

Clothing and Care

Qualitative research on clothing and the wellbeing of children

Acknowledgements

The Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre works to build the evidence base that helps us better understand wellbeing and what works to improve outcomes for New Zealand's children, young people and their whānau.

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Executive summary

Oranga Tamariki caregivers who care for children in state care receive the Foster Care Allowance (FCA), while the Orphan's Benefit (OB) and Unsupported Child's Benefit (UCB) are for eligible caregivers outside of the statutory care system and are administered by the Ministry of Social Development.

In July 2018, Oranga Tamariki introduced a Clothing Allowance as part of its support for caregivers receiving the OB and UCB. This support aligned these caregivers with caregivers who receive a clothing allowance for children living with foster caregivers (and receive FCA).

This research consisted of 36 individual and paired in-depth qualitative interviews with caregivers receiving either the OB, UCB, or FCA. Its purpose was to provide further understanding of the role of clothing on children in care for these caregivers.

First and foremost, caregivers told us clothing provides for children's physical wellbeing. However, it also contributes to psychological needs, firstly as a tangible expression of love/aroha. It is also important for tamariki and rangatahi to enable them to connect with their peer group and develop a sense of belonging within whānau networks. It helps form and convey their identity. Feeling good in the clothes they wear generates self-confidence; this is something caregivers want for children in their care, particularly given the children's often-challenging backgrounds.

Caregivers' perspective is that clothing creates a first impression and affects how children are viewed and received by others. How they are clothed communicates how well they are cared for and reflects caregivers' performance in their parenting role. Important others can include biological parents and whānau, teachers, and parents from the child's school or pre-school. The provision of clothing also provides caregivers with a means to express their love and reinforce the child's inclusion in the family. For some, it offers a bonding or educational opportunity for family members to participate in together.

Caregivers typically access a mix of new and second-hand clothing from a range of sources. Lower cost retailers such as K Mart and the Warehouse are common choices, with op shops frequented primarily due to the low cost of clothing. Family members play a key role in supporting clothing provision for children in care.

Planning and budgeting for clothing differs by income level, and the age of the child. Those with older children tend to rely on them to identify what new clothing they need, and when. Caregivers with younger children wait for children to outgrow items or gauge the need for new clothes on the condition of garments. A change in season often prompts a review of clothing needs and can prompt a shopping excursion.

Given financial constraints, those on lower incomes tend to undertake more planning and forethought when it comes to clothing. Budgeting strategies employed include relying on charities or hand me downs, staggering clothes purchases, planning shopping around retail sales, applying for additional clothing grants, and adopting techniques to extend the lifespan of clothing. Sometimes children go without until clothing items can be afforded, which can result in a delay in participating in extracurricular activities.

Those with a higher level of disposable income are more able to engage in ad hoc clothing purchases; these are often additional outfits bought as one-off 'treats' and therefore not necessarily addressing a physical need. It is important to note, however, that even more financially secure caregivers undertake budgeting practices and prioritise cheaper retail outlets when purchasing clothing for the children in their care.

The key barrier for lower income families to providing clothing is financial. Other families find this less of a challenge; moreover, they do not experience as many barriers overall. There may be tension in the relationship with the child over what they wear; while this is less about caregivers' ability to provide clothing, it can have financial implications in circumstances where children request higher cost, branded items. Other barriers experienced include difficulties in accessing financial assistance, restricted access to suitable retail stores and sizing, and keeping up with children's clothing demands.

At a basic level, having more funds available for clothing gives caregivers the ability to better meet the child/ren's clothing needs. This may include purchasing a wider range of clothing, as well as garments that are more in keeping with the child's preferences or clothing requests. Thus, it provides caregivers with additional scope to express their love for children in their care, and may appease tension in relationships where children are unhappy with clothes purchases. The ability to pay for specific items can facilitate children's participation in recreational and other activities and may increase the self-confidence of children if they are provided with clothing that strengthens peer or family connections. It has the potential to reduce emotional stress for caregivers who struggle to provide clothing for children in their care.

Caregivers take different approaches to utilising these funds; while many combine it with other earnings and spend it on general household expenses, others are very particular about allocating the money to the purchase of new clothing only. Regardless of their approach, caregivers are clear that it must be used on the child in care in some capacity. In addition, they all expressed gratitude for any financial support received for clothing provision.

The findings from this study with 36 caregivers, support the previous survey of caregivers which identified that many are unaware of the Clothing Allowance. Further, those who have some knowledge of it do not always know how payments are structured. There is scope for improved communication of the existence of this allowance. Other considerations include structuring payments, so they are better aligned with the way in which caregivers typically budget and plan for clothing (e.g. lump sum payments at the start of winter). A child's entry into the family is also an important stage to consider in the provision of clothing; given that they may arrive at short notice with little or no clothing, caregivers often make a significant financial outlay at this time.

When considering the experiences of caregivers in providing clothing, it is not possible to know whether these differ from parents caring for biological children. However, findings suggest that concerns are likely to be amplified amongst this group; for example, being judged by others may be felt more acutely given the weight of responsibility they feel as a caregiver. There may also be a greater need to ensure that all children they are caring for experience the same sense of belonging or inclusion within the family as a result of the clothing they are provided with. Moreover, the potential for a child being stigmatised as under the care of Oranga Tamariki due to the clothes that they wear, is clearly unique to this cohort, as is the experience of children being placed in their care at short notice with little or no clothing. There were a minority of examples in the research where clothing needs were impacted by neglect suffered by children in their previous households. The payment people are receiving (i.e. UCB vs OB vs FCA) did not appear to influence caregivers' experiences either in relation to caregiving generally, or the provision of clothing.

Background

Oranga Tamariki caregivers who care for children in state care receive the Foster Care Allowance (FCA), while the Orphan's Benefit (OB) and Unsupported Child Benefit (UCB) are for eligible caregivers outside of the statutory care system and are administered by the Ministry of Social Development.

Caregivers receiving the FCA also receive a Clothing Allowance for children in their care. In July 2018, this was extended to caregivers receiving the OB and UCB. The purpose of the clothing allowance is to cover the cost of a reasonable range of appropriate clothing; a travel bag; and replacement of school uniform items. The allowance varies depending on the age of the child; at the time of writing, rates ranged from \$20.82 to \$34.98 weekly.

Oranga Tamariki commissioned a survey with caregivers receiving the OB and UCB, which found that caregivers did not differentiate between money spent on a child for whom an OB or UCB is received compared with other expenses. Caregivers also said that they do not budget separately for clothing expenses.

Against this background, qualitative research on clothing and the wellbeing of children was sought to supplement the insights identified during the survey, and to provide further understanding of the role of clothing in care and wellbeing for caregivers receiving the OB, UCB or Foster Carer Allowance (FCA).

Specific questions to be answered by the research are:

- What role does clothing have on children and their care?
- How does clothing affect the care and wellbeing of children?
- What barriers do children and caregivers face with access and support for clothing to participate in activities?
- What benefits have there been from the introduction of the Clothing Allowances and increases in benefits for the care of children?
- How do caregivers budget and plan for clothing and care of children?
- What experiences do caregivers have with clothing and the financial challenges of caring for children?

This document presents key findings from the research.

Method

A qualitative approach was adopted for the research. This consisted of 36 individual and paired in-depth qualitative interviews with caregivers receiving either the Orphan's Benefit, Unsupported Child Benefit, or Foster Carer Allowance.

To ensure a range of views and experiences, interviews were conducted with a mix of caregivers from Wellington, Palmerston North, Levin, Auckland, and Turangi. Participants also varied in terms of their age, ethnicity and household income. A more detailed overview of those interviewed is attached as Appendix A.

Interviews were semi-structured and covered the following topics: the grouping of needs, general caregiving experiences, role of clothing in caring for children, relationship with provision of clothing and care, typical pathways for clothing provision, and impact of the Clothing Allowance.

