfaction and intention to leave. However it was not significantly associated with strain associated with fostering, nor did it actually differentiate between those who actually left and those who continued.
There is insufficient evidence regarding the characteristics of carers and families associated with retention and satisfaction. Furthermore, studies that have been conducted have focused on foster family demographic characteristics (for example, family income, educational and employment status) rather than family psychosocial functioning (for example, parenting style, parental mental health, family functioning).

**Summary**

Australian research has not adequately examined the relationship between carer’s concerns and the retention of carers. International research that has focused on retention suggests that aspects of agency support are very important in carer satisfaction and a desire to continue fostering, particularly in instances in which the carer experiences placement breakdown and allegations of abuse from children in their care. There is some evidence that training is related to carer satisfaction and retention. There is insufficient evidence regarding the characteristics of carers and families associated with retention and satisfaction.

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context**

Very little research has specifically focused on the support and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster carers. The little research that has been conducted has been qualitative and based on the views of unspecified or small numbers of carers. Due to their focus on carers in general, often these studies did not provide conclusions or make recommendations specific to the needs of Indigenous carers.

In a study by McHugh and colleagues (2004) in which the availability of foster carers within New South Wales was investigated, the authors examined the specific issues relating to the support and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster carers. The authors conducted two focus groups and an interview with workers from the Aboriginal Statewide Foster Carer Support Service and an Aboriginal Children’s Service providing out-of-home. A carer survey was employed to obtain information from foster care families on their socio-demographic characteristics and fostering experience. However due to the small numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers who completed surveys, no separate analysis was conducted on these groups. Discussion of the findings in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers tended to focus on the views of the Aboriginal workers rather than the views of the carers. According to the workers, ongoing support for carers was crucial in the retention of carers, preventing “burn out” and loss of carers. Another study by McHugh and colleagues (2002) showed that Indigenous carers experienced a greater degree of material disadvantage than non-Indigenous carers.

The Victorian Department of Human Services (1998) conducted an internal review of out-of-home care services for Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria. The review attempted to address the key issue of whether the service system provided for the needs of Aboriginal children and families who were in the system. The primary data for the review were collected during a series of community consultations with six Aboriginal agencies involved in the provision of out-of-home care services to Aboriginal children. There were also focus groups held with Aboriginal carers, however the needs of carers were not the main focus of the report and no conclusions.
were no made in this area. The number of carers attending the groups was not specified, nor was there documentation of the interviews questions or schedule. Several themes emerged from the community consultations and caregiver focus groups:

- Agencies were not fully informing caregivers regarding the processes and legalities of placements.
- Caregivers voiced concerns about the lack of information on children’s medical and behavioural issues.
- A common issue identified by all carers was the need for more home support, financial advice and respite services.
- Carers believed that they did not need parental skills training, however there were “constant requests” in focus groups for training in managing children and young people with special needs.
- Aboriginal agency staff and carers reported they often found it very difficult to work with government workers including Child Protection staff and other departments. A preference was expressed for the use of Aboriginal community organisations.

Consultation with the Aboriginal out-of-home care agencies also suggested that there was insufficient time and resources to provide services. There was limited use of formal recruitment strategies and training of carers. Some agencies also reported that they did not have case management mechanisms or use structured case plans.

*Cultural comparison*

Research highlighted that like non-Indigenous carers, ongoing support for carers was crucial in the retention of carers. There were indications that support needs are different for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster carers. For instance, a particular lack of material resources was found to characterise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster families. It was also highlighted that more rigorous and professional approaches being taken in assessing and training all carers could be intimidating to some Indigenous families who were then reluctant to become involved in fostering. Like non-Indigenous carers, a need for training in managing children and young people with special needs was identified.

*Key messages*

- Foster carers in Australia are often dissatisfied, as they do not feel adequately supported. Areas of concern for carers included: provision of adequate support from caseworkers (that is, smaller case loads) better training and supervision, more experienced workers; support and information concerning legal entitlements and eligibility for benefits and services; and to be adequately informed, prepared, supported and consulted by the system to improve placement stability. However Australian research has not adequately examined carers’ concerns about the retention of carers.
- International research that has focused on retention suggests that aspects of agency support are very important in carer satisfaction and the desire to continue fostering, particularly in instances in which the carer experiences placement breakdown and allegations of abuse from children in their care.
There is some evidence that training is related to carer satisfaction and retention, however there is insufficient evidence regarding the characteristics of carers and families associated with retention and satisfaction.

- Very little research specifically focused on the support and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster carers and, due to the focus on the general needs of carers, studies tended not to provide conclusions or make recommendations specific to the needs of Indigenous carers.

