



Helping Kids In Care Change Schools

Children who are in care often face educational challenges that require a great deal of attention and support from foster parents. These children who are traumatized by the abuse and neglect that brings them into the system also deal with the trauma of being removed from their homes.

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), gave a low rate of graduation from high school. Reading levels on average are lower for children in foster care. They need extra support and assistance to succeed in school.

Foster parents are faced with the challenge of supporting these vulnerable children during school transitions. In an ideal world, a child who is placed in 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.

In the real world of foster care, an abrupt transition to a new home is frequently a necessity. This transfer to a new home happens at any time—including during the school year and on days when the foster parents have to work. Often the families and workers don't have the luxury of time to prepare the kids for the experience of going to a new school. They need to be registered and begin school upon placement in new homes, sometimes within the following day of that placement.

Here are some things you can do as a foster parent to make sure that the school transition is the best it can be.

Preparing for school

- Get to know the local schools and their locations if you are not familiar 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 helps build 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, dentist or optometrist visits.
- Work with your social worker to obtain the necessary signatures from the parent or legal guardian. Schools vary as to how strict they are about who is able to 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 FCARC Tip Sheet, *Fostering a Child with an IEP* for more information about that topic. <http://wifostercareandadoption.org/library/519/IEP.pdf>
- Keep copies of all school forms that you sign in a confidential file, as well as any paperwork that you get from the school. Work with the child's parents about signing permission forms and school communications. You can become a

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mentor for the birth parent, if he or she isn't already very involved with the school system.

Preparing the child

- Practice your name, address and phone number with new children in your home, whether the children are six or 16. Make sure that they have a written copy of your name, address, place of employment, telephone numbers and any other pertinent information. Put a copy of this information in their backpacks or a secure place for younger children where they know they can find the information.
- 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. If possible, consider taking her to school the first day or two or introducing her to the bus driver.
- 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 him with his classrooms, locker, gym, library, and cafeteria. Some schools arrange a school 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. Make sure 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 the responsibility is the school personnel to get the right signature.
- Prepare children for lessons about genealogy and their family history so that they can participate in these lessons in the most comfortable way they can. Share with teachers that these

assignments may be difficult for your placement child as well as other children not living with biological families.

- Help children develop an age appropriate story with which they are comfortable so that they can respond to questions others may ask.. See the article *Children Who Are Adopted and School Issues* at www.wifostercareandadoption.org/library/164/ADOPTED%20CHILD%20GOES%20TO%20SCHOOL_ADOPTED%20CHILD%20GOES%20TO%20SCHOOL.pdf for information about developing life stories.
- Learn what the extracurricular activities are at the school, and encourage the children you foster to become active in one or more of these activities.

Working with the School

- Remember that you are an advocate for the child. Work with the school and communicate with them in assertively, while also recognizing the constraints the schools have.. Remember that 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 are aware of 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 when parents are involved in the schools, their kids do better.
- Become familiar with county, agency and school district guidelines if children have an IEP. Also see FCARC Tip Sheet, "Working with an IEP" (<http://wifostercareandadoption.org/library/519/IEP.pdf>).
- Talk with the teacher or guidance counselor about the behaviors of the children that result

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from their difficult 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. (i.e. *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 foster care and the obstacles kids in care encounter.

- Talk to school librarians and suggest books about foster care and foster children. (Also see the list in the resource section of this tip sheet.)

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 maintain good communication with school staff.



Resources Available From the FCARC Lending Library:

The following materials are available through our resource library. To access our lending library, go to www.wisconsinfostercareandadoption.org

Keeping It Secret: Teens Write About Foster Care Stigma (Book)

A Road Map for Learning: Improving Educational Outcomes in Foster Care (Book) This Casey practice framework is full of resources and emphasizes the educational needs of K-12 students in foster care or out-of-home care.

Foster Care Children: A Guide for Parents and Teachers (Book)

A Family for Leanne by Shelby Griffin-Timberlake (Children's book)

Finding the Right Spot: When Kids Can't Live with Their Parents (Book) by Janice Levy

Maybe Days: A Book for Children in Foster Care This is a straightforward look at the issues of foster care, the questions that kids ask, and the feelings they confront. An excellent primer for the young child going into foster care, this book also explains in kid terms the responsibilities of everyone involved: parents, foster parents, social workers, lawyers and judges. By Madison, WI therapists Jennifer Wilgocki and Marcia Kahn Wright (Children's book, ages 4 to 8)

Returnable Girl by Pamela Lowell

Zachary's New Home: A Story for Foster and Adopted Children by Geraldine M. Blomquist, M.S.W. and Paul B. Blomquist. Zachary, a little kitten, is confused and concerned. He doesn't understand why he has to move from his first family to a foster family and then to an adoptive family. He is angry at the changes in his life. He thinks that no one loves him. (Children's book, ages 4 to 8)

The Heart Knows Something Different: Teenage Voices from the Foster Care System by Al Desetta

Other Resources:

Casey Executive Bulletin. http://www.svcf.org/downloads/Casey_ExecSummary_NCLB.pdf

National Foster Parent Association
www.nfpainc.org/uploads/Advocating_in_School_for_the_Children_in_Your_Care.pdf

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction bulletin defining the rights of foster parents in working with the Individual Educational Plan of children with disabilities.

<http://dpi.wi.gov/sped/bul00-11-2.html#q71>

Ohio State's booklet **Whose IDEA Is This?**

<http://www.ode.state.oh.us/GD/Templates/Pages/ODE/ODEDetail.aspx?page=3&TopicRelationID=967&ContentID=11128&Content=47225>