Interviews were conducted in caregivers' homes¹ between 4 October and 9 December, 2020² and were around 1.5 hours in duration.

Caregivers received a koha as a thank you for their contribution to the research.

¹ One interview was conducted in a community facility.

² Due to Auckland experiencing restrictions as a result of COVID-19, the fieldwork period was extended.

Caregivers bring a range of backgrounds and experiences to the caregiving role.

The research involved a broad mix of participants in a range of caregiving situations. This included people of different socio-economic status and educational backgrounds. Caregivers were at different ages and lifestages, ranging from younger individuals in their twenties through to retired grandparents who had taken on the care of grandchildren. Most participants were caring for children from their own whānau, and the number and ages of children in each family varied across the sample. The majority were women, although a small number of men took part in couple interviews.

These characteristics are important to consider as they impact both on caregivers' general experiences of caring, as well as their approach to the provision of clothing. For example, while some are on restricted incomes and struggle to meet day to day household commitments, others are financially secure and have minimal or no concerns in this regard. Further, for some caregivers, children coming into their care was a planned and anticipated event; for others it was unexpected and happened at short notice.

While the background to taking on the caregiving role varied, all caregivers highlight a range of rewarding aspects in caring for children. These include the joy in observing positive developments across a range of areas (e.g. emotional wellbeing) and the personal satisfaction in providing a safe and healthy environment for children to grow up in:

He was stealing from gang members. He nearly joined a gang in Otara, and was on methamphetamine before he came to me. Now look at him, graduated, getting a job, getting his own apartment. And I hands down don't thank myself. It's the hard yards that he's put in, and the social worker, and the mentor that he has now. [FCA, Māori, Auckland]

I love what we teach these kids that come into our lives. Every time I feel like I've given them something to remember. What we try to do is try and give them something, and a little bit of teachings. And showing them that there is love somewhere in their lives that someone can give them. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

They speak about what children have brought to their family as one of the highlights of caregiving, and how grateful they are for this:

It's a funny thing, like you get lots of props³ for being a caregiver. Everyone's like 'oh, you're so amazing'. But I feel like we are just as lucky, if not luckier, because he's such a beautiful little boy. We're so lucky to have him in our family. [UCB, NZ European, Auckland]

He is the son I never had, never can have. The big brother that my kids never got. [FCA, Māori, Auckland]

It's like falling in love again, and I feel so lucky to have her, and I can just sit there and watch her sleep. I think she's brought something extra into my life. [UCB, Māori, Auckland]

³ Respect

Some of the rewards and highlights of caregiving, and what it means to caregivers, are displayed in the images below:



The harakeke represents whānau and a connection to New Zealand:

"With the weaving of it, it is the linkage of everything that comes together as a whānau. Weaving and whakapapa, that's the most important thing".



This represents the children, their hapu, and their iwi; their maunga, river, and marae are also displayed.

"This is how we raise a Māori child in care".



A photograph of 'the wall' in one caregiver's house where the children's pictures are displayed. It is a place where they can express their feelings: *"They are confident enough to be in a place where they can put their stuff and have their place. This is like their stamp".*

Caregivers acknowledge that the role is not without its challenges. As described above, many are caring for the children of other whānau members; this is often their mokopuna but also included cousins or nieces and nephews. While they do not regret taking on the caregiving role, some caregivers admit that it was not always a straightforward decision and that it had had a significant impact on their existing family life:

There were challenges. I could no longer pursue what I wanted to do, I was going to get my Bachelors in [programme] I basically had no choice. I'll be honest with you. Because I'm the oldest out of five children, it was like I was obligated to take care of them. I feel bad that I feel that way, but I was also pressured by my family to take care of them. [UCB, Māori, Wellington]

We thought we'd been there, we'd done that. We never thought we'd be taking the kids off one of our kids and bringing them up. But, you do what you have to do in the end. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

Interactions with other members of the child's whānau, including biological parents, can be problematic. While many seek to maintain these connections, they are also mindful of the need to protect children from unhealthy or potentially risky relationships. Other difficulties are linked to the children's backgrounds, some of which featured substance abuse, family violence and physical neglect; children therefore presented with a range of physical and mental health challenges, which caregivers are required to manage.

Additionally, while some caregivers report positive experiences with Oranga Tamariki staff, others express frustration with the organisation's processes or communication, with several highlighting that they have experienced a high turnover of social workers. Comments include:

That was the hardest part. Because he was raised in a physical abuse family and alcohol and drugs, I think he thought it was okay to carry on in the footsteps. And he's put me, I can hands down say, a lot of situations where I've had to remove him from the situation. [FCA, Māori, Auckland]

She's had a lot of let down in her life. Her mother comes and visits and then her mother takes off. And leaves her here, and that really upsets her. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

It was actually three months after he was with us, before the paperwork was completed. I had to go into the office here. I rang and rang and rang to find out who the social worker was and all of that because I hadn't heard from them. [FCA, Māori, Levin]

What role does clothing have on children and their care?

Clothing plays a vital role in the care of children. Caregivers view it as a basic necessity and essential for children to lead a healthy life; they therefore position it alongside other fundamental needs such as food, accommodation, heating and, in some cases, love/aroha:

That's just your practical stuff. You need to eat and have clothes and somewhere to live. It's just your basic needs. [UCB, NZ European, Auckland]

You need all of those together to function well. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

For some, while considered important, it is slightly lower in priority than other caring responsibilities:

It's reasonably high up there – food is the other one. But it's not as important as the love and care. That's number one. [FCA, NZ European, Auckland]

You'd die without food obviously. But I think they're all pretty essential. I mean, you can get clothes from an op shop and stuff. You need to have clothes really. Heating, it's important to be in a well heated house or you get sick. [UCB, NZ European, Auckland]

The figure below⁴ shows the positioning of clothing relative to other aspects of caregiving. While fundamentally fulfilling a physiological need, clothing also plays a role in meeting children's psychological needs (this is discussed further in the sections that follow).



⁴ This figure is based on key areas identified by caregivers in our interviews.

Experiences of providing clothing varies across caregivers.

Some caregivers view the provision of clothing as an easy role to fulfil – it is a part of everyday life and ‘what you do’ as part of your caring responsibilities. They have limited or no concerns regarding their ability to meet children’s needs in this area and no trouble supplying clothing for them. These individuals tend to have stable household incomes and/or are financially well-established:

I’ve never had a time when I couldn’t provide clothing. It wouldn’t even enter my head. I just do it. [FCA, NZ European, Auckland]

I need to know that we are financially stable for any emergency. You have got to live, but you have also got to have fun, so I don’t stress over money. I always say to [partner], whatever he needs, just get it. At the end of the day, he’s our priority. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

For others, it is more stressful. These caregivers struggle to keep up with children’s clothing requirements, mostly due to financial constraints. Some rely on charities or apply for additional funding to meet their clothing or wider household needs, or are more dependent on second-hand clothing streams. These caregivers are sometimes caring for children on a very limited income:

We are okay – we’ve had a few food grants. When COVID happened, we got lots from the [Iwi] Trust Board. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

This is a Housing New Zealand house. And the heating comes with that so that helps. And I’m a bargain shopper... it’s a must to be able to get what they need. ...Money is tight, but we get by. It’s tough when there are unexpected clothing expenses. My granddaughter made the [sports] team and had to have a new leotard to perform in the competition. Not sure where we would have found the money if the grant hadn’t come through because you really want them to be able to do these activities, just like other kids. [FCA, Māori, Palmerston North]

Diana⁵ is a sole parent, dependent on the sole parent benefit and care allowances, and money is tight. She has taken on the care of four children in her whānau. Two of the boys have deep emotional needs, presenting with significant behaviour issues (aggression, violent outbursts, ADHD). The youngest child was only a few months old when he came ‘temporarily’ into her care. He arrived with almost no clothing and no nappies. No financial assistance was forthcoming until the investigation had been completed, and the children formally placed in her care. Despite the obvious financial challenges, strategies for accessing clothing include op shop-outings and clothes swaps with whānau; in addition, careful budgeting gets them through. Doing things that are free or very low cost is a common strategy. “We go for picnics, go to the park and the kids build forts in the backyard and we’ll have lunch on the back lawn”. With four children to shop for, going back to school at the beginning of the year and winter are times when money for clothing gets really tight and requires careful planning and budgeting. The boys are at an age where they are not label and brand aware, although her granddaughter is starting to become conscious of clothing and how she appears. The cost of sporting clothing has been problematic: her granddaughter is at a competitive level in her sport and clothing for competitions are expensive. She had to secure a grant from Work and Income to assist with the costs for this.