**Support**

Research conducted in Australia with non-Indigenous samples is presented, however this research tends to focus upon whether carers receive support or not, rather than whether that support was effective in improving retention. In general, there are very few studies that have been conducted internationally that have considered in detail the effectiveness of informal and formal supports to assist foster families. There is a small body of international research that has examined effective models of support for ethnic minority children and families (no such research exists for the out-of-home care population). Findings from international studies that have investigated the support of ethnic minority children and their parents are briefly discussed.

*Australian and international research with the wider community*

*Australian research examining carer perceptions of the amount of support received*

The survey by the AFCA (2001) of Australian foster carers provided a comprehensive discussion of the concept of support and the ways through which carers can be effectively supported in the out-of-home care system. Carers identified several issues and concerns. Notably, the majority of carers (79 per cent) felt they get “just enough” or not enough support. The perceived level and quality of support received from government was significantly lower than that received from agencies. It was found that most support is received from friends and family (55 per cent of carers reported receiving a great deal of support from these sources), whereas departments were not seen as strong sources of support, with nearly half of carers indicating that they received little or no support from the relevant departments. This was particularly the case when the carer was alleged to have abused a child in their care. There was a discussion of the issues in relation to training, information, respite, allegations of abuse, and financial support; the report identified a need for improvement in these areas.

McHugh and colleagues (2004) reported that over half of the carers who participated in their study of foster carers in New South Wales regarded the overall level of support they received from their caseworker as good, whereas a fifth of the carers described it as poor. Carers’ assessment of their relationship with the government department responsible for foster care services mirrored the findings in relation to overall support with half of the carers describing the relationship as good and a fifth describing it as poor.

In another study, McHugh (2002) specifically focused on aspects of the foster care payment system in Australia. A national postal survey of representatives of government and non-government foster care service providers was employed to identify issues and concerns in relation to the ability of carers to meet the costs of
caring for children in foster care. The agencies and associations reported that the standard subsidy to meet the basic costs of care was inadequate. This was exacerbated by inconsistent departmental policies in relation to the reimbursement of carers (for example, kinship of non-related children), and caused high levels of stress for carers and non-government agency staff attempting to meet the needs of children. Qualitative focus group interviews with carers suggested that estimates of the costs of children not in care were not adequate to meet the needs of children in care as children in care tend to have more complex needs than children who had never lived in care (for example, heightened physical and mental health problems). Carers highlighted areas in the budgets where costs specific to fostering were not reflected. It was reported that few jurisdictions were reimbursing carers by way of standard subsidy payments at a level that would meet the basic, everyday costs associated with fostering. It was highlighted that a significant increase in the levels of subsidy payments for all children would be required if the issue of adequacy of payments was to be addressed and carers were to receive amounts closer to the “real” costs of fostering.

In brief, foster carers in Australia are often dissatisfied, as they do not feel adequately supported. Areas of concern for carers included: provision of adequate support from caseworkers such as smaller case loads, better training and supervision, more experienced workers; support and information concerning legal entitlements and eligibility for benefits and services; and to be adequately informed, prepared, supported and consulted by the system to improve placement stability.

*International research with ethnic minority groups*

In general, there are very few studies that have considered in detail the effectiveness for ethnic minority children and families of different social work approaches or the views of ethnic minority families of the quality of workers or the methods and approaches used.

International survey data from questionnaires completed by ethnic minority parents indicate that they generally rate social welfare services positively (O’Neale 2000; Thorburn, Wilding and Watson 2000). Few studies have compared the perceptions of ethnic minority carers to those of other service users, however such studies indicate that there is no difference in the level of satisfaction with welfare services. Several researchers have reported that ethnic minority families respond positively to practical support including day care, transport to schools and grants for clothes as well as the provision of emotional support. Parents also value a long term longer term service provided they could trust that combined the provision of a person-centred service with practical help (Thorburn, Norford and Rashid 2000).

