



# LIVING OUT

A resource for families providing informal care and support for young people living away from home.

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# INTRODUCTION

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Amanda and Mark's daughter Claire approached her parents one evening with a problem. Claire's friend Tegan had had an argument with her Mum and had been 'kicked out of home'. Tegan didn't have anywhere to stay and Claire asked her parents if it was okay for Tegan to stay with the family “..for a few nights”.

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Many families find themselves in a similar situation to Amanda and Mark. The vast majority of families will be able to work through the issues and reunite, a small number will require ongoing support and some may not be able to reunite.

This publication is designed to provide information for families who are informally caring for young people aged 12 - 17 years who are not living at home and are not subject to a Family Court or Children's Court order.

Young people living informally with friends or extended family are often referred to as 'couch surfing'. Families who are informally caring for a 'couch surfing' young person often have a number of questions about their rights and responsibilities as informal carers. The information in this booklet is intended as a starting point for these families. Individual and family circumstances can vary considerably. This booklet may not answer all questions about individual circumstances. It is recommended that you seek advice from local family services or your local community legal centre for more advice relating to individual circumstances.

In this publication, families who are informally caring for young people are referred to as the *host family* or *Informal Kinships Carers*.



# THE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF INFORMAL CARERS

The following section is intended to provide carers with an overview of their basic rights and responsibilities when informally caring for a young person who is living out of home without a Family Court or Children's Court order in place. Individual circumstances may vary considerably and it is therefore recommended that further information is obtained from the services listed in the Accessing Family Support section.

## The legal rights and responsibilities of informal carers:

All carers, whether informal or formalised, owe the child in their care, a **duty of care**. Duty of care is a legal term which refers to the responsibility carers have to ensure that **reasonable care** is taken to avoid reasonably foreseeable risks of injury or harm to the child. While there is no concrete examples of what constitutes 'reasonable care' across all situations, informal carers should **act in good faith to ensure the safety of the child in their care**.

Informal carers will have a varying degree of duty of care towards a young person depending on the young person's age, level of maturity and the extent to which the young person has contact with their parents/guardian. In general terms, younger young people are considered more vulnerable and therefore in need of more support to ensure their safety. Similarly, young people who have an intellectual disability or young people who engage in risky behaviours, require more support and supervision to ensure their safety. Consequently, carers of more vulnerable young people must take more care to ensure that foreseeable risks of injury to the child can be avoided.

When thinking about how to ensure a young person's safety, it is important to have an understanding of the young person's capacity to make safe and informed decisions. Carers should consider talking with a young person about activities they are planning to participate in. Attempt to identify:

- » Whether the young person can make an informed decision about any potential safety risks involved in participating in the activity.
- » Whether the young person can plan how to safely undertake the activity.
- » Whether the young person will have access to supports to help them negotiate how to ensure their safety.

# MAKING CONTACT WITH THE YOUNG PERSON'S FAMILY

My son brought one of his friends home to stay with us for a few nights after he was kicked out of home. Should I call his family to let them know where he is?

This is one of the first questions families have about hosting a young person in their home, and it can also be one of the most difficult to negotiate. Young people who have left home due to conflict with their parents, often want some time away and don't want their parents to know where they are. Young people are generally seeking a safe and peaceful environment and may be very reluctant to let their parents know where they are staying.

Host families may also be concerned about how the young person's parents will react towards them for providing a place for their child to stay. The following provides information on the legal rights and responsibilities informal carers have in regards to informing parents about the location of their child.

In legal terms, young people remain under the care of their parents/guardian until they reach 18 years of age. A young person's parent/guardian retains legal responsibility for decision making for their child unless a Family or Children's Court order is in place which specifically gives **Parental Responsibility** to a third party. As such, it is best for host families to make contact with a young person's parents/guardian within a reasonable period of time to notify them:

- » that their child is safe
- » the location of where their child is staying
- » to begin an open conversation about the short to medium term care of the young person.

The age of the young person and whether they have any particular personal or health needs, must be considered when deciding at what point to contact a parent to notify them of their child's whereabouts. The younger the child is, the more vulnerable they are and consequently there is a greater need to make contact with their family in a more timely manner.

## STARTING A CONVERSATION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT CONTACTING THEIR FAMILY

It is normal for young people to feel anxious and concerned about a host family making contact with their parents. Host families sometimes avoid starting a conversation about the young person's circumstances out of concerns that it will upset the young person. Generally young people want someone to ask them if they are okay and if they want to talk. Here are some suggestions about how to start the conversation with a young person:

- » Most importantly listen to and talk with the young person about their concerns.
- » Emphasise that the purpose of contacting their family is to ensure that their family know they are safe and won't worry.
- » Emphasise that you would like to help the young person access support and are not trying to get them to leave.
- » Let the young person know that you are not making a judgment about their family situation and that you are there to listen to them and to understand their experience.
- » Ask the young person what support they would ideally like.