⁵ Informant names have been replaced to maintain their privacy.

Stephanie is in her mid-seventies and cares for her two pre-school grandsons. She is financially secure, owns her own home in an affluent suburb in Auckland, and still works part-time. While the boys have some connection with their father, their mother is not in regular contact. Stephanie admits that this is not what she was expecting to be doing at this stage in her life but did not question her decision to become the boys' caregivers at short notice when it became apparent that they were at risk in their previous home environment. She has no problems providing clothing for them – finance is not an issue, and she does not need to budget for this expense. She has no particular structure to how she goes about it and tends to buy 'as and when needed'. It's very important to her that the boys are well presented – she is conscious of their backgrounds and does not want them to be seen in a different light to other young children in their area. Dealing with Oranga Tamariki is an unfamiliar experience for her, given her middle-class background: *"I'm probably a bit different in being in this organisation. I'm not trying to be snobby. I've always worked for my living, my husband always worked. This is just a foreign experience for me".*

Alongside meeting their basic needs, the provision of clothing for children in their care plays several roles for caregivers.

Protecting children both physically and emotionally is fundamental to the clothing and caring role.

The provision of clothing is integral to the protective role played by caregivers in caring for children. This includes protecting their physical wellbeing by providing clean and appropriate clothing. Examples include ensuring they have warm clothes during winter, a raincoat to shelter them from the rain, and pyjamas that keep them warm at night:

We are not very materialistic at all. For us, it is all about as long as he has got clothing to keep him warm or to keep him dry or from the sun, we are happy. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

Providing clothing also safeguards children's emotional wellbeing. This includes making sure that their clothes do not generate negative reactions from others, or that children stand out for the wrong reasons (e.g. due to wearing dirty clothes). For some caregivers, this also incorporates supplying them with the clothes that they want:

It's important that [child] does not get upset, so wearing what he wants is important to his wellbeing and mental wellbeing. [UCB, Pacific, Auckland]

Central to this is some caregivers' desire to ensure that children are not stigmatised as an "OT child". If they are well-dressed and presented in a clean and tidy manner, caregivers believe they will avoid this label, thus protecting them from potential emotional harm:

I don't want them to stick out. I don't want them to feel they are second class citizens because they are under OT. So, I make sure they look good. I just want them to look like everyone else down at school. I want them to grow up to be wonderful young men, and not get that stigma. So, they look the best they can. [FCA, NZ European, Auckland]

And I suppose it's my personal standard of even going to [preschool]. I don't want her to be ripped or dirty or anything like that. I think it would stand out negatively and I don't want her to be that kid. [FCA, Māori/ NZ European, Wellington]

How children are dressed reflects caregivers' parenting ability.

Caregivers believe that the clothing their children wear – and their overall appearance – reflects how well they are cared for. Appearing 'neat and tidy' is an indication of a stable and secure household; conversely, wearing dirty or ill-fitting clothes symbolise a chaotic or uncaring home environment. In considering this, caregivers sometimes make comparisons to children's previous living situations:

Clean clothes, it's like showing that we look after them because we care about their hygiene, because where they came from hygiene wasn't a really important thing. [FCA, Pacific, Auckland]

He's clean, you don't have old stuff on. He doesn't stink and that kind of thing. Because he comes from a family where they were dirty. They weren't getting baths and stuff. They were getting sores everywhere. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

Consequently, caregivers feel that they will be viewed negatively (e.g. by other parents) if they do not adequately fulfil this aspect of their role:

I would get judged if she looked not very well put together. [FCA, Māori, Wellington]

Oh, presentation is everything. I don't like to judge other parents, but there is nothing worse than seeing a little kid and their clothes are dirty, their face is snot everywhere and that, and it is just laziness. Kids clothes aren't that dear that they have to look like that, like seriously. Don't make the kid look not loved. [UCB, NZ European, Turangi]

For some, this is more keenly felt given their formal caregiving position, which creates added pressure to be seen to be doing a good job. This is both in relation to how other parents perceive their performance, but particularly the case when children have access to their biological family:

The first thing that comes to mind is access. I always want them to look healthy and clean, so the parents can relax and know that the kids are well cared for. [FCA, NZ European/ Māori, Wellington]

The last thing you want is for anyone to think that you don't look after the child properly. You don't want to send them to school with something that they've outgrown. They're kids, but other adults that look at them will probably think 'oh the caregivers don't look after them properly'. That's one thing that's important to me, is what other people would have to say about how I'm doing my job. [FCA, Pacific, Auckland]

Providing clothing can be an expression of love and validates a child's inclusion in the family.

Clothing provides caregivers with a means of expressing their love for children in their care. Purchasing the clothes that they like, providing special outfits for significant events within the family, and surprising them with new garments are ways in which caregivers show the child how much they are cared for and loved. Seeing the child respond, and the happiness that this brings them, is especially rewarding for these caregivers:

I love to see something and go he would really like that, and then just buy it just because I know that he'd appreciate it. I guess in terms of the love languages and stuff, I'm quite high on gift giving. So, for me to be able to get something that I know he'll enjoy, I love being able to buy those things for him. [UCB, NZ European, Auckland]

For some caregivers, this is particularly important in terms of redressing some of the challenges that children in their care faced in their previous home environments:

Words can't describe it, it's just a happy place in your heart. I hope that it heals her for the bad things that happen, and still happen. She gets let down quite a lot with her mother. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

It makes me feel blessed to see them happy because I knew where they came from, they were hardly ever happy. [FCA, Pacific, Auckland]

Central to this is demonstrating to the child in care that they are part of the family, and loved in the same way as all whānau members, including any biological children:

Being able to have the things that he really enjoys probably does help in terms of his feeling belonging and loved, knowing that he's got all these things that are especially for him that he really loves, because it's a good way of making him feel at home and loved. [UCB, NZ European, Turangi]

I don't want him to feel any lesser than my children, that's the only way I can put it. So, I don't want him to think for example buying kids presents, and not seeing his name under the tree. He is also important to me, so I want him to understand that. It's just more for making him feel like he is wanted here, that we do love him and care about him [FCA, Māori; Auckland]

Elenoa recalls their first family holiday after Tusi came into their care. They used some of the money put aside for the trip to buy clothes for the children. This included a special dress bought for Tusi to wear on holiday which matched one of their other children's. Elenoa remembers how special that moment felt as it cemented Tusi's place in the family: *"It was good because it was our first trip as a family with her in it. It made us feel like we were meant to have her in our family."*

Accessing clothing can provide a bonding experience for family members.

Some caregivers plan clothing excursions in advance with children in their care, and/or combine it with other recreational activities. As such, it becomes a social event for family members and provides an opportunity for caregivers to engage and bond with children. Examples provided in the research included whānau trips to op shops to access clothing and other items for the children (e.g. toys), as well as day long shopping expeditions to purchase new clothes, which also involve eating out and engaging in other 'pampering' activities. Some caregivers also spoke about group outings to purchase family outfits for an upcoming special occasion.

Comments include:

I love clothing and tend to spend more on [child]. It's something fun we can do together. Both girls doing their own special thing. [FCA, Māori/ NZ European, Wellington]

We quite enjoy all her clothing excursions. It's a family day out – me, him and her. He sits in the car and we get him a pie. Then we go shopping and then we go for lunch and go and sit by the lake. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

Clothing provides an education opportunity.

