



Helping Children & Youth in Care Achieve School Success

Getting ready for school can be a complex and potentially overwhelming experience for children and youth in care—as well as for foster parents. You may have a child in your home who will be starting at a brand new school, returning to the same school, or you may be welcoming a new child into your home during the school year—someone whom you haven’t even met yet. As a foster parent, there are some ways that you can plan ahead (as much as possible) to help the child in your care succeed in school.

Before School Starts

When children enter care, their home environment has changed and this often impacts their school performance.

- Ideally, all of you—birth parents, child welfare workers, the child, and yourself—will meet together before school starts. If that is not an option, talk with the child’s case worker to determine what information can be shared and what should be kept confidential in order to be in compliance with foster parent confidentiality licensing rules. The fact that the child is in foster care is private information, not to be shared without proper consent. (You may also want to read the Coalition tip



sheet, [*Respecting the Confidentiality of Children in Care and their Families*](#) on this topic.)

- Children may feel stigmatized from being in the foster care system. The child may not want their peers or even school staff to know that they are in care. Talk with the child about how to address this before school starts.
- A few weeks before school starts, begin regular bedtimes, meals, and after school

routines. For children you welcome into your home during the school year, try to develop a structured routine a few days before they start school.

Working Collaboratively

Getting to know teachers, school staff, and other parents is

invaluable. “I still get intimidated at times, especially when enrolling a new student or when my kids change teachers,” said one veteran foster parent. “But it helps that I have a good relationship with the office staff.”

- *Get to know the teacher.* Reach out to the child’s teacher as early as possible—even if it’s just a few days before school starts—and ask to schedule a meeting with him

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or her. Together, talk about how to develop and sustain an ongoing communication plan. This might be regularly scheduled phone calls, emails, or a communication notebook that goes back and forth. Being proactive can help the child have a successful school year—don't wait until conference time to address issues.

- *Working with birth parents.* School is a good way to team with birth parents to advocate for the child in your care. Birth parents know their children best and you can build on that knowledge when working with teachers and other members of the child's school team.
- *Advocating for children in care.* As a foster parent, you know the needs of the child in your care. The child's parents also provide additional insights that can be beneficial to share with the child's school team. It's okay to advocate for what the child needs to be successful in school.

During the School Day

Allow the child in your care an opportunity to share what kind of support he or she might like during the school day and how often they would like a little extra boost. You may find that some extra visits or calls (if permitted) are needed as the child gets used to the new school or routine. Some children may even like to have you more involved throughout the year.

- Volunteer in the classroom a day or two a week, or as often as your schedule permits.
- Have a discussion with the child and ask if

he or she would like you to join them for lunch (if possible). Some children and youth might not feel comfortable with this, but others might happily accept the offer.

- If you aren't able to go to school, perhaps schedule a time for a phone call to check in with the child during the school day.

Some additional considerations include:

- *Scheduling appointments after school whenever possible.* This helps to prevent disruptions to the child's regular day and may reduce unwanted questions about why Erica misses gym each Tuesday.
- *Being mindful of potential and anticipated triggers.* You may not know all of the child's triggers—and that's okay. If he starts having an issue, there may be something that is triggering his behavior. For example, he may have had a past traumatic experience with an adult male and may not be comfortable with someone you take for granted, such as a male bus driver, teacher, guidance counselor, or principal.
- *Transitioning.*

Transitions are often closely related to triggers. The start of a school year, holidays, and the end of a school year are all transition times and can be challenging times for children in care.

Homework

Designating a homework space and time can help children develop a routine and keep a consistent schedule. Some children in care struggle with school work. This may be because of a lack of attendance at school,



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early trauma, frequent moves, or any number of other reasons. Following are some suggestions to try to help with homework.

- *Break homework into smaller steps.* Sometimes breaking things into smaller steps alleviates stress and anxiety, and keeps students better focused. For example, instead of having Cassandra work on 20 math problems, have her work on five questions at a time.
- *Remember where children are functioning developmentally.* Stephan may not be working at the same level as other kids his age. He may learn in a more non-traditional way.
- *Celebrating successes.* Make a big deal out of accomplishments—no matter how big or small. Acknowledgement of achievements can go a long way in encouraging continued success.
- *Teach organizational skills.* Develop a system for school work going back and forth between home and school. For example, use different colored folders and notebooks for different classes or subjects.
- *Consider a tutor or mentor if there is an identified need for academic assistance.* A lot of schools provide mentoring assistance and support resources. Perhaps Alisha could be involve with organizations, such as the YMCA or Big Brothers and Big Sisters, that provide mentors. Also check with people at your school to see if they can recommend a tutor.
- *Try to keep in mind that some assignments may be emotionally taxing.*



Assignments about family trees, Child of the Week, holidays, Mother's Day, and Father's Day are just a few that may be triggers for your child.

School can be a wonderful experience for children in your care. They can develop healthy relationships and connections to teachers, coaches, counselors, and other staff members. As foster parents, you have a

strong role in advocating for a child's academic success. By creating collaborations and partnerships with the child's school team, you are creating a pathway toward ongoing school success.

We know that school can sometimes be one of the biggest stressors for children and parents alike. You are not alone. We are here to help. Don't hesitate to contact us for support, understanding, and resources.



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Resources

Tip Sheets

- [Fostering a Child with an IEP](#)
- [Helping Kids in Care Change Schools](#)
- [Respecting the Confidentiality of Children in Care and their Families](#)

Additional Resources

- [Department of Public Instruction \(DPI\) Foster Care Educational Services](#)
- [A Guide to the Individualized Education Plan](#)
- [Wisconsin Family Assistance Center for Education, Training, and Support](#)
- [Beyond Consequences Institute](#)
- [The Post Institute](#)



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