The young person staying with me says that her home is not safe and she is fearful of returning. I'm scared for my family's safety – what should I do?

Sometimes young people's family situations are complex and present a risk to their safety and wellbeing. It is important to listen to young people reporting risks to their safety and/or wellbeing and seek further advice on how to ensure the young person's safety and wellbeing. Before seeking further advice from a local service, ensure that you have clear information about the wellbeing risks facing the young person, including any observations you have made about the young person's appearance and wellbeing.

Services you may wish to contact for further advice include:

- » The Student Wellbeing Team at the young person's school
- » Your local Police
- » Parentline – 13 22 89
- » The Local Government Youth Service in your area. Local Youth Services are often a great resource for accessing local support services.

A resource for families providing informal care

The Department of Health and Human Services Child Protection Services respond to welfare concerns of children and young people up to 17 years. Local Child Protection regional offices can provide 'wellbeing advice' to members of the public where there are queries around the safety and obligations towards the care of children/young people. If you have concerns around your obligations towards a young person in your care, your local Child Protection office is able to provide some general advice.

**IF YOU BELIEVE THAT YOU OR SOMEONE ELSE IS IN IMMEDIATE DANGER, CALL EMERGENCY 000 AND ASK FOR THE POLICE.**

# DAILY DECISION MAKING

## **ACCESSING HEALTH CARE:**

My daughter's friend is staying with us after her mother kicked her out of home last week. She takes regular medication for an ongoing health condition and is nearly out of her current prescription. How do I help her access her doctor – she doesn't have her own Medicare card.

When supporting a young person to access medical services, it is important to know the following:

### **Obtaining a Medicare card:**

The young person's medical practitioner may have the Medicare number on file and will be able to bill the young person through this without needing to see the Medicare card. However, if the young person does not have their own Medicare card, their parent may be able to see that the child has visited the doctor through viewing their Medicare activity.

Young people aged 15 years and over are able to apply for their own Medicare card. Application forms can be accessed at Medicare Service Centres. Alternatively, application forms are available online at: [www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/forms/3170](http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/forms/3170)

When applying for their own Medicare card, the young person will need to provide Identification such as a birth certificate, driver licence, bank card etc. The young person will also have to supply their bank account details.

Once a young person is issued with their own Medicare card, their parent/guardian is also issued with a new card with the child's name removed. This may notify the parent that their child has applied for and been granted a Medicare card.

### **Accessing health care for young people who are not Australian citizens:**

The Australian government has a Reciprocal Health Care Agreement with a number of countries which provides the citizens of these countries with access to essential medical treatment, access to some health care services and some subsidised medicines. For more information on eligibility, see the Medicare site: [www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/subjects/medicare-services](http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/subjects/medicare-services)

### **Seeing a doctor:**

You can give consent for medical treatment without your parent's or guardian's parental consent, if a doctor considers you are capable of understanding the nature, risks and consequences of the treatment. In deciding whether you are able to give your informed consent. However, in emergency situations, doctors will act in the best interests of the child's health if they are not able to obtain consent from parents/guardian.

**IN THE CASE OF A MEDICAL EMERGENCY, CALL EMERGENCY 000 AND ASK FOR THE AMBULANCE.**



For young people under 18 years, it is not always clear at what age they are able to independently access and consent to medical treatment. Some general principles are:

- » If the medical treatment is for minor complaints such as a cold and the doctor is satisfied that the young person understands the risks and implications for treatment and determines that the medical treatment is in the young person's best interests, the doctor may decide to provide the treatment without seeking consent from the young persons' parent/guardian.
- » For treatment that is more complicated, such as accessing contraception, if the doctor is satisfied that the young person understands the treatment and any of its consequences and the treatment is in the young person's best interests, the doctor may choose to provide the treatment without seeking consent from the young person's parent/guardian.

For more information about young people's rights and responsibilities in accessing healthcare, refer to the Am I Old Enough publication by Victorian Legal Aid: <https://yla.org.au/vic/topics/health-love-and-sex/your-rights-at-the-doctor/>



## DAILY CARE AND FAMILY ROUTINES:

Parents/guardians retain parental rights and responsibilities towards their children, even when their child is not living with them – unless a Family or Children’s Court Order imposes restrictions on these. It is important for families who are providing informal care of young people to be aware that parental consent is retained by the child’s parent/guardian and as such, informal carers should where possible, make contact with a young person’s parent/guardian to discuss issues around consent to engage in:

- » Community and social activities.
- » Schooling decisions.
- » Learning to drive.

The following provides some suggestions to negotiating everyday situations where host families may be approached by a young person to provide consent to engage in activities.

### Providing consent to engage in activities:

My neighbour’s 16 year old daughter has been living with me for the past month while her mother is in psychiatric care. We do not have a formal Kinship agreement in place but her mother knows she is with me and she has stayed with me in the past with her mother’s permission. The young girl has a school excursion coming up and needs permission to attend. How will she obtain permission to attend when her mother is not well enough to provide consent at the present time?