Some caregivers see the provision of clothing as a learning opportunity for children in their care. This includes educating them about financial literacy and budgeting, or more general learning regarding the value of money. One caregiver, for example, provides two children in her care with an annual clothing budget, from which they are required to plan and make decisions on how funds are spent:

We teach the girls to stay within a budget, and so we get the girls to go online to see what's available, what the sales are. They'll do the research, go online, map out the shops that we need to go to and then they'll basically look up the prices. Then they'll come back to me and then we'll go through how much they have to spend. [FCA, Māori, Auckland]

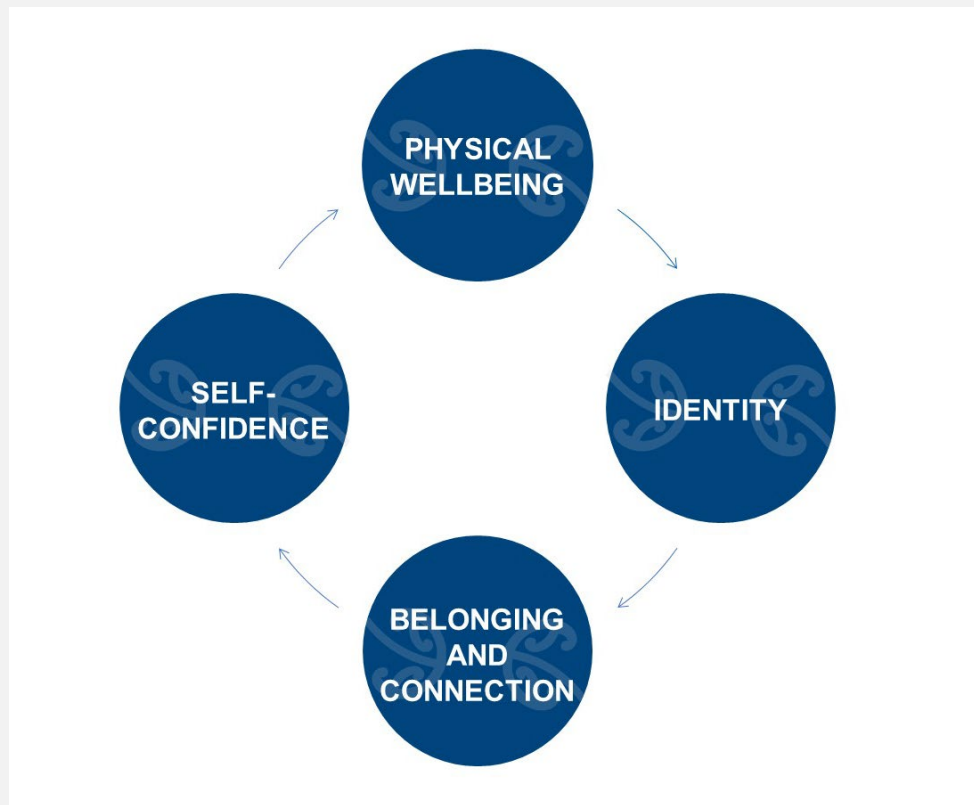
Teaching him that you don't need to have the good stuff. It's nice to have a few good things, and that's good, and if you work for it, you can get them. It's like a value thing for us – it's more about the teachings. It's what you hopefully instill in them to make them think about what you are looking at for clothes, how much they are going to cost? And is it a need or a want? [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

Another educational activity reported includes the repurposing of second-hand clothes obtained from op shops, with some caregivers undertaking this alongside children in their care:

They'll cut up their tee shirts, and then they'll make tote bags. They like doing things like that. I saw it on You Tube, it's called clothing hacks, and it teaches them how, if you've got old clothes, how you can turn them into something else and reuse them. [FCA, Māori, Auckland]

How does clothing affect the care and wellbeing of children?

From caregivers' perspectives, the role of clothing is a key part of children's care and wellbeing. It is important across several domains, including physical wellbeing, sense of identity, belonging and connection, and increased self-confidence.



First and foremost, clothing provides for children's physical wellbeing

Caregivers spoke about the impact of clothing in relation to their child/ren's physical wellbeing. This includes clothes keeping them warm and sheltered from the elements, both in winter (e.g. via warm and weatherproof garments) and summer (e.g. via suitable swimming outfits). In this role, it protects them from illness or other potential physical health harms:

It's for her wellbeing, health and care for her to grow as a person. Clothing is the most important thing for her. If she's not warm enough, then she's going to be sick. [FCA, Pacific, Auckland]

You have to have appropriate clothing for the seasons and for day-care. It's worth paying the extra money to get a good jacket and overalls for winter. It protects them from the elements. [FCA, NZ European, Auckland]

One caregiver emphasises how important this is given the developmental issues faced by children in her care due to their family background (e.g. low immune system). While less commonly mentioned, clothing that does not chafe their skin is a particular consideration for younger children where “*itchy*” garments can cause physical irritations.

Clothing provides an opportunity for children to express their identity to others.

Caregivers report that clothing allows their children to express a sense of identity through the clothes they wear. This includes, for example, sports clothing which affiliates them with particular teams or brands, as well as superhero or other television characters (e.g. Paw Patrol) for younger children. For older children, clothing labels play a key part in this:

He’s a well-presented boy so he takes care of himself, you know the whole appearance. So, he likes to always have a haircut and shave his little whatever he’s got on his face. All I can say is he just prefers to be in labelled gear. [FCA, Māori, Auckland]

Dawn has been caring for her three-year-old grandson, Marcus, since he was 18 months old. She works hard to maintain a good relationship with his parents who have both struggled with addiction issues. While he is only young, Dawn has noticed that Marcus is becoming very aware of what he wears, and how others respond to his clothes. At this year’s Halloween celebration, he dressed up as a witch, with a broomstick, hat, and jacket. When he wore the outfit to day-care the next day all the children rushed up to him and were excited about his costume. She recalls the look on his face, and how good he felt: “*He was very chuffed*”.

Clothing connects children with others.

Clothing can provide children with a sense of belonging and connection to others, both within, and outside of, the family. For example, caregivers discuss children in their care wanting to dress like their friends as a way of connecting to a particular peer group. Receiving hand-me-downs from older children also plays an important role in cementing their place within their ‘new’ family for some children in care:

[Name] likes clothes being passed down from his cousins. Because it’s worn by his cousins he feels connected to them and loves wearing them. [FCA, Pacific, Auckland]

In some ways having clothes handed down too could do the same thing because it’s part of the system as well. It shows that he’s part of the family because that’s what we do, is we hand them on and different people get to have them and he’s part of that system. [UCB, NZ European, Auckland]

Clothing can strengthen children’s self-confidence and self-esteem.

Some caregivers highlight that clothing has a positive impact on children’s emotional wellbeing as a result of increased self-confidence. This is mostly linked to feeling good about themselves due to wearing “*clean and tidy*” or “*nice*” clothes, and the response that it generates from others:

So, he feels good. And like it or not people do judge on your appearance. I don't know if it's the spoken or unspoken. And it's good for his confidence and self-esteem. That will come from within for him, but people are more likely to be more receptive of him if he's clean and well-presented and tidy. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

He is aware of his appearance, so he always worries about what girls are looking at, because he is of the age, so he likes to look good. It doesn't matter for who, he just likes to always present himself in a nice manner, whether it be dressed like a little gangster or dress in a nice suit attire. I think it plays a big part in his life. If he can get the nice clothing that he wants to wear, then I think it'll make him feel a lot better inside. [FCA, Māori, Auckland]

Wearing outfits or clothing labels that contribute to them feeling connected to others can also strengthen children's self-esteem. Conversely, where they feel separate or different to their peers, some caregivers highlight the negative effects of this on their emotional wellbeing (e.g. being teased because they do not have the full school or sports uniform). Comments include:

Twelve-year-old is just getting into Champion and Adidas, and that's because all her friends have got it. And that makes her feel good, so we do get the things for her. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

I've got nice clothes on, I feel better, I feel confident. They'll run away because they are wearing ugly clothes. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

Awhina has been caring for her teenage nephew (Trent) for the past two years, along with her biological children. He comes from a background of widespread substance abuse within his whānau and, while they faced some challenges when he first came to live with them, he is now very settled and has developed a strong bond with both her and her daughters. Recently, Oranga Tamariki purchased a suit for Trent to wear to a graduation event. Awhina was grateful for this assistance, which they would not otherwise have been able to afford, and she felt so proud to see him dressed up in this way: *"I was literally crying. That was the most happiest moment to see him dress like a young man"*. She says Trent felt very special wearing the suit: *"He likes the feeling of dressing up like a businessman. It makes him feel different inside, and not in his life has he ever been able to dress like that"*. Awhina also believes that it presented a different and more positive image to the world of what other people would expect from him: *"I think it's good because it makes him feel good inside, different and not some young gangster like what everyone else's perspective will be on him"*.