However the usage of – and accessibility to – services have been highlighted as key issues in the services to ethnic minority families. The central question is whether ethnic minority families in need of services use actually make use of such services. A consistent picture emerging from international studies is that to increase their value to ethnic minority families, family support services need to understand and find strategies to overcomes a number of barriers, including:
• inhibitions arising from cultural expectations, including the views of the wide family that it is shameful to admit to the existence of unmet needs or problems and to seek help outside the family;
• difficulties resulting from lack of or poor quality interpreting services, including the training of interpreters in the special issues that concerns the needs of vulnerable children;
• inadequate strategies for recruiting ethnic minority staff at all levels and in proportions that reflect the children and families in the community used by the services; and
• the dominance of Anglo-centric perceptions of parenting standards and practices that often prevails even when the ethnic minority workers are recruited.
**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context**

*Australian research examining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carer perceptions of the amount of support received*

In their study focusing on aspects of the foster care payment system in Australia, McHugh and colleagues (2002) investigated the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers. Separate focus groups were held with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers in the capital cities of most states, and a joint focus group of non-Indigenous carers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers was held in a remote town. The authors found that Indigenous carers were more likely than non-Indigenous carers to either live in public or Aboriginal housing, were more likely to live with their own extended families, to foster sibling groups and to have more children in their care than non-Indigenous carers. From discussion with Indigenous carers it was apparent that large and often struggling Indigenous families took on children, both related and unrelated. Often placements were informal and usually lacked any legal status, therefore it was difficult for carers to obtain financial assistance from the department to meet the needs of these children. The lack of material resources among Indigenous carers was more obvious than with non-Indigenous carers in the study. Twenty-two of the 43 Indigenous carers said the payments they received were inadequate to meet the costs of the children in their care. Many carers cited difficulties in finding appropriate housing and accessing health services and transport. It was also apparent that one of the most important conditions for a successful carer was positive and on-going support from workers in agencies, associations and from small self-support carer groups. This did not always appear to be possible for Indigenous carers who were more likely to be living in a geographically remote area. Carers from the remote town also noted disadvantage in relation to caring for children with special needs.

Although there is little research in relation to the support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster carers, there is much evidence that colonisation and past polices of assimilation in welfare, particularly those associated with the forcible separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from their parents generally into non-Indigenous care (that is, the Stolen Generation) (HREOC 1997) have impacted on current perceptions of the government welfare system including out-of-home care services (HREOC 1997; NSW Community Services Commission 2001; Victorian Department of Human Services 2003). Many Indigenous people dislike, fear, or are suspicious of government departments and mainstream non-government services and are reluctant to use and access these services. There is little research that has examined the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander use and satisfaction with specific welfare services. However, anecdotal evidence from workers would suggest that Aboriginal people express a strong preference to access Aboriginal run organisations (Victorian Department of Human Services 2003)

In the absence of Australian research that has examined in detail the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families’ use of and satisfaction toward welfare services, Ralph (1997) provided useful guidelines to facilitate cultural competence in working with Aboriginal families:
• Understanding of the extent to which the client is competent in relating within Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal spheres. Assessment in this area is crucial in engaging the client and in planning what type of assistance can be offered.

• Extended family and kin should be involved in decision making about the child. Decision-making in many Aboriginal families, especially contentious issues, is often based on consensus of all the family, rather than a majority view or the opinion of key individuals.

• The “best interest of the child” is likely to be considered in the context of how Aboriginal culture is to be protected and promoted. Although the interests of children are accorded a very high value in Aboriginal society, the “best interest” principle is likely to be over-ridden in some situations by the broader consideration of how Aboriginal culture and family life is to be promoted. For Aboriginal people whose culture has been ravaged by the dominance of Anglo-Australian society, the struggle to maintain cultural integrity is ongoing and of the utmost importance.

• It is helpful for counsellors in working with speakers of Aboriginal English, especially its heavier forms, to be aware of the language differences that exist in the areas of meaning, use and style. For instance, traditionally Aboriginal people do not use direct questions to elicit personal information.

• It is important to acknowledge and respect customary law and the existing traditional methods of dispute resolution. In some instances, conciliation or arbitration that is undertaken by tribal elders may involve a decision regarding punishment or restitution.

Cultural comparison

In brief, foster carers in Australia are often dissatisfied, as they do not feel adequately supported. A number of areas of concern for carers include provision of adequate support from caseworkers such as smaller caseloads, and better training and supervision. There is a particular lack of material resources among Indigenous families where some families may have lower housing and health standards. As such, it is likely that the support needs of Indigenous foster carers are greater. Much evidence suggests that past polices of assimilation in welfare impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities’ current perceptions of the government welfare system including out-of-home care services. As such Aboriginal people express a strong preference to access Aboriginal run organisations. There is little research that has examined the support needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders foster families and their use of – and satisfaction with – specific out-of-home support services.

Key messages

• There is a particular lack of material resources among Indigenous families where some families may have lower housing and health standards. In addition, past polices of assimilation in welfare impact on Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander communities’ current perceptions of the government welfare system including out-of-home care services.

- There is little research that has examined the support needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders foster families and their use of, and satisfaction with, specific out-of-home support services.