Connection to school, community activities and peers become crucial when young people are living away from home as these provide stability for young people during a very unsettled and stressful time. However, obtaining permission for young people to attend activities can be difficult if parents cannot be contacted and there is no formal guardianship agreement in place.

Depending on the age of the young person and the risks involved in the proposed activity, schools have the scope to consider whether the young person can provide their own consent around decisions involving schooling and school activities. If the school is satisfied that a student understands the nature of the decision to be made, they are showing maturity in their decision-making process and it is in their best interest that the school engage with them in the process of making a decision, then the school is able to obtain consent for some decisions directly from the young person. There is no set age at which a school can obtain consent from a student to engage in activities, rather, the main consideration is the maturity and autonomy of the individual young person.

### Informal Relative Carers Statutory Declaration

Relatives or carers who have ongoing full-time care of a young person with the permission of the young person’s parents/guardian, are able to complete the **Victorian Informal Relative Carers Statutory Declaration**. This document may make it easier for government services to recognise ongoing informal carers. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development recommends that adults who are providing ongoing informal care of a young person under 18, use this form as a foundation from which consent can be obtained for decisions regarding the young person’s education where the young person is unable to provide this consent themselves.

The Informal Relative Carers Statutory Declaration form can be accessed from DHS offices or from the Commission for Children and Young People:

**TEL: 1300 78 29 78**

**<https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/>**

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This declaration does not affect the legal custody of children in any way and does not alter the legal rights of children or parents/guardians in any way.

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My son's 14 year old friend is staying with us at the moment after he had a fight with his parents and left home. He attends the same school as my son and I drive my son to school two days a week. Do I have the right to transport my son's friend in the car or do I need to seek permission from his parents?

Parents/guardians maintain the responsibility for providing consent for their children to engage in any activity unless a Family or Children's Court Order is in place which modify/limits parental rights/responsibilities. Parental rights and responsibilities are not altered simply when a child under the age of 18 is not living with their parents. Therefore, it is always best for families who are informally caring for a young person to talk with the child's parent/guardian as soon as possible to discuss issues of consent to engage in activities. This extends to gaining permission to transport the young person in a vehicle.

In the event that the young person's family are unable to be contacted, it is best to have a conversation with the young person around making an appropriate decision. It is recommended that families in this situation discuss with the young person whether they are comfortable with being transported in a vehicle, under what circumstances and how far.

It is further recommended that families consider the following:

- » The vehicles that the young person is transported in are registered and roadworthy
- » The young person is not driven by a P plater in their first probationary year
- » The driver adheres to the road rules at all times
- » The driver is at no time under the influence of mind altering substances (prescription or illicit), including alcohol.

In emergency or unsafe situations, the safety and best interests of the child are paramount and families are encouraged to make decisions that are in the best interests of the child with regard to transportation. For instance, if the young person is stranded in a public place at night and has no access to public transport and is asking to be picked up, the carer should consider whether it is in the child's best interests to be transported despite not having permission from the child's parent/guardian.

My daughter's 15 year old friend was kicked out of home two weeks ago by her aunt and uncle who are her guardians. I have talked with them and they know she is living at my home and they are happy that she is living with me at the moment. My daughter and her friend have been invited to a party on the weekend and I have given my daughter permission to go – am I also able to provide my daughter's friend with permission to attend?

Maintaining social networks is very important for young people who are living out of home. Peer relationships are of central importance to young people's lives and missing out on events and celebrations that a young person's peers are all attending can be a very distressing and isolating experience.

Providing consent to attend social activities and parties remains a responsibility of a young person's parent/guardian. Where it is possible, it is best to seek the permission of the young person's parent/guardian for activities such as parties. When it is not possible to make contact with the young person's parent/guardian, or where over-arching permission has already been provided by the parents/guardian to make everyday parenting decisions, we recommend that you consider the following when deciding on whether to provide permission for a young person to attend a party/community event:

- » Do you have the contact phone numbers of the event organisers and the address at which the event will be held?
- » Will the event be supervised by an adult?
- » Does the event have an open or closed invitation list, how has the young person been invited, by private invitation or open social media invitation?
- » Will there be alcohol at the event?
- » How will the young person get to and from the event? Is this a safe mode of transport?
- » How will the young person contact you in the event of an emergency or wanting to leave the event?

### Boundary setting and family routines

Boundary setting is often a very complex, difficult area for host families to negotiate. Families often become hosts to a young person at short notice and may have initially only agreed to supporting the young person for 'just a few nights' and so the arrangements made are often loosely defined. Families who end up hosting a young person for a longer period of time often find themselves in a situation where they need to implement some clearer communication and boundaries.