How do caregivers budget and plan for clothing and care of children?

Planning for new clothing items is triggered by different needs.

Caregivers describe a range of approaches when planning clothing provision for children in their care, with most indicating that some degree of planning is necessary to ensure that the child/ren's clothing needs are met, and that they can be accommodated within the budget available. However, while some are very systematic in terms of how and when they go about this, other caregivers take a more ad hoc approach. As evident in one caregiver's description of her strategy for managing the child in her care's clothing needs, this is sometimes dictated by the availability of funds:

I don't usually plan. If I have money, then I will go shopping. If I don't, we won't. [OB, Asian, Auckland]

The main approaches to planning for clothing provision are outlined below.

Caregivers review clothing needs at the change of season.

In the approach to summer or winter, caregivers often review the child/ren's clothing needs. This involves going through the child's wardrobe and identifying any items that no longer fit or are inappropriate for the upcoming weather. Some caregivers undertake a cull of these items – either putting them into storage or recycling them – and make a list of what is needed for the new season:

When it's starting to get colder, I buy different pyjamas depending on the season. It's weather dependent basically. [FCA, NZ European, Auckland]

It is always just trying to identify, does he need it now, are we forecasting like winter for next year? We just went through the next size up of clothing. So, we rotate his drawers every six months. We are taking out the winter and bringing out the summer, so the winter goes away. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

Growing out of clothes triggers planning for new clothes.

A “growth spurt” or signs that children are clearly growing out of their clothes may trigger clothes planning or a shopping trip for caregivers. Those caring for younger children highlight that this can be a regular occurrence given the rate at which the child/ren's bodies develop. Some caregivers rely on their (older) children to tell them when they need clothes in a larger size. Comments include:

Or when he grows out of his clothes, we'll get another lot. Like if his shorts are too small, then we will get another pair. I tell him, you need another pair of shorts. [UCB, Māori, Auckland]

The beginning of a school year or term may prompt clothing planning.

Some caregivers use the start of a school year or term⁶ to plan for the year ahead. This is often in relation to ‘the basics’ (e.g. “socks and undies”) and/or school or

⁶ While it is recognised that caregivers may be eligible for a clothing grant at this time, not all may be aware of this.

sports uniforms. One caregiver describes how their family collaboratively plans clothing for the upcoming year based on how many outfits the children require. This includes a mix of “nice” and “normal” (i.e. everyday) clothes, and is seen to be an efficient way of ensuring that they do not purchase unnecessary garments that will not be worn:

We've decided this year that there's seven days in the week, so the girls have decided and we've all decided that they're going to have 14 pairs of clothes, 14 sets. And when they wear out, then you buy the next lot. But those clothes are going to last you for this period because you don't want your drawers overflowing with stuff you're never going to wear. [FCA, Māori, Auckland]

The appearance of garments can act as an indicator for the need for new clothing.

Caregivers are sometimes prompted to purchase new clothes when existing garments start to deteriorate. This includes when clothes appear tired and worn out or are damaged, and often involve those that are well worn due to being a child's 'favourite':

They've been playing rugby in it or whatever, and its stained or ripped and it's not worth holding onto. [UCB, NZ European, Auckland]

Special occasions can prompt plans for a clothing purchase.

Clothing purchases are sometimes planned around special occasions within the family; this includes weddings or birthdays, as well as significant events such as a family photo. These can prompt the purchase of a special outfit in keeping with the occasion, and in most cases involve a new rather than secondhand item:

But only on special occasions, we buy them brand new things, like their birthdays or now and then, I see that we've got some extra money on this, then we buy her some new clothes and stuff. [FCA, Pacific, Auckland]

The next thing that we will be looking at purchasing, whole new outfits, will be when we are going to look at getting our family portraits done after his adoption is finalised. So that is the first thing on our list, in terms of getting us outfits. [UCB, NZ European, Turangi]

Spontaneous purchases are sometimes undertaken.

While not planned for, some caregivers undertake spontaneous clothing purchases. This tends to be those with higher disposable incomes who have more funds available or less constrained budgets, and can therefore accommodate unplanned additional expenses.

These types of clothing purchases generally occur when the caregiver is in a retail environment and sees an outfit that they know the child will like (e.g. it displays their favourite superhero); alternatively, the child might be present and request a specific clothing item:

Sometimes he'll be with me and he'll just say 'oh, I really like that'. So, either I'm there by myself and I see it and go 'oh, actually he probably could use that or he would like it' and I buy it. Or we're out together and he goes 'oh mum look at that' and then I'll buy it. [UCB, NZ European, Auckland]

Budgeting for clothing determines what is provided.

Similar to planning their clothing purchases, caregivers draw on a range of strategies when budgeting for this expense.

When discussing budgeting, caregivers variously talk about the amount of money put aside for clothing purchases, how they do this, and/or techniques employed to ensure what they spend does not exceed their available funds. Therefore, while some do not have a formal budget for clothing, they have clear strategies for ensuring that they get the most out of the money available, which in some cases is fairly limited.

Not surprisingly, those on low or restricted incomes are most likely to employ these techniques, with budgeting necessary to ensure that they are able to provide the level of clothing required by the child/ren. It is important to note, however, that even those who do not face financial constraints in providing clothing, engage in budgeting practices. For these individuals budgeting for clothing is less about affordability and more concerned with minimising wastage, good money management, and ensuring value for money:

We set up automatic payments [for clothing] from the regular account, which is our kind of budgeted amount that gets sent out to the different accounts to make sure that there's always money for the different things. [UCB, NZ European, Auckland]

I know Postie Plus, their Tilt brand or whatever it is, their stuff is so good and for how fast they grow. We bought his tracksuit pants, five bucks each this winter. He won't fit them next winter, they are gone. Fifteen bucks lasted him the whole winter. [UCB, NZ European, Turangi]

Caregivers typically prioritise lower cost clothing retailers.

When budgeting and planning for clothing, many caregivers select outlets that sell low-cost clothes. In the case of new clothes, retail stores such as K Mart and The Warehouse are commonly mentioned. Op shops and Trade Me are also seen to provide a cost-effective way of sourcing second-hand garments. One caregiver, for example, describes how she purchases clothes from Trade Me for the child in her care at the change of season, as this provides additional saving:

I'm actually finding now that on Trade Me for example there's a lot of things, people are getting rid of their winter clothes because we're going into summer. So, I'm trying to buy ahead. Like \$1 for a pair of pants because nobody is buying because it's summer now, so I'll grab pants that are maybe a couple of sizes [bigger]. [UCB, Māori, Auckland]

In taking this approach, caregivers are able to maximise the number and range of garments purchased within their available budget. Further, while limited availability of funds is a key driver for some, others highlight that value for money is also an important consideration. Particularly given the rate at which younger children grow out of clothes, they simply do not see the point in spending large amounts of money on this expense:

I don't see any point in it, because they grow out of it a lot quicker when they are younger than what we do as older people. We go for the bargains, we are bargain shoppers! I like him to always look tidy and clean and I dress him to look tidy and clean and respectful, but it doesn't have to say Adidas to do that. [UCB, NZ European, Turangi]

For some caregivers, stores like Kmart or The Warehouse are preferred over op shops, because the clothing is seen to be of better quality or more durable than some secondhand clothes. While op shopping can still be a source of some clothing, it tends to be more of a fun activity or outing than a primary source of clothing for these individuals. Comments include:

I never go to Salvation Army. Sometimes they have good clothes. Sometimes they have really old [clothes]. I know it's stupid, but it doesn't last because if I get them, I always soak them, wash them before they wear it, because you don't know who was wearing them. [FCA, Pacific, Auckland]

Clothes shopping is often planned around sales.

