Helping Kids in Care Change Schools

Whenever possible, case workers and social workers seek to keep children in their current schools. However, there are times when circumstances make changing schools unavoidable. Foster parents face the challenge of supporting these vulnerable children during school transitions. In an ideal world, a child placed in a new foster home would have the time to adjust to the new physical setting and neighborhood, get to know the family, and learn the new household routines before entering school. Foster parents would have time to guide their new family members through their personal and educational transition into a new school.

However, an abrupt transition to a new home is sometimes necessary in the real world of foster care. This transfer to a new home might happen anytime—including during the school year and on days when the foster parents have to work. Often, families and workers don't have the luxury of time to prepare the kids for the experience of going to a new school. The children need to be registered and begin school upon placement in a new home, sometimes within a day of that placement.

Additionally, children and youth in care often face educational challenges that require attention and support from foster parents. These young people are dealing with the trauma of entering care, leaving their home of origin or another foster care home, and now, another new environment. They bring these experiences into the classroom and often find education secondary to their need to deal with the emotional challenges brought about by their life experiences.

Studies show that children with multiple home placements (and thus often in multiple schools) have a low high school graduation rate. Reading levels, on average, are lower for children in foster care.

This tip sheet offers some things you can do as a foster parent to ensure that the transition to a new school is as smooth as possible.

Preparing for school

- Get to know the local schools and their locations if you are unfamiliar with them. Most foster parents enroll their child in public schools, but you may also choose a private, parochial, or charter school if the child's parents and social worker also think that's a good idea.
- If appropriate and approved by the social worker, invite the child's parent to accompany you to the school. Involving the child's parent from the beginning may help the child make a smooth transition and help build mutual respect.
- Obtain any health forms and immunization records from the child's parent or your social worker as soon as possible. They are required for school registration. You may have to schedule physician,

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dentist, or optometrist visits.

- Work with your social worker to obtain the necessary signatures from the parent or legal guardian. Schools vary in how strict they are about who can sign for what activities.
- Learn what forms you can legally sign. Often, caseworkers recommend that foster parents cross out "parent or guardian" under the signature line on any form and enter "foster parent" in bold letters with their signature.
- Consult with your caseworker about an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) if the child you foster is in special education. See the Coalition tip sheet, Fostering a Child With an IEP, for more information about that topic.
- Keep copies of all school forms you sign in a confidential file, as well as any paperwork you get from the school. Work with the child's parents about signing permission forms and school communications. You can become a mentor for the birth parent if they aren't already very involved with the school system.
- Check with the school about current classroom technology to familiarize yourself and, if needed, help educate the child in your care.

Preparing the child

- Practice your name, address, and phone number with new children in your home, whether they are six or 16. Ensure they have a written copy of your name, address, place of employment, telephone numbers, and any other pertinent information. Please put a copy of this information in their backpacks or a secure place for younger children where they know they can find it.
- Take the child with you to the school when you register, whether he is six or 16.
- Show your child the route to school or the bus stop. Consider taking them to school the first day or two or introducing them to the bus driver if possible.
- If possible, introduce your kids to the teacher, the principal, and other school staff before the first day.
- Tour the school with the child and familiarize them with their classrooms, locker, gym, library, and cafeteria. Some schools arrange a tour for older children or have another student show them around.
- Get to know the teachers. Introduce yourself and tell them that you are a foster parent. Ensure they have your contact information, including cell phone and email address.
- If children are in special education classes or have other support teachers, get to know those teachers as well. Remember that foster parents cannot sign for any (IEP) forms, although it's the responsibility of the school personnel to get the correct signature.
- Prepare children for lessons about genealogy and family history so that they can comfortably participate in them. Share with teachers that these assignments may be challenging for the child and other children not living with biological families.
- Help children develop an age-appropriate story with which they are comfortable to respond to questions others may ask.
- Learn about the school's extracurricular activities and encourage the children you foster to participate in one or more of them.

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Working with the School

- Remember that you are an advocate for the child. Work with the school and communicate with them assertively while recognizing the school's constraints. Teachers have many other children in their classrooms, and their time is limited. However, they may be very willing to give special assistance to children when they know their challenging situations.
- Talk to school librarians and suggest books about foster care and foster children.
- Visit the school for open houses and volunteer there, if possible. If there is not enough time to bake for bake sales or make classroom treats, buy some snacks to send with your child. Studies show that kids do better when parents are involved in the schools.
- Become familiar with county, agency, and school district guidelines if children have an IEP.
- Talk with the teacher or guidance counselor about the children's behaviors resulting from their complex backgrounds without violating confidentiality. Know the guidelines for confidentiality. It often helps to tell teachers information about what some kids in care experience in general rather than your child specifically. (For example, Many children in foster care have had multiple placements, making school and friendships difficult for them.)
- Educate classroom teachers and other staff about foster care. Many may know little about it and the obstacles children in care encounter.

With thoughtful preparation and support, you can help ease the transition to a new school when children come to your home. Talk to the children in your care regularly about their school experiences and communicate well with school staff.

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Resources

From the Resource Library

- *Finding the Right Spot: When Kids Can't Live with Their Parents,* by Janice Levy
- *Maybe Days: A Book for Children in Foster Care,* by Jennifer Wilgocki and Marcia Kahn Wright
- *Returnable Girl,* by Pamela Lowell
- *Oh No, School!,* by Hae-Kyung Chang
- *Lost at School—Why Our Kids With Behavioral Challenges are Falling through the Cracks and How We Can Help Them,* by Ross W. Greene, Ph.D.
- *When the School Says No . . . How to Get the YES!—Securing Special Education Services for Your Child,* by Vaughn K. Lauer
- *Help for Billy,* by Heather T. Forbes, LCSW
- Fostering Across Wisconsin: School Tools
- Helping Children & Youth in Care Achieve School Success
- Creating Safe School Experiences: Strategies for LGBTQ+ Parents

Learn in the Champion Classrooms

- Erasing the Belonging Gap Within Schools
- Conscious Responses: What Parents and Schools Need to Know to Support Kids Impacted by Trauma
- Special Ed Strategies for Virtual, Hybrid, and In-person Learners
- Let's Talk: School Challenges

Additional Resources

- National Foster Parent Association
- Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction Bulletin (defines the rights of foster parents in working with the Individual Educational Plan of children with disabilities)
- Special Education
- WI FACETS: Special Education Resources for Children in Wisconsin

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