If you are able to have contact with the young person's parent/guardian, it is always best to consult with them about issues which require parental consent – make sure that you have also discussed this with the young person so they are aware that you are in contact with their parent/s. It is always best to maintain clear and open communication.

When undertaking a conversation about family rules and boundaries, it is important to acknowledge that all families have their own individual ways of working together and communicating. Rules and behaviours that are considered acceptable can vary considerably between families. Young people and host families can both find the experience of negotiating

different perspectives on family rules a complex task. It is important to approach conversations about family rules and expectations in a calm and supportive way. Some suggestions to keep in mind are:

- » Let the young person know you want to have a two way conversation where you discuss how to meet everyone's needs and come to an understanding about everyone's perspective.
- » Talk with the young person about how all families are different, have their own way of communicating and their own rules about how their family works.
- » Use non-judgmental and neutral statements such as "In our family... we have the music/TV off by 11pm on school nights" etc...
- » Avoid statements that sound like you may be criticising a young person's family. While the young person may be very upset or angry towards their parent or family members as a result of family conflict, these feelings are often also mixed in with feelings of sadness and loss. Young people generally want to be able to find a way to re-unite with their family. Comments that are construed as criticisms of their family can be very distressing and confusing for young people.
- » Be curious about the young person's experience of family life. Ask the young person about their family rules and what they are used to – though don't try to force the young person to talk if they don't want to, some young people will want to talk about their experiences and feelings, others will be very reserved.
- » Keep the conversation about family norms and boundaries simple. Discuss the important family rules that your family is not prepared to compromise on, but be prepared to have some areas in which you may have to compromise. Remember, the conversation about boundaries and family rules can be re-visited and re-negotiated over time if necessary.
- » **Always prioritise the safety and wellbeing of the young person.**

Young people who are couch surfing often don't know how to initiate conversations about family expectations. Here are a few suggested topics to cover with a young person who is staying with you so that the young person and your family feel comfortable to talk about how family life works in your home.

- » **Food.** This is an all important topic for young people who are couch surfing. It is a good idea to discuss with the young person:
  - Whether there are any food items that are for particular household members or are for allocated times/events.
  - When they are able to access food from the refrigerator/pantry.
  - When the household grocery shopping is done – does the young person have any particular dietary needs or particular likes/dislikes.
  - Whether household members are expected to share the cooking, will the young person be expected to share the cooking responsibilities?
- » **Laundry.** This can be a tricky area to negotiate. The young person may have limited laundry skills, however they may find it confronting having their laundry and particularly their underwear, done by host family members. We recommend you have a conversation with the young person about how they would like their laundry to be done. Offer to teach the young person how to use the washing machine if they would prefer to do their own washing – and consider providing the young person with their own laundry bag/basket to store their dirty laundry separately if they prefer.
- » **TV/Internet usage.** A lot of young people's social and support interactions and recreation time occurs online today. Access to internet connections and Wi-Fi are important for young people to remain connected to their social groups, to access information about services and supports and to enjoy recreation time. We recommend that you talk with the young person staying with you about how

they gain access to their online supports – do they have a phone with a data plan is this pre-paid? Consider whether you are happy for the young person to have access to your internet, if you have Wi-Fi, consider whether you are happy for the young person to have access to the password.

You may want to discuss some digital media boundaries with the young person – and consider how to align these with the boundaries in place for any other young people within the household. We suggest you consider some of the following as options:

- Social media engagement provides young people with an important sense of connection. For young people who are couch surfing, this connection can be even more important. Demonstrate that you understand this by being respectful of young people's connection to social media, show interest in their interests but don't try to over-monitor. Maintain the option for open communication about social media – especially if the young person is experiencing conflict with friends over social media.
- Always prioritise sleep. It is hard for young people to ignore messages/alert tones, even in the middle of the night. Interrupted and poor sleep quality is closely related to poor mental health and wellbeing. Help young people value their rest by supporting them to locate devices away from sleep areas. Consider negotiating that phones/tablets/computers are not located in the bedroom during sleeping time or are on silent and located away from the bed.
- Encourage young people to access supports via social media services such as ReachOut! and headspace. These services have lots of great information for young people who are experiencing tough times.
- Discuss with the young person your wishes about disclosing living arrangement at your home. Particularly discuss issues that could arise from young people 'tagging'



themselves at your address or identifying your address online. Also discuss your wishes about photos being taken of family members and posted online.