Some caregivers plan clothes purchases around retail sales as, similar to the above, they are able to afford a wider selection of garments within their available budget. For some, this involves researching what is on offer online, and planning their visit(s) to selected retailers with items on sale. Others schedule significant purchases for times of the year when they know that sales are traditionally held:

We normally get their clothes just after Christmas or just after New Year's, because that's when the sales are on. So, we wait for the sales so that they're able to have more options and it's within their affordability. [FCA, Māori, Auckland]

In some cases, caregivers purchase in an ad hoc manner when they chance upon a sale within one of their preferred retail outlets. However, this can be challenging as they do not always have the available funds at the time that sales occur.

Spreading the cost of clothing purchases assists with budgeting.

For those on a restricted budget, spreading the cost of clothing allows them to either purchase clothes in advance, and/or buy clothes as they can afford them. Some caregivers, for example, use 'lay by' systems to access clothing for special events, such as Christmas. Being able to pay clothes off in small increments is a key advantage for those with limited incomes:

We do it way in advance though. Like, this week we are going to go get his Christmas stuff, we are going to lay by it so we have got a bit of time to pay it off. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

Since she's been with me, to be honest I've done a lot of Afterpays. I've never used it prior to her coming. I only just started using it this year to be honest. But she's getting older, she's growing faster. [UCB, Māori, Auckland]

Others are staggering clothing purchases as they can afford them, which means that they do not exceed their available budget. One caregiver describes how she only purchases clothes once other priority household expenses, such as food and accommodation costs, are covered. Comments include:

Because we can't just go in there and just fill the trolley, basically. We have to set it out with what we need to get at that time. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

We just get what we can when we can. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

Some caregivers put aside specific funds for clothing.

Some caregivers put money aside for clothes on a regular basis, and only access the funds once they have reached a certain level. This includes, for example, one caregiver receiving the Orphan's Benefit who saves a set amount each week towards the clothing required for a religious celebration, and another who waits until the funds build up to around \$1000 before this is given to the two children in her care to spend on their clothing needs for the year.

While caregivers doing this generally put the money into a specific bank account set up for this purpose, one individual describes how she has an account at a local clothing retail outlet for the teenage boy in her care. She deposits a fixed amount each week which he can access as and when needed to make clothing purchases:

It's a [retail store] account, so every week I put \$50 on this [retail store] because I knew he liked labelled stuff, and then I just put his name on my account so that he can go down, say my password to the lady over the counter, then he can choose him what he wants. So that's basically what he does but he rings me first and says 'Aunty can I use the account to buy me some shoes?' [FCA, Māori, Auckland]

Strategies to extend the lifespan of clothing reduces clothing costs.

Some caregivers are maximising their clothing budget by taking steps to extend the lifespan of children's clothing, as it reduces the amount of clothing they are required to purchase. One strategy caregivers discuss is buying clothes in a larger size that children grow into:

I will buy him the uniform two sizes up so it will last longer. [UCB, Māori, Auckland]

So, what I do when I buy clothes, I buy like two sizes up so he grows into them. Because that will rollover for the next winter and then he will get another wear out of those, it just rolls over. That's what I do to save money. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

Another technique described is additional care measures taken to prolong the clothes' lifecycle. This includes dry-cleaning 'special' clothes such as church outfits, and/or washing white clothes separate from other garments:

I dry clean the suits so it can last longer and be used for church and special occasions like the school ball. [UCB, Pacific, Auckland].

Caregivers highlight that the activities some children are involved with can be “*hard on clothes*” and is one of the reasons they adopt a strategy of separating clothes into different categories (e.g. ‘everyday’ vs. ‘good’ clothes) as a way of maximising their longevity:

My mum keeps all the formal clothes in her room, so that way all the other clothes that you see around here, whatever clothes they want to wear they can wear. But all the formal dresses and suits, my mum just puts it in her room until church. [FCA, Pacific, Auckland]

Caregivers are accessing clothing from a range of sources.

Caregivers access clothing for children in their care from a range of sources, with most indicating that they have at least two or more places from which they acquire either new or secondhand clothing. The main sources identified are outlined in the table below.

Table 1: Sources of clothing for caregivers

Source	Description	Example comments
Retail outlets	— Caregivers are generally shopping at lower cost retail outlets such as The Warehouse, K Mart and Postie Plus when purchasing new clothes.	<i>We go straight to Kmart because we feel like Kmart is more affordable than most other places. [FCA, Pacific, Auckland]</i>
	— More expensive stores such as Rebel Sports, Hallensteins and Farmers are associated with ‘special occasions’ and less regular clothing purchases.	<i>Farmers is good, and Postie Plus which is cheaper. Farmers is good quality, but it’s expensive. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]</i>
	— Some are selecting outlets based on availability of systems which allow them to pay in instalments (e.g. ‘Zip’ or ‘Layby’).	<i>I actually do quite often, will go on the sites like TNT, Cotton On, Baby Factory, Kmart things like that to see if they have sales on, but mostly I will look at sites that I know will have Afterpay. [UCB, Māori, Auckland]</i>
	— Online shopping can offer practical advantages, particularly for those with young children.	<i>It [online shopping] is easier. At least you know with online you can see what sizes there are, you don’t have the hassle of parking, dragging a child through. She gets restless, she’s okay if you’re doing what she wants to do but she’s at that terrible two age. [UCB, Māori, Auckland]</i>
Op shops	— Some caregivers are sourcing the majority or all of their clothing from op shops; for others, it is supplementary to their new purchases	<i>I bring her up the way I brought my kids up and how I was brought up with my parents. We were all about the op shop. [FCA, Pacific, Auckland]</i>
	— While the low cost is attractive to some caregivers, others are motivated by sustainability issues relating to clothing production	<i>They love op shopping because they can see all the different types of fabric that they can use. They love the idea of pulling something apart and making something else out of it. And then they turn them into presents. [FCA, Māori, Auckland]</i>

Source	Description	Example comments
Hand me downs from family, friends and wider community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Clothes are passed on by family members and friends, or obtained via other support networks (e.g. church community) — Some caregivers rarely have to purchase new clothes given the regularity of this clothing stream — This process is often cyclical, with caregivers redistributing clothes once they have finished with them 	<p><i>Whenever your kids grow out of clothes there's someone in the church who has got a kid a bit younger and you pass them on. So they just get passed around all the different families. [UCB, NZ European, Auckland]</i></p> <p><i>I can't even say how much stuff we have actually bought him. We didn't even get a chance really because there were just bags and bags of clothing. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]</i></p>
Family members gifting clothing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Other family members sometimes purchase new clothes for the child/ren in care — This mostly includes grandparents and aunts/uncles and, in some cases, biological parents 	<p><i>If I didn't have my Mum, then it would probably be a struggle because it gets daunting when he is growing out of his clothes. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]</i></p> <p><i>We visit the aunts or my parents and they just adore her. So I might sit there and I might say something like, and not intentionally, but like 'oh she's growing so big now I need to get this or that'. Sometimes the family will just go and get it. [UCB, Māori, Auckland]</i></p> <p><i>The support that we have was good. The extended family as well with us Island people. The more family we have, the more support we have. I think she's the luckiest baby for us to have because this time, she's got everything. [FCA, Pacific, Auckland]</i></p>
Charities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Charities are sometimes approached by caregivers to assist with specific clothing (e.g. school or sports uniforms) — Those highlighted in the research include Birthright, Variety Trust, and Lotteries Commission. 	<p><i>We do fundraisers to pay for the [sports] uniform. Shorts and t-shirt come to about \$180 so it's very expensive. [UCB, Māori, Auckland]</i></p>

What barriers do children and caregivers face with access and support for clothing to participate in activities?

