

What Teachers and Educators Can Do to Help Youth In Foster Care

Explore the Student's Academic History

- > Contact the student's former teacher and school to find out about academic status, strengths, challenges and history. Help ensure that school records and Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for students enrolled in special education are updated with all relevant information and evaluated by the appropriate staff at your school in a timely fashion.
- > Be aware that each move a child makes can delay academic progress by months. Understand that many children and youth in foster care have a harder time learning because of their experiences. They may have been in educational settings in which they were not well supported because they were viewed as transient students bound to be moved again.
- > Invite the resource parents – foster parents, kinship caregivers, adoptive parents, etc. – to work with you in assessing the student's current level of achievement and setting reasonable goals for the academic year.
- > Find out who the student's educational decision-maker is and reach out to this person to ensure that you are both on the same page.

In the Classroom

- > Be aware that children and youth in care generally tend to perform less well in school than their peers. Thirty to forty percent of youth in foster care are also in special education, so your student may already have an IEP or may need one. Determine the student's academic, social and emotional level and then find ways to help him or her fit into the class by using accommodations and adaptations to support educational success. Connect the student to appropriate supports, such as tutoring and mentoring.
- > The student may have a learning disability due to poor maternal health during pregnancy or prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol. The enormous emotional burdens of grief, loss and uncertainty about the future can also impair a child's ability to concentrate, learn and acquire new skills. You can support the student's development by insuring that routines are regular and that he or she has opportunities to practice needed skills and is alerted to any schedule changes.
- > Structure materials and tasks in the classroom to help the student achieve success, even if academics are a problem. Help offset the chaos in the student's life by providing structure and predictability in the classroom.
- > Respect the child's right to privacy. Students and teachers who do not have responsibility for teaching the child do not need to know about his or her foster care status. Become knowledgeable about confidentiality and how to address confidential issues appropriately.
- > Encourage students to participate in holistic educational opportunities like after school programs, extra curricular activities, and special school events.
- > Broaden the diversity of families depicted in the books and materials in your classroom to include foster, adoptive and relative caregiving families.

(More)

- > Keep in mind that a youth in foster care (or one who has been adopted) may not be able to complete certain assignments as easily as their peers. For example, constructing a family tree or bringing in a baby picture may be difficult for a child who has been frequently and suddenly moved or has little contact with his or her birth family. Similarly, securing permission for a special activity such as a field trip can be problematic when the current caregivers do not have legal authority to give permission. It may take more lead-time than normal to get approval through the appropriate channels.
- > Consider doing a unit on foster care during May. Lists of books about foster care and adoption are available at the following sites:
 - <http://www.cwla.org/pubs/subj.asp>
 - <http://www.childadvocacy.com/books/index.php>

Your Relationship with the Child and Family

- > Like other students, a child or youth in foster care needs to be accommodated, but does not want to be treated differently. Strive to ensure that the student does not feel exposed as a “special case” as he/she does in so many other settings. At the same time, be lenient when circumstances warrant it.
- > Remember that many children and youth in foster care find it difficult to trust adults, often for good reason. Recognize you may have to work harder to achieve a trusting relationship over time. Behavior and attitudes intended to be caring can appear just the opposite when they have been experienced in a negative context in the past. Be patient and consistent.
- > Some teachers may feel challenged by highly involved resource parents who advocate very strongly for the student. Remember that these children and youth need someone who is on their side, even if that person seems over-involved. Try to work with the energy the parents bring to their child’s academic life.
- > What children and youth in foster care need most are strong advocates in their schools. Educators, resource parents, agency staff and birth families can all contribute to school success when they understand the challenges and have the opportunity to collaborate in providing support to these students.

Preparation for Postsecondary Education, Training and Career Goals

- > Prepare students for postsecondary education and training while in middle and high school, helping them become aware of the full range of postsecondary program options. Have high aspirations for their post high school lives.
- > Train students early in self-determination and self-advocacy so they can speak up for themselves, direct and redirect their lives, solve problems, reach valued postsecondary education and training goals, and take part in their communities.
- > Provide students with access to appropriate academic supports, high school course planning, SAT/ACT and other assessment preparation, as well as guidance and follow-up in selecting and applying to postsecondary education and training programs.
- > Link students to existing community educational and career development programs such as TRIO, Gear Up, and College Bridge Programs.

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Sources and Further Information

- > A Road Map for Learning: Improving Educational Outcomes in Foster Care: A Road Map for Learning is a guide for everyone working towards successful educational outcomes for youth in foster care or out-of-home care.
<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/>
- > Conversation with an Educator [Online].
http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/conversation-with-educator.html
- > Education and Foster Care on the website of the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning:
http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/education-and-foster-care.html
- > Education and Training Vouchers: These federal Independent Living/Chafee program funds provide youth who were formerly in foster care up to \$5,000 a year toward the cost of attending a postsecondary institution. Eligible expenses include tuition and room and board. For more information see the National Resource Center for Youth Development, <http://www.nrcys.ou.edu/nrcyd/programs/etv.shtml>, and state-by-state information at http://www.nrcys.ou.edu/nrcyd/state_pages.shtml.
- > Endless Dreams: This video and training curriculum informs teachers about the unique educational needs of youth in foster care and offers policies, procedures, and practices that can improve educational success.
<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/>
- > It's My Life: Postsecondary Education and Training: Based on the It's My Life transition framework, this guide helps child welfare professionals and educators prepare young people from foster care academically, financially, and emotionally for postsecondary education and training success.
<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/>
- > Garcia, C. (2004). Helping Foster Care Grads Move on to College. Connect for Kids. [Online].
http://www.connectforkids.org/articles/foster_care_grads_college
- > Mack, K. (2002). Educational Opportunity for Youth in Foster Care. Children's Voice. [Online].
<http://www.cwla.org/articles/cv0205youthcare.htm>
- > McNaught, K. (2006). Mythbusting: Breaking Down Confidentiality and Decision-Making Barriers to Meet the Education Needs of Children in Foster Care. American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law through support from Casey Family Programs. Ever struggle to gain access to education records? Are you ever unsure what education information can be shared, and with whom, when a child is in foster care? Ever tried to determine who in a child's life was responsible for making education decisions? This publication answers common questions by individuals involved with the child welfare system, including judges, children's attorneys, parents, foster parents, youth, caseworkers, and court appointed special advocates (CASAs). [Online].
<http://www.abanet.org/child/rcjji/education/mythbusting2.pdf>
- > Orphan Foundation of America administers several scholarships for postsecondary education and training to young people who have been in foster care. Contact (571) 203-0270.
<http://www.orphan.org/>