- Be aware of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat. Be aware of the security settings for these apps and seek to have a discussion with the young person about how they set their security settings.
- » **Weekly activities.** Does the young person have any particular weekly routines/activities that they always attend and how could they be supported to keep this up. It is important that young people are able to continue to attend their normal weekly activities as these help promote a sense of connection and general wellbeing. Discuss how these commitments fit in with the rest of the family's schedule.
- » **Household space.** Household space can quickly become over-crowded with an additional family member. Discussions around everyone's needs and how to achieve this can prevent feelings of over-crowding and family members feeling as though they have lost personal space within the home. When thinking about how to negotiate household space, it could be helpful to discuss:
  - Quiet spaces – especially to ensure that young people have a quiet study space.
  - Bathrooms – discussing how everyone is going to access the bathroom in the mornings can be important for household harmony.
  - Bedroom layouts – where young people have to share a bedroom, it is helpful to discuss sleeping habits including usual bed times and routines, does the young person read before going to sleep, listen to music, sleep with the light on. Considering how individual habits can be supported will help everyone have a good night sleep.
- » **Having visitors over.** Young people who are couch surfing often feel out of routine and disconnected from their friends and social networks. Positive connections to peers and

community are very important for promoting young people's health and wellbeing. Being able to spend time with peers is very important for young people who are living informally at friends' homes. Where possible, we recommend supporting young people to have friends over at times that are suitable for the household.

- » **Household routines.** Household routines can vary considerably and young people who are couch surfing can find it difficult to adjust their routines to fit in with a new family. It can be helpful to talk with a young person about their own routine, including discussing mealtime routines, bedtime routines, expected curfews during the week and on weekends etc. Discuss with the young person your family's routines and strive to come to a shared understanding of what will work for your household. It is positive to include the young person as much as possible in household activities, including sharing of household tasks such as cooking and cleaning responsibilities. Keep in mind that the young person may be concerned about carrying out activities that are unfamiliar to them and may require some support to learn new skills.

# ACCESSING FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

This section outlines support services that support young people and families to address issues resulting in family conflict.

## **Reconnect:**

The Reconnect Service is a community based support service for young people aged 12 – 18 years who are at risk of homelessness. Reconnect workers can work with young people in the community to stabilise their accommodation and address their individual needs which are placing them at risk of homelessness. This is a voluntary and free service which can also provide family mediation. To find your local Reconnect service, go to: <https://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children-programs-services-reconnect/reconnect-services>

## **FRMP Family Therapy:**

The Family Reconciliation and Mediation Program can help young people aged 16 – 25 and their family access family mediation, family therapy and individual counselling through the provision of brokerage funds directly to counselling/ family mediation providers. Applications for FRMP funded family counselling/mediation can be lodged by a support worker such as a youth worker, student wellbeing coordinator etc.. For more information on how to access the FRMP program, go to: [www.melbournecitymission.org.au/services/program-detail/family-reconciliation-mediation-program-\(frmp\)](http://www.melbournecitymission.org.au/services/program-detail/family-reconciliation-mediation-program-(frmp))

## **Relationships Australia:**

Relationships Australia can provide family mediation and counselling to enhance relationships and strengthen family communication. To locate the nearest Relationships Australia office, go to: [www.relationshipsvictoria.com.au/locations/](http://www.relationshipsvictoria.com.au/locations/)

There may be other services that provide family support and counselling in your local area. To find out more about local services, we suggest contacting the local government youth service in your area.

# ACCESSING FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Families who have a young person aged under 16 years living with them in an ongoing capacity may be able to apply to receive Family Tax Benefit on the young person's behalf. To be eligible, the young person must be living with the family for at least 35% of the time. In some circumstances, if a young person is living with a family in an ongoing capacity and is unable to return home, the family may be able to apply to receive Child Support from the young person's parents. It is best to talk with a Centrelink Customer Service Officer about these options in further detail.

Child Support Payment enquiries: **131 272**

Family Payments enquiries: **136 150**

Young people aged 16 years or over who are unable to return home due to extreme family breakdown or because there are considerable risks to their safety if they return home, may be able to apply to Centrelink for the Youth Allowance Independent Rate. Young people who choose to apply for this payment will have their eligibility assessed by a Centrelink social worker. For more information about eligibility and the application process for Youth Allowance, we recommend you contact Centrelink on: 132 490 or attend your local Centrelink Customer Service Centre.

NB: Centrelink payment criteria change from time to time, we recommend you regularly check the Centrelink website for updates on payment eligibility: [www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/dhs/centrelink](http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/dhs/centrelink)

## Other financial supports for young people living away from home:

### Family Reconciliation and Mediation Program

Families who are providing short term support for young people aged 16 – 25 years, who are experiencing family conflict and have left home as a result, may be eligible to receive some financial support through the Family Reconciliation and Mediation Program (FRMP). The aim of the FRMP is to support young people to remain connected to significant others and community and to provide access to therapeutic supports to enable family reconciliation.