Limited finance is the biggest barrier faced by caregivers.

Many of the caregivers interviewed are on limited household incomes and some struggle to meet all their household bills. Some caregivers are also providing care for a large number of children, and/or living in extended, multi-generational households. Taking on responsibility for the care of another child can add to financial pressures, either because of the direct costs involved in providing care or due to associated impacts (e.g. stopping paid work). One caregiver highlights that the effects of their parent's substance abuse on the health of children in her care has resulted in additional clothing-related expenses:

How do you explain it? Meth children have a different way of growing. They mature a lot faster than normal kids, like their heads are a lot bigger, their bodies mature a lot faster. So, when you go to the Warehouse, because they make the bulk of those clothes, say in the kids section they're made for Indian children and Chinese children because they're this size. So it's really difficult and so of course you end up shopping in the women's section. [FCA, Māori, Auckland]

Consequently, despite clothing being considered an essential part of children's wellbeing and care, these caregivers are sometimes required to prioritise other household expenses (e.g. food) over clothing. As evident in one caregiver's comments below, clothing is only able to be purchased if there are funds available after meeting these other commitments:

We do a shopping list – what they need, don't need. Whatever is left over will go towards whatever he needs. Food is priority for budgeting, and the power. Whatever is left after that will go towards unnecessary, but necessary to have. Just clothing for him. [UCB, Māori, Auckland]

Other impacts relating to financial challenges include caregivers being very restricted in the clothing they are able to provide, with some focusing on the 'basics' (e.g. "socks and undies"), buying (cheaper) clothes that children do not want to wear, and an inability to respond to unanticipated or urgent clothing needs.

Caregivers can also experience emotional stress as a result of financial pressures related to clothing. This is due to worry about not being able to provide for the children in their care, or because of a sense of guilt or failure in not supplying children with the clothes that they want:

I would love to take the girl to Cotton On, because she's 15 now. The clothes are out of my range, because I'm just on the pension. I get 500 every week for them. But I've got the rent, the power, the food. It's a bit of a struggle. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

Michelle has four adult children, and a whangai son. They have all moved out of home, but she currently has her teenage grandson Lou (who she receives an Unsupported Child's Benefit for), alongside his girlfriend and three siblings living with her. Lou has been in her care since he was three years old. They don't have a lot of money, but there is a lot of aroha in the household: *"We are dysfunctional but funny. But we all support each other with what we do"*. Clothes are only bought when there is money left over from other household expenses, and they fundraise a lot to cover costs for sporting uniforms. However, Lou never complains, and he is always grateful for what his Nan buys for him. Last year, however, there was an incident that impacted quite significantly on her moko. When he turned up to play league one Saturday Lou went to get his gear out of a communal bag. However, his coach stopped him and said that he wasn't able to play because his fees for his uniform and boots hadn't been paid by his father. This happened in front of other people and left Lou feeling very embarrassed. Despite his grandmother encouraging him to return to the sport once the fees had been paid, he refused to go back: *"He was 12 so was at that understanding age. It was just the embarrassment, all his mates were there. If he gets embarrassed with anything, he won't go back a second time"*.

Beyond financial challenges caregivers face a range of other barriers or challenges in providing clothing for children.

Clothing preferences become more pronounced as the child gets older.

Caregivers highlight that children's attitudes towards clothing, and the role it plays, changes as they get older. There is a sense that once children reach two to three years old, they become more aware of their appearance and many start to indicate a preference for what they want to wear. This includes the style of garment, or the branding and imagery displayed:

He's definitely got favourites, favourite things, and he always wants to have hoodies and pockets to put his Lego in. And he loves to have hoodies to be like a ninja and all that. [UCB, NZ European, Auckland]

So, they're getting to that stage where we try and buy them clothes from Kmart and they just tell us straightaway they don't like it. They look at it, they're like we don't like it, we don't want to wear it. [FCA, Pacific, Auckland]

Individuals caring for older children spoke about how clothing preferences become more pronounced as they enter their teens, and often centre on labels or brands aligned with their peer group. Due to the typically higher cost of these garments, these are sometimes at odds with those able to be provided by their caregivers. As a result, children may refuse to wear certain items of clothing, which can create tension in the relationship:

[Child] cares a lot about what she wears. She likes to choose and knows what she doesn't like. It can sometimes clash with what I want her to wear, but that depends on where we are going. If we're going to the supermarket, she can wear what she likes. But it can be different if we're going out to dinner. [FCA, Māori/NZ European, Wellington]

Most definitely 1000% he's very picky when it comes to his clothes. He's got his own particular style, whereas I'm straight Kmart. And my kids can have a \$6 piece of clothing, no sweat. He won't, not at all. I've bought him Warehouse before and it's sat in his bloody wardrobe. [UCB, Māori, Auckland]

She likes to look nice. She's at that age where it's important to her. Trying to pick her own clothes, but her Nan is picking them for her! [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

Children's attachment to a worn or "ratty" garment can also be a source of conflict, particularly when they refuse to stop wearing it despite the caregiver wanting to replace it with a new item.

The demand for clothing can be overwhelming.

Caregivers report that keeping up with the demand for clothing can be challenging. This is particularly the case for those caring for younger children who tend to grow out of clothes at a fast rate, requiring ongoing review of clothing needs. Others with older children spoke about having to replace lost clothing on a regular basis:

Clothing is a constant for me – I'm forever buying them, sorting them, putting away ones he's outgrown, washing them, folding them, etc. It's just constant. Constantly going out, buying and spending. [FCA, NZ European, Auckland]

Aside from the financial impacts of this, finding the time and energy to replace clothes when needed can be an issue for caregivers – especially those with younger children in their care which can pose logistical difficulties when managing shopping excursions:

We always start off with the clothing section then we end up to the toys. Then we kind of leave shoes for like a last resort kind of thing because we realise they can be a lot more picky over shoes. And then we just check out, and by the time we check out we realise one of them would always have to start crying, or start acting up or cause a scene in front of people. [FCA Pacific, Auckland]

The initial placement of a child can also mean that caregivers have to respond very quickly to provide clothing, often at short notice. This is exacerbated by the fact that some children arrive with no or limited clothing, and/or caregivers are required to destroy any garments that they arrive with due to potential contamination from their previous household:

They came with no clothes, they were bounced 12 times. [FCA, Māori, Auckland]

We just had to get so much when he first arrived. He didn't come with a lot. And we were told to get rid of it all because the drugs. [FCA, NZ European, Auckland]

Mainstream sizing does not cater to the stature of all children.

Some caregivers face difficulty in finding clothes that are sized appropriately for the children in their care. Pacific and Māori caregivers highlight that cheaper retail outlets are often geared towards children of a smaller stature. As a result, they are required to shop for larger sizes, sometimes within the adult range. This can make the process more expensive and mean that the clothes purchased are not in keeping with the style or fashion of the children's age or lifestage:

They struggle with the fact that they can't find clothes that [fit]. They would love to shop in that [children's] section. They don't want to look like they're 100 years of age. [UCB, Māori, Auckland]

There may be restricted access to suitable retail stores.

