



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 or 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 met yet. As a foster parent, there are some ways that you can plan to help the child in your care succeed in school.

Before School Starts

When children enter care, their home environment changes, often impacting their school performance.

- Ideally, all of you—birth parents, child welfare professionals, the child, and yourself—will meet together before school starts. If that is not an option, talk with the child's caseworker to determine what information can be shared and what should be kept confidential to comply 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](#).)
- Children may feel stigmatized from being in the foster care system. The child may not want their peers or school staff to know 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 and meals. 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 them. Together, talk about how to develop and sustain an ongoing communication plan. This might be regularly scheduled phone calls or emails. If the child in care is comfortable with the responsibility, you might have a communication notebook that goes back and forth between you and the teacher. 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 work 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.

During the School Day

Allow the child in your care to share what kind of support they might like during the school day and how often they would enjoy a little extra boost. Additional visits or calls as the child gets used to the new school or routine could be helpful if permitted. Some children may even like to have you more involved throughout the year as a field trip chaperone, playground or lunch supervisor, etc.

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 a child 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 they start having an issue, there may be something that is triggering the behavior. For example, they 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, holidays, and the end of a school year are transition times and can be challenging 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 schoolwork. This may be because of a lack of attendance at school, early trauma, frequent moves, or any number of reasons. The following are some suggestions for helping with homework.

- *Break homework into smaller steps.* Sometimes, breaking things into smaller steps alleviates stress and anxiety and keeps students better focused. For example, work on five math problems at a time instead of all 20 at once.
- *Celebrate successes.* Make a big deal out of accomplishments—no matter how big or small. Acknowledging achievements can go a long way toward encouraging continued success.
- *Teach organizational skills.* Develop a system for schoolwork 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. Many schools provide mentoring assistance and support resources. Perhaps a child could be involved with an organization like the YMCA or Big Brothers and Big Sisters that provides 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 with teachers, coaches, counselors, and other staff members. As foster parents, you are vital in advocating for a child's academic success. You create a pathway toward ongoing school success by building collaborations and partnerships with the child's school team.

Resources

From [the Resource Library](#)

- Fostering Across Wisconsin: [School Tools](#)
- [Helping Kids in Care Change Schools](#)
- [Respecting the Confidentiality of Children in Care and their Families](#)

Learn in the [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Erasing the Belonging Gap Within Schools](#)

Additional Resources

- [Educational Stability for Students in Out-of-Home Care](#)
- [Promoting School Success for Foster Children](#)
- [Department of Public Instruction \(DPI\) Foster Care Educational Services](#)
- [Beyond Consequences Institute](#)