Support workers such as youth workers, student wellbeing coordinators and homelessness prevention workers are able to apply for FRMP respite funds on behalf of families and young people. The support worker has to be able to provide ongoing case support for the young person in order to be eligible. More information on FRMP can be located at: [www.melbournecitymission.org.au/services/program-detail/family-reconciliation-mediation-program-\(frmp\)](http://www.melbournecitymission.org.au/services/program-detail/family-reconciliation-mediation-program-(frmp))



### **Creating Connections Education Employment Pathways**

Young people aged 16 – 25 years who are at risk of homelessness, including young people who are couch surfing, are able to apply for Creating Connections Education Employment Pathways (CEEP) funds of up to \$1,200.00 to assist with education/training expenses. CEEP funds can be used for books, stationery, transport tickets, computer etc. A support worker such as a youth worker, student wellbeing coordinator, homelessness prevention worker (such as Reconnect worker) must apply for the funds on behalf of the young person. More information about CEEP can be located here: [www.melbournacitymission.org.au/services/program-detail/creating-connections-education-employment-pathways-\(ceep\)](http://www.melbournacitymission.org.au/services/program-detail/creating-connections-education-employment-pathways-(ceep))

### **State School Relief Committee (SSRC)**

The State School Relief Committee can provide clothing and footwear to young people who are disadvantaged. To access support through this fund, make an appointment to discuss this with the school's Wellbeing Coordinator.

### **A Start In Life**

A Start In Life can provide funding for young people under 25 years to cover education essentials, including financial support to access tutoring. Information on how to apply for support from A Start In Life can be found at:

[www.astartinlife.org.au](http://www.astartinlife.org.au)

# HOST FAMILY SURVIVAL TIPS

Becoming a host family of a young person can be a complex journey. The introduction of a new family member is always a time of significant family change. When the new family member is a young person who has experienced significant conflict with their family of origin, they can bring with them feelings of anger, loss, grief and vulnerability. Young people who have faced significant loss often need a lot of support and understanding to assist them through the tough times. The following section will provide information on understanding young people's responses to grief and loss and will offer some tips on how to ensure your family copes with the added demands of caring for a young person experiencing tough times.

## Grief, loss, trauma and young people

Grief is not just felt by the passing of a loved one but rather, can be a reaction to the loss of place and/or experiences/connections of great personal value.

Young people who have left home due to family conflict or because of a significant negative event, can experience the loss of the family home and connection to family members and family space as grief. Individual responses to grief can vary. Young people in particular can respond to grief in very different ways to adults. Young people can be experiencing very complex and overwhelming feelings but may find it difficult to understand and/or share these with others. Some common feelings young people experience when they are living away from home include:

- » **Feelings of isolation, insecurity and dislocation:** Young people often feel unsettled and unstable when living informally at friends'

homes. Couch surfers often report feeling that they don't have any defined space of their own, that they don't feel able to use space or shared items such as the TV, freely. Because young people feel so tenuous about their living arrangements, they can often feel reluctant to open themselves up to the household for fear of making attachments that will have to be broken if they have to move on to another household. For these reasons, young people who are couch surfing may keep to themselves and be reluctant to discuss their thoughts, feelings and plans for the future.

- » **Feelings of anger or resentment:** The young person may feel abandoned by their family. They may be feeling unloved – or feel that they are the 'black sheep' of the family or not the 'favourite' child. The young person may also feel angry that their experience of family has not been what they hoped for, they may feel misunderstood, judged or not nurtured.
- » **Feelings of guilt:** Young people can feel responsible for causing family stress and disharmony and this can result in feeling like they are a 'bad person'. Young people who feel that they have been the cause, or have contributed to family stress, may find it very difficult to talk about this with others as they may be concerned that they will be viewed as a bad person. Young people who internalise feelings of blame and guilt can struggle with low self-esteem and may find it difficult to receive any constructive feedback from others.
- » **Feelings of sadness:** Young people may feel very sad that they are missing out on the daily life and routine of their family, especially their siblings. Missing out on family routines such



as seeing their siblings performing in sporting/ community based activities, can become a very acute loss for young people and can heighten their sense of isolation. This can be particularly difficult for young people who have their siblings attend the same school as they may see their sibling each day at school but the mixture of underlying complex family dynamics may make contact with their sibling difficult.

Young people can find it difficult to understand and work through complex emotions around grief and loss. Working through tough experiences takes up a lot of energy and can have an impact on young people's routines and behaviour. Here are some common reactions young people may experience when grieving the loss of connection to family and the family home:

- » **Experiencing difficulties with relationships:** Young people may feel very alone and have an acute sense that their friends don't understand how they are feeling. Young people who are couch surfing generally don't refer to themselves as homeless, as they feel that homelessness refers to people who are sleeping rough. However, young people who are couch surfing generally feel very homeless. Young people find it hard to convey their experience and feelings to friends and so can become withdrawn from their social world.
- » **Difficulty concentrating:** Couch surfing can be an overwhelming experience. Young people who are couch surfing often feel that they are preoccupied with the stress associated with their uncertain and often tenuous living arrangements. As a result, young people can find it difficult to maintain concentration. This can have implications for the young person's engagement with school. It is also very common for young people who are couch surfing to experience a high level of illnesses. The stress around the breakdown in family relationships and the uncertainty of living at friends' houses, can make young people vulnerable to colds and respiratory infections.