Caregivers living in Turangi discussed the lack of clothing retailers within their town. While it is acknowledged that there is a Hospice shop and a supermarket which sells limited items (e.g. socks), families generally need to travel to Taupō for clothing purchases. For some, this is not a significant barrier as it is combined with scheduled trips to Taupō for other purposes (e.g. some are travelling there weekly for grocery shopping):

Because we have got nothing in Turangi, we will always make a weekend of it, well not a weekend of it, we will go on a Saturday of shopping. And, we can just have a family day because there are more offerings in Taupō of anything. [UCB, NZ European, Turangi]

For others, the cost of petrol can be a challenge, alongside the additional planning required:

It just makes us be resourceful – you’ve just got to get on with what you’ve got. If we actually need something, we’d need to go to Taupō to get it. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

Some Pacific caregivers are not able to access traditional Pacific clothing (e.g. puleta) in mainstream retail outlets. As a result, they are required to purchase material and have these sewn to order.

Accessing financial assistance is not always straightforward.

Caregivers who require financial assistance sometimes apply for grants to help with paying for clothes (e.g. for school uniforms). While some had done this successfully, others report challenges in either applying for, or securing, clothing-related grants. This includes not knowing what grants are available, with some caregivers only finding out about potential funding options when they had a change of social worker. Others find the process overly complicated or humiliating, or are reluctant to ask for help – to the extent that it deters them from making an application:

Need to get a quote from the Warehouse and then take it to WINZ. There are lots of steps involved so I’ve never done it. I hardly drive now and have to get someone to take me. It’s too much bother. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

I haven’t been to WINZ for clothing because it’s degrading. You have to justify everything, it really depends who you hit, sometimes to me it’s ridiculous questions. [UCB, Māori, Auckland]

I think it’s us Island people, we find it really hard and we have to try and not ask for help when we need to. That for me, is kind of the emotion, because you’re ashamed or you’re shy, that you don’t go and ask for that extra help. [FCA, Pacific, Auckland]

It scares me. I don’t know what to do. Am I still entitled to financial assistance when I start working? What will I be entitled to? Who do I go to, to find out? Who can I trust to tell me what I am entitled to? [UCB, Māori, Wellington]

What do caregivers know about the clothing allowance and how do they use it?

Caregivers were not always aware they received a Clothing Allowance.

There are varied levels of awareness of the Clothing Allowance amongst caregivers. This ranges from those who are unaware that the money they receive for caregiving includes an allocation for clothing, through to some individuals who know the exact amount and frequency of payments. Other caregivers are aware they receive “something” towards clothing but lack knowledge of the details:

I'm less kind of familiar. It just turns up in my bank account weekly, but I think there may be [something for] clothing. [UCB, NZ European, Auckland].

I don't even know how much, I don't even look. It gets swallowed up in a minute. [FCA, NZ European, Auckland]

Oh, I know every breakdown. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

As a result, caregivers utilise the allowance in different ways.

For many – particularly those who do not know about the allocation – the Clothing Allowance is absorbed into a general pool of money and used to pay overall household expenses. This includes food or electricity bills, as well as accommodation-related costs:

Yes, sometimes it goes to their clothing, sometimes it goes to bedding. [FCA, Pacific, Auckland]

Once a month you get a clothing allowance for each of them – I don't actually tot it up. It all just goes into the pot as far as I am concerned. [FCA, NZ European, Auckland]

For caregivers on a low income and/or restricted budget, it contributes to whatever household expenses are a priority at the time; for others, it is spent on a direct expense related to the child, which may not include clothing. Regardless of the approach, most stipulate that any financial support received in relation to caregiving has to be used towards the child's care in some way:

Just use it on [child]. We don't sit down and itemise it. We know that we spend more than the allowance. [FCA, NZ European, Auckland]

If that little bit can help, it might not be clothing as such, it might add up to something to provide for the child. As long as it's used for the child. It's got to go towards the child. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

Some individuals who are fully informed about the Clothing Allowance, including the amount received, are of the view that the funding needs to be used for its intended purpose (i.e. only on clothing for the child they were providing care for). This is very evident in the way in which the allowance is utilised, with some putting the money aside each month into a specific clothing fund and others keeping a tally of the amount spent on new clothing to ensure that they are meeting their perceived obligations. One caregiver for example, shared that their foster care agency had been very explicit that they needed to use the funds on “*brand new clothes*” for the child they are caring for. Other comments include:

You separate it off because that's what they pay it for. It's not about paying your expenses, your personal expenses, that's wrong. [FCA, Māori, Auckland]

It just makes me use it towards that when it is broken down like that I suppose. I know that there is money there than I can use for getting his clothes. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

We got that payment and there was a specific clothing one. I was like 'well I need to buy him brand new clothes because that money's been put there especially for that', so I would intentionally go and make sure that that money was used for brand new clothes [UCB, NZ European, Auckland]

One caregiver withdraws the Clothing Allowance payment every month and provides it to the child in her care in cash. While she informs him it is to be spent on clothing, she acknowledges that she does not monitor this and leaves it to him to decide how the funds are spent. As evident in the interview extract below, she views this as an appropriate approach given his age and associated very particular clothing tastes:

They just put it [Clothing Allowance] straight with the board payment and then I give it to him in cash, so that he can go to different places where he wants to do it. I mean he had clothes here, but he wants the style and so she [social worker] thought it would be more appropriate now that he's getting older to just give him the money and then he can go about buying his own clothes. [UCB, Māori, Auckland]

Some caregivers highlight that the allowance does not cover all their child/ren's clothing-related costs, and they need to top it up from additional sources (e.g. their board payment or other household income). One caregiver spoke about the challenges of budgeting for clothing when sales are not aligned with the availability of funds from the Clothing Allowance. Others suggest changes to the way in which the allowance is paid to align it more closely with their typical clothes shopping patterns. This included, for example, paying it in instalments at the start of a new season:

To be honest, it would probably benefit me more to be able to get a lump sum maybe once or twice a year because I think I probably would make better use of it. To put it on the side to go towards clothing would just be too hard to do, whereas maybe if they put all that clothing allowance into one, and maybe split it up so like winter and summer... Because well for me anyway, that's how I shop. [UCB, Māori, Auckland]

Despite these perceived limitations, caregivers express gratitude for the Clothing Allowance allocation. Particularly for those on a restricted budget, there is an appreciation of any additional support for an expense that they often struggle to meet. One caregiver highlights that it has eliminated concerns about the financial impact on providing for their biological children as a result of caring for another child, and another spoke about its contribution to the cousin in her care in developing a sense of independence:

He's a young boy from [place] who came from a large family where alcohol was more important than buying clothes, and food was not an option in their daily lives. It wasn't always there, so he's learnt to steal his way through life. And to be given things like the clothing allowance as well as a \$20 allowance, and to have his own money. I think he feels real independent in that sense. That there was something different for him, rather than just being a nobody up north and having no family to live with. [UCB, Māori, Auckland]

The allowance has allowed [child] to join our family. We could bring her into our family without having to worry about what we're not providing our own kids because of what we were providing for [child]. [UCB, NZ European, Wellington]

At the end of the day, it is all about his health and wellbeing, and making sure that everything is provided for him, so it's great. [UCB, Māori, Turangi]

Appendix A: Sample Composition

This qualitative research consisted of individual or paired in-depth qualitative interviews with 43 caregivers across 36 interview sessions.

The demographic information in the tables below (excluding gender) is based on the main participant recruited for the 36 interview sessions. Of these 36 interview sessions, 7 were paired interviews with partners/spouses also taking part. The gender information is based on all caregivers taking part, including partners/spouses.

Region		Benefit Type	
Wellington	4	Foster Care Allowance (FCA)	17
Palmerston North	3	Orphan's Benefit (OB)	2
Levin	2	Unsupported Child's Benefit (UCB)	17
Auckland	22		
Turangi	5		

Gender		Age	
Female	37	20-29	6
Male	6	30-39	7
		40-49	5
		50 +	18

Ethnicity		Annual Income	
Māori	18	30k	11
Pacific	13	30 – 70k	9
Asian	1	70 – 90k	5
NZ European	4	90 – 130k	2
		Not disclosed/not sure	9