

Changing Schools—How Foster Parents Can Empower Children in Care

Children who come into care face a lot of changes: new home, new parents, new siblings, and a new neighborhood. When children are not able to remain in their home school, this is another change for them. Many times, children in care associate school as a safe haven for them—a constant in an unpredictable world. All these changes and transitions can be scary for a child of any age. As a foster parent, you want to help the child in your care deal with these various changes and transitions successfully. While you may not be able to alleviate all of the anxiety these transitions may cause, there are some ways to help children transition into a new and unfamiliar school environment.

If you are familiar with the school, a teacher, or a staff member at the school, this could be a beneficial contact for you as a foster parent. If not, opening the lines of communication early on can be beneficial—with the principal, a classroom teacher, or school counselor, etc. Communicating with the faculty can help ensure a successful school experience.

Here are some additional suggestions to help children transition into a new school:



- Get familiar with the new school. Schedule a tour of the school and a meet and greet with teachers and other staff. Check to see if your school offers an orientation for students. Knowing where their classroom is and where they'll be eating lunch makes a new environment less intimidating.
- Before the first day of school, begin your school morning and bedtime routines. Practicing a new routine prior to the first day can make the first morning a little less hectic. Practicing your morning schedule and walking to the bus stop (or dropping off at school) could help the child in your care adjust to his or her new schedule and help them know what to expect.
- Practice your name, address, and phone numbers and ensure they have your contact information on hand—especially helpful for younger children. This can help the child feel a bit more secure knowing how to get a hold of you if they need to.
- If you know other kids who attend that school, you could try to arrange a play date outside of school. Having a familiar face in an

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Communicating with Schools When a Child is in Foster Care

It is common for foster parents to feel confused about their role when it comes to school and education. When you foster a school-aged child, you assume a lot of the day-to-day parental duties when it comes to education. After all, when you are caring for a child in foster care, you are the one who is ensuring the child gets to school in the morning, the person helping them with their homework at night, and the person helping them cope with many of the challenges associated with school. However, communicating effectively with the school and advocating for a child's educational success can be a source of confusion and sometimes frustration for foster parents. Foster parents are often left with questions such as:



- Who is on the child's educational team?
- What information is okay to share with the school?
- How do I advocate for any additional services a child in my care may need while in school?

Who is on the child's educational team?

When a child enters the foster care system, the child welfare agency and the courts are required to make provisions to ensure the child's educational needs are being met while the child is in care. The case worker is typically the primary point person in facilitating this process. Case workers are required to monitor academic progress, share relevant developments that affect a child's education with school officials, as well as parents and foster parents, and advocate for services the child may need to succeed in school. The case worker is also required to report the child's academic progress to the courts and facilitate any court orders regarding the child's education. These responsibilities often place the

case worker at the forefront of the child's education team, but there are other key players, including you as the foster parent.

School staff, such as administrators, teaching faculty, and special service providers, are also included on the education team. These professionals are ultimately responsible for the safety, wellbeing, and educational services for the child while in school. Depending on the needs of the child, this team may include a special education teacher, school psychologist, social worker, and any other school-based service providers, such as occupational therapists and speech and language specialists. Many schools across Wisconsin have designated a school staff liaison for children in out-of-home care to ensure their needs are being met.

The child's birth or adoptive parent (whomever is the legal parent) retains most of the rights associated with education, unless otherwise ordered by the court. This means the legal parents are critical members of the team in making decisions, signing consents for activities and services, and the overall planning of the child's education. In cases where the parental rights have been terminated, the individual designated as the guardian of the child serves in this capacity. As the foster parent, your input in the decision making process is also very important.

What information is okay to share with the school? As a foster parent, you know one of your duties is to protect the confidentiality of the child in your care. But what information should school officials know? In general, that question is best handled by the child's case worker. The agency case worker typically informs the school about the

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child's status as a child in out-of-home care, as well as specific court orders that limit the parental rights (such as visiting and interacting with the child at school), relevant medical diagnoses, and special needs that affect the child's education.

In most cases, it is not necessary or appropriate to tell school officials the in-depth details about the child's history. However, if you feel like the school should know some of these details, you could consult with the case worker and share your concerns.

In general, there are many things that you can share with the school. Foster parents can share information on how the child is doing on their homework assignments and any areas they may be struggling with. Foster parents also might let school staff know if there is anything that might affect the child's health and wellbeing at school, or otherwise affect their day at school. And they can let schools know about behaviors that may carry over into the classroom and suggestions on how to manage them. Foster parents are also encouraged to give advance notice of upcoming appointments, court dates, and anything that might cause the child to miss time at school.

What information is the school allowed to share with me? Schools are bound by confidentiality laws regarding school records. Parents of a child in foster care usually retain the legal rights of any other parent (except physical custody of the child) unless limited by a court order. As a foster parent, in order to obtain access to these records, the legal parent and the case worker will need to sign a release of information form with the school.

School records may be shared with foster parents and human or social service agencies, **if** the parent or guardian has given written permission to do so or if a court orders such release as authorized by Wis. Stat. sec. 118.125. Obtaining this permission allows the school district to communicate with the foster parent and agency staff just as it communicates with the parent or guardian.

If you have additional questions about confidentiality issues, you can ask your case worker for information and clarification.

How do I advocate for any additional services a child in my care may need while in school? If you feel that a child in your care requires some additional services, such as an IEP, school counseling, or an assessment for another kind of assistance, it is important to advocate for these supports. The child's birth or legal parents will need to consent to any assessments or modifications to established services. The best way to advocate for school-based assistance is to make your concerns known to the entire team—school, birth or legal parents, and case worker.