- » **Changes in sleeping patterns and appetite:** Young people can find it difficult to continue to look after their basic needs when they are feeling stressed and overwhelmed. One sign that a young person is feeling overwhelmed with their situation is a change in their eating and sleeping patterns.

## Supporting young people through grief and loss

Host families often want to provide support and help the young person staying with them through the tough times, however, many families find this difficult and feel that they are not having an impact if the young person does not want to talk about their experiences. Even if the young person does not want to talk about their reasons for leaving home, there is a lot of practical things host families can do to provide much needed support. Here are some tips:

- » Help the young person maintain their routine as much as possible. Encourage the young person to continue to attend any regular activities and engage in their areas of interest.
- » Encourage the young person to maintain their connection to family and extended family. Re-initiating contact with parents/guardian may be a gradual process. Not all young people are able to return home, however, in most cases, unless there are significant safety concerns, maintaining some contact with family and with extended family can help young people feel less isolated and help them come to terms with their experience of family life.
- » Providing quiet spaces/times. Quiet spaces are necessary for young people to find the space to be able to work through their thoughts and emotions as well as helping young people feel that they have some of their own space in an unfamiliar home. Some young people find it difficult to allow themselves quiet time unless it is built into a family routine.

- » Listen to the young persons' experience. Not all young people will want to talk about their thoughts and feelings. Some young people will want to talk but don't know how to start the conversation. Letting the young person know that you are there to listen if they would like to share their experiences, provides young people with permission to start talking. It is important to emphasise that you are not going to make judgments and are interested in understanding their experiences.

### **The impact of 'hosting' on family members**

Any addition to a household can have an impact on the whole family unit. This impact can be difficult for family members who are friends with the young person couch surfing. Friendships can be tested and strained when friends are forced to live together. This can be a confronting experience for both the young person couch surfing and the young host and can also have an impact on young people's broader friendship groups.

It is important to be aware that your child might find it difficult sharing their home life with their friend. Letting your child know that you are aware it can be a challenge living with a friend and that you are available to talk about this if they would like to talk.

The rest of the family unit may also feel the impact of having another person share the household. It is important to maintain your own family routine and celebrations. If your family regularly attends events, holidays or celebrations, it is important to continue these. It may be that it is not appropriate for the young person who is couch surfing to attend these family events and other temporary accommodation may need to be arranged.



# BECOMING INDEPENDENT: INFORMATION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The following section provides information about some of the tasks young people will need to undergo to become independent. This information is written for young people but is helpful for host families to be aware of.

More information about becoming independent can be found in the booklet ***Am I Old Enough*** by Victoria Legal Aid.

## **Obtaining a Medicare card:**

Young people aged 15 years and over are able to apply for their own Medicare card. Application forms can be accessed at Medicare Service Centres or online at: [www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/forms/3170](http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/forms/3170)

Completed forms must be lodged at a Medicare Service Centre.

When applying for their own Medicare card, the young person will need to provide Identification such as a birth certificate, driver licence, KeyPass etc. Bank account details must also be supplied.

When a young person is issued with their own Medicare card, their parent/guardian is also issued with a new card with the child's name removed. This may make the parent aware that their child has applied for and been granted a Medicare card.

## **Obtaining a Tax File Number (TFN):**

A Tax File Number is required for all people who are receiving an income (through employment or through Centrelink Income Support) and therefore have tax withheld. A TFN is needed to lodge a tax return at the end of each financial year. TFNs are also needed for Bank Accounts so that banks and financial institutions credit you with the correct amount of pre-tax interest thresholds. If you don't supply your bank with your TFN, they may tax you extra interest.

There is no minimum age to obtain a TFN. Application forms to apply for a TFN can be obtained from Australia Post outlets, Centrelink or by contacting the Australian Taxation Office on: **1300 720 092**.

Young people aged 13 years or older are able to sign their own application for a TFN. Young people aged 12 or under must have their parent/guardian sign their application on their behalf.

If you think you already have a TFN but need to confirm this – or access it again, you can contact the Australian Taxation Office on **13 28 61**.

## **Opening a Bank Account:**

There is no minimum age for opening a bank account in Australia, however, individual financial institutions may have their own requirements – such as being able to demonstrate that you are able to consistently sign your signature.

