Learning and Social-Emotional Supports for Students Experiencing Family Transitions: Meeting the Needs of Military, Foster, and Homeless Children

Lowering barriers to learning is critical to success in school for all children.

All children possess tremendous potential and deserve access to comprehensive, rigorous curricula and high quality instruction. Too often, though, they come to class struggling with life challenges that can create barriers to learning and teaching. Left unaddressed, issues such as learning difficulties, poor mental and physical health, cultural and linguistic differences, socioeconomic or family problems, and other external events beyond a student's control can significantly impede student and school success. The educational environment presents unique opportunities to address these barriers, but only when services are available that support the whole child. Effective student support services, like those provided by school psychologists, enable teachers, administrators, and parents to know how best to ensure that every student is ready and able to learn despite barriers.

Children experiencing stressful family transitions present a growing challenge for schools across the country.

Children need stability, connectedness, and support in order to thrive in school and life. Unfortunately, an increasing number of families in the United States are experiencing stressful and oftentimes unpredictable transitions that can quickly undermine these essential securities. These can include military deployments; a move to foster care; becoming homeless; being a refugee or immigrant; running away; and experiencing a natural disaster, death of a parent, or parental divorce. In the past few years, external forces such as the struggling economy and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have increased the occurrence of and pressures on military, homeless, and foster care families. Today there are nearly 4 million military, foster care, and homeless children combined in the United States. These three populations alone translate into nearly 7% of children enrolled in school (K-12), or the equivalent of 2 in every class of 25 students, experiencing unpredictable instability outside of school that can affect school functioning.

Stressful family transitions can lead to family risk factors that affect children.

Challenges associated with difficult family transitions include:
- Physical transience (moving from one home or shelter to another)
- School mobility (moving to a new school due to a change in housing)

About 1.5 million American children are homeless during the course of each year, and their numbers are rapidly growing (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2007).

Effective student supports include mental health services, emphasize prevention and early intervention, actively engage families, and incorporate strength-based approaches such as positive behavioral supports, social-emotional learning, and response to intervention. (Aos, Lieb, Mayfield, Miller, & Pennucci, 2004; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000)

About 1.35% of the 1.96 million military dependents attended Department of Defense Educational Activity (DoDEA) schools in the United States in 2009, suggesting that an overwhelming majority of military dependents attend U.S. public schools (U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity, n.d.).
Psychological and emotional stressors (absence of one or both parents, adjusting to new caregivers or school, leaving behind established relationships with friends and teachers or coaches)

Lack of stable parenting (absence of parents, parental substance or physical abuse, parent’s mental health problems, strained relationships between parents and other family members)

Anxiety or fear related to physical safety and well-being (concern about a parent dying or getting hurt, worry for one’s own safety)

Physical risks (hunger, poor sleep, inadequate clothing, lack of medical care)

Academic challenges (poor record sharing and curriculum differences between schools, lost instruction time, lack of place and/or resources to do homework, inadequate or no parental involvement)

**Stressful family transitions can interfere with children’s learning and well-being.**

Children are inherently resilient. However, many homeless, foster care, and military children are at increased risk for problems that affect academic achievement and well-being. The greater the number and combination of transition issues, the greater the risks, which can include:

- Social–emotional difficulties
- Behavior issues
- Depression and anxiety
- Increased family responsibilities
- Inattention and low work completion
- Falling behind academically due to moves or inability to get to school

- Grade retention
- Dropping out
- Absenteeism and truancy
- Isolation
- Substance abuse
- Delinquency/incarceration

**Foster children have higher rates of placement in special education, school dropout, and discipline problems, and they exhibit poorer academic skills than their non-foster care peers** (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004)

**Schools have the opportunity to promote student resilience by providing stability, connectedness, and support.**

It is essential that schools proactively identify and reach out to students and families in transition as schools can consistently provide stability, connectedness, and support (both academic and social–emotional).

**Stability.** Schools offer the stability of the learning environment, the familiarity of school life, the rhythms of the daily schedule, consistent behavioral expectations and rules, the presence of adults who will offer care and support, and the assurance that the lights will be on, classrooms will be warm, and lunch will be served. Additionally, schools can contribute to a sense of stability for the families by being a ready resource and known place of security for their children. Often, the school is viewed as a community center where students and families can safely gather, meet with others, and receive support.

**Connectedness.** Schools can ensure that students feel a sense of connectedness to caring adults in the building and to their peers. These are people who students know they can rely on and trust. Schools also need to connect with families and engage them in their child’s school experience, as family involvement is one of the most important factors in school success. Equally important, when students move in or out of the system, schools must have the processes in place to connect with the previous or next school. They need to ensure that files are transferred quickly and that information and communication between schools is thorough and complete. Schools also must have strong connections with community resources in order to help families to access wraparound supports.

Students who feel connected to school demonstrate higher attendance, school grades, and test scores; and lower incidence of substance use, criminal activity, and mental health problems (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009)
Interventions using positive behavioral supports have been shown to decrease behavior problems while improving academic performance, as measured by standardized tests in reading and mathematics (Luiselli et al., 2005).

Support. Schools often provide supports that include:
- Meeting of basic needs such as food, shelter, clean clothes, school supplies, and a place to shower
- Provision of mental health services such as evaluation, individual and group counseling, and referrals to community services
- Behavioral interventions including social skills instruction and positive behavior supports programs
- Academic assessments and interventions, including instructional supports and progress monitoring through a response-to-intervention process and/or through special education services
- Advocacy on behalf of students' needs
- Connecting of students to mentoring programs
- Helping families to get necessary services, connecting families to community partners, offering parenting and life skills classes

Maintaining high expectations for and supporting the needs of children in transition improves academic achievement and life outcomes.

It is imperative that schools maintain high academic standards and expectations for all students, including those at risk due to family circumstances. Providing comprehensive and fully integrated learning and social-emotional supports is essential to helping students in transition learn the necessary skills to meet or exceed expectations and see themselves as capable and valued. Such services need to be responsive to individual family circumstances, including cultural and linguistic diversity. Typically, these services are provided by school-employed student support personnel (e.g., school psychologists, counselors, social workers, and nurses) who collaborate with and link families to community-based resources while maintaining a focus on education. Access to these services improves behavior, academic performance, instruction, school climate, family engagement, and data-based decision-making.

Schools need comprehensive, fully integrated student and learning supports in order to ensure positive outcomes for students in transition.

Schools need the capacity to identify students experiencing challenging family transitions, recognize their needs, and provide the necessary stability and supports to ensure their academic achievement and social-emotional health. To do so, schools need to regularly provide supports that lower barriers to learning and reengage students who are disconnected. Given that school may be the only mainstay in the life of a student in transition, we must equip our schools with the resources needed to offer appropriate interventions. Specifically, schools need:

- Access to professionals who can provide support services, such as school psychologists, counselors, social workers, and nurses
- Communication about students’ needs and any necessary classroom accommodations
- Professional development for educators about the risks of not responding to these students’ needs
- Ability to recognize warning signs that a student is struggling
- A process to identify children in need, which requires strong partnerships between school, social services, law enforcement, child protective services, and military bases

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