Reach out when you have questions and concerns

Every child's case is unique and your child welfare agency may have different policies when it comes to the school system. We encourage you to reach out to the child's case worker when you have questions. As the school year approaches, it is helpful to understand your particular agency's policy when it comes to communication with the school. Overall, decisions about school and education can be made easier with open communication between you as the foster parent, the child's birth or legal parent, and the case worker.



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Senior Pictures for Youth in Out-of-Home Care

Senior pictures are important to all youth! Unfortunately, youth in foster care are not always able to enjoy this experience with their friends and classmates.

The Coalition has a network of volunteer photographers across the state who are willing to work with us and with you to provide graduating seniors with the option and opportunity of receiving their senior pictures. This program was created to help foster youth and their families celebrate one very important accomplishment: high school graduation.



Participating in the program is easy. There are a few forms to fill out and then we reach out to our volunteer photographers to see who is available. We try very hard to match you and the youth in your care with a photographer in your county or, at the very least, a neighboring county. Once we know that a photographer is available, we will contact you with the name and number of that photographer, allowing you to get in touch directly to work out the best date, time, and location. We strongly encourage you to talk with the photographer about what he or she is willing to donate right from the beginning. Each of our volunteers does things a little differently; some donate the session as well as a disk of images. Some donate the session and a print package. Others donate the session, a disk of images, and

prints! (In the event that the photographer with whom you are working donates a disk, we recommend working with mpix.com for purchasing prints. They are a professional fulfillment site with a wide ranges of sizes and very reasonable prices.)

Senior portraits are more than just pictures; they are important keepsakes from the high school years. We are happy offer this program to those youth who will be graduating from high school. For more information or to receive the forms to apply, please contact Jenna at 414-475-1246, 800-762-8063, or jczaplewski@coalitionforcyf.org.

Remember: earlier is better! Our volunteer photographers get booked quickly – especially around back-to-school time!



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unfamiliar setting makes new experiences and places a little less scary.

Scheduling a team meeting prior to the start of school can be helpful in determining who is responsible for what and can lessen the chance of any confusion down the road, as well as decrease the chance of an uncomfortable situation for all parties involved.

Numerous changes in foster homes and schools are difficult for a child to manage. Confusion about who is responsible for school decisions and lack of collaboration can lead to negative school experiences for a child, as well as for the parents and caregivers. Open communication with the child's school is key. Having a consistent contact or advocate at the school is recommended to ensure reliable information sharing. Also, keep in touch with the case worker about the progress or any challenges that the child in your care is experiencing. Check out the FCARC website *While Your Child is in School* section of tip sheets on the FCARC website for more resources. Have a great school year!

Find the Coalition for Children, Youth & Families on Social Media

Facebook

facebook.com/coalitionforcyf

Twitter

twitter.com/coalitionforcyf

A Place in My Heart Conference

BEYOND CONSEQUENCES IN THE CLASSROOM: A TRAUMA-FOCUSED APPROACH



Saturday, November 8, 2014
9am-4pm

Glacier Canyon Lodge at the Wilderness
45 Hillman Road
Wisconsin Dells, WI

Beyond Consequences in the Classroom: A Trauma-Focused Approach

Join us in the Wisconsin Dells on Saturday, November 8 for the annual *A Place in My Heart* conference.

This year's conference features Heather T. Forbes of the Beyond Consequences Institute. Heather will be talking about how a history of trauma may affect children and youth in the school environment and how parents, teachers, and child welfare staff can understand, support, and help.

Find additional information and register online at

<https://apimh2014.eventbrite.com>

or call us at 414-475-1246.



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Resources

From the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center

Tip Sheets

Helping Achieve School Success

wifostercareandadoption.org/resources/fearctipsheets

Helping Kids in Care Change Schools

wifostercareandadoption.org/resources/fearctipsheets

Fostering a Child with an IEP

wifostercareandadoption.org/resources/fearctipsheets

Additional Resources

- A Guide to the Individualized Education Program
www2.ed.gov/parents/needs/speced/iepguide/index.html
- Wisconsin Family Assistance Center for Education, Training & Support (WI FACETS)
www.wifacets.org
- Individualized Education Programs
kidshealth.org/parent/growth/learning/iep.html
- Podcast: Helping Foster Kids Succeed In School
<https://www.mixcloud.com/fosterparentingpodcast/episode-71-helping-foster-kids-succeed-in-school/>
- School and Your Foster Child
adoption.about.com/od/school-and-foster-care/

- Beyond Consequences Institute
www.beyondconsequences.com/
- Educational Services for Children Placed in Foster Care
<https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/pupil-services/school-social-work/publications/foster-care>

Books

- ⇒ A Road Map for Learning: Improving Educational Outcomes in Foster Care
- ⇒ Foster Care Children: A Guide for Parents and Teachers
- ⇒ Help for Billy: A Beyond Consequences Approach to Helping Challenging Children in the Classroom, by Heather Forbes

Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (WFAPA)

WFAPA provides great opportunities to get together with other foster parents through its spring and fall conferences. They also have an extensive website, wfapa.org, a newsletter, and a network of supportive WFAPA members and other foster parents who can be a resource for you.



Contact Us!

Please know that we are always here for additional information, resources, and support. You can contact us toll-free at **800-947-8074** or via email at **info@wifostercareandadoption.org**.



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