However, before you open a bank account, it pays to do a little research into the bank you want to choose and the type of account you wish to open. Here are a few things you may wish to consider:

- » Do you want to open an account with one of the big banks or with a smaller neighbourhood bank or credit union. Big banks have the convenience of more ATM locations and more online/call centre services. However, sometimes the smaller credit unions have lower account keeping fees and better credit card rates etc.. It pays to do your homework and compare the different fees between institutions as well as thinking about what will work with your lifestyle and how accessible your bank will be for you.
- » Minimum balance charges: some accounts require you to keep a minimum monthly balance in your account and if the account balance dips below this, a charge is incurred. Before opening one of these accounts it is worth considering whether you will be able to maintain the monthly minimum balance.
- » Service Charges: some accounts have monthly account keeping fees or charge fees after you have used your allocated number of monthly ATM transactions. It pays to compare the account keeping fees – some banks have accounts for under 18 year olds with no account keeping fees, however there may be other conditions attached to these accounts – ***always read the fine print!***
- » ATM charges: some banks will charge a fee for using an ATM from another bank/financial institution. While the (approximately) \$2-service fee may not seem like much at the time, these extra charges can very quickly add up. A good way to avoid paying extra ATM charges is to:
  - Know where your bank's nearest ATMs are. Check to see if your bank has an ATM locator App to make it easier to find your nearest ATM.

- Plan ahead – know what cash expenses you have coming up and make sure you have cash on you in advance.
- Consider taking cash out during EFTPOS transactions from traders such as the supermarket, larger department stores etc...
- » Security and access to your account: If you are under 18 years, your parents/guardian can open an account in Trust for you, or you can set up the account so that they can have access to it – which can be handy if you would like your parents to be able to directly deposit money into your account for you! If you are 12 years or over and can satisfy the bank's requirements, you are able to open an account in your own name without your parents/guardian having access to this.

### **Obtaining your birth certificate:**

Your birth certificate is an important document to have – especially when you are applying for other forms of ID or accessing services. If you don't have a copy of your birth certificate, you can apply to the Births, Deaths and Marriages Registry Office of Victoria to have a copy re-issued. However, if you were born in another state, you will have to apply to the Registry office in that state for a copy of your birth certificate. If you were born overseas you will have to contact the Registry office in the Country in which you were born.

Generally, a parent or legal guardian has to apply for the birth certificate of a young person who is under 18 years of age. However, if your parents/guardian is not able to apply on your behalf, you may be able to apply for special consideration to the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages.

Application forms can be accessed online or at the department of births deaths and marriages Victoria: [www.bdm.vic.gov.au](http://www.bdm.vic.gov.au)

When you lodge your application, you will need to provide certified copies of ID. This can be difficult for young people who are applying independently and have limited forms of ID. The Registry office will accept Student Cards, ATM cards and Medicare card as ID. If you are concerned that you don't have the required ID to support your application, contact the Births, Deaths and Marriages Registry Office of Victoria on 1300 369 367 to discuss your individual circumstances.

### **Is there a fee for obtaining my birth certificate?**

You will have to pay a fee of \$33 to obtain your birth certificate.

### **Getting Your Licence:**

Once you are 16 years you are able to sit to obtain a learner permit. You will need to book to sit the test at a VicRoads office and pay the Licence fee. The test to obtain a learner permit is a 32 question computer based test which is based on the Road to Solo Driving Handbook. You can take practice tests online here: [www.vicroads.vic.gov.au/licences/your-1s/get-your-1s/lpt](http://www.vicroads.vic.gov.au/licences/your-1s/get-your-1s/lpt)

To book your test, you can find your nearest VicRoads Customer Service Centre here:

[www.vicroads.vic.gov.au/contact-us/officelocations](http://www.vicroads.vic.gov.au/contact-us/officelocations)

Once you have obtained your learner's permit, you will be issued with a Learner log book. In order to be eligible for applying for your probationary licence once you have turned 18 years, you will need to have logged 120 hours of driving experience under a variety of conditions in your log book. It can be difficult for young people who are living independently to obtain their required 120 hours of driving experience. There is support available for young people who face disadvantage in meeting their required hours of driving practice through the L2P Learner Driver Mentor Program.

The L2P program can provide young people with access to a fully licenced mentor driver and a car to help young people attain their required driving experience. Information on how to locate your local L2P program provider can be found here: [www.vicroads.vic.gov.au/licences/your-ps/get-your-ps/preparing-for-your-licence-test/l2p-learner-driver-mentor-program](http://www.vicroads.vic.gov.au/licences/your-ps/get-your-ps/preparing-for-your-licence-test/l2p-learner-driver-mentor-program)

### **Signing a Rental Agreement:**

There is no minimum age to be able to sign a Tenancy Agreement to rent a house or flat, however you will generally have to demonstrate to the landlord or rental agent that you are renting out of necessity – that means you have no other reasonable option to access accommodation other than to enter into a Rental Agreement.

Young people can find it very difficult to find suitable rental accommodation. Renting can also be very costly as you will need to pay a bond and you may also have to pay an amount of rent up-front. There are some financial supports available to help people on low incomes afford rent, including the Bond Loan Scheme. For more see: <https://housing.vic.gov.au/rentassist-bond-loan>

It is important to be aware of your rights and responsibilities when renting a property. Information on rental rights and responsibilities is available from the Tenants Union of Victoria – see here on how to access information on a wide range of issues around rental rights and responsibilities: [www.tuv.org.au](http://www.tuv.org.au)



