Most teachers have had or will have students who are in foster care. In 2007, just under a half million U.S. children did not live with their parent(s). The median amount of time that children spend in foster care is about one year, but some remain much longer and some exit and reenter care several times. Although “foster care” can refer to a number of arrangements, over half of children in care live in homes of nonrelatives and another 25% live with relatives. These statistics may change as the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351) is implemented. This law contains provisions to facilitate the care of children by relative guardians, to maintain contacts among siblings, and to ensure that children are in school full-time.

The school has the potential to be a powerful force toward normalizing the lives of children in foster care and can provide skills that these students need to support themselves as adults. In the information that follows, foster care refers to the situation in which children live with nonrelatives (i.e., foster parents) and have their care supervised by the state (i.e., caseworkers).

STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE
The circumstances that surround each child in foster care are unique, meaning that available generalizations and statistics will not apply to all children. The commonality is that the parents are either unable or unwilling to care for the child. Today most children enter foster care as a result of serious neglect, abuse, or parental substance abuse.

Characteristics of Children in Foster Care
Typically, these children left their siblings, extended family members, friends, and teachers when they entered foster care. They may strongly miss their biological parents, even if their parents helped create the adverse conditions that led to their foster placement. With each subsequent move among foster homes, they are again forced to leave friends, foster families, and teachers. Many express anger at having to leave those with whom they have established relationships.

From the perspective of the child, foster care usually means living with strangers. Depending on the age at which children entered foster care and whether they have contact with their families of origin, children may know very little about their biological parents. As they progress through school, children in foster care lack a biological parent to monitor their education and advocate for them when necessary.

Challenges Facing Children in Foster Care
Just as children enter foster care for myriad reasons, so they also have varied reactions and needs. Some students thrive in foster care and later credit their foster families with providing them with stability, care, and guidance that helped them become successful adults. Others experience challenges that their teachers need to understand. In general, students in foster care have more physical, academic, and behavioral problems than their peers.

Academic challenges. The high school graduation rate of youth in foster care is below that of the general population. Many youth “age-out” of foster care without jobs, adequate educational preparation, or support systems. Although foster care placement does not appear to be a direct cause of children’s academic difficulties, the circumstances of their biological families and the movement among foster homes reflect significant risks. For example, if the biological family was impoverished, there may have been few books and toys in the home during the child’s preschool years. The movement from one home to another compounds difficulties with absences, adjustment to new teachers and peers, changes in curriculum, and
disruptions in special services. Many foster children are forced to miss classes for mandated medical and court appointments.

Children in foster care often perform below their peers, with the greatest achievement gaps in basic reading, math calculation, and written expression. Since most children learn these skills through formal instruction, these deficits may reflect the disruptions in regular school attendance related to foster care placement. Often current foster parents have little or no information about the child’s prior educational performance and needs, interfering with continuity of instruction and services. Further, children in foster care may not remain in a given school or district long enough to be assessed to determine their eligibility for special education services.

Behavioral and emotional challenges. Children and youth in foster care may experience anxiety, stress, and emotional trauma in response to the frequent, sudden changes of the foster care experience. They may not dare to get excited about upcoming events or school activities because they know that they can be moved to another foster home without warning. As children in foster care grow older, some become detached and apathetic, and daydream excessively. Others may be overly sociable, even clingy. They may be easily overwhelmed and disorganized by stress. New activities and situations may be frightening. When in a threatening situation, they may withdraw from caregivers or become unresponsive, which may be misinterpreted as defiance or oppositional behavior.

Many youth in foster care report feeling stigmatized. They feel different from their peers and others may treat them as different.

Challenges to Schools

Even in the best of circumstances, children in foster care present many challenges to school personnel. Frequent moves, often between districts, make it difficult to keep track of foster children, and delays in transferring their educational and immunization records and in assessing their needs interfere with the delivery of needed services. Even though children in foster care are more likely than their peers to receive special education services, many do not receive the special services they need because they are not in one setting long enough to be referred.

Schools face significant barriers in obtaining information about student health and school history, as biological parents may be unavailable (e.g., have died or are in treatment), uncooperative, or incapable of providing accurate information. As a rule, foster parents need about a month to get to know the child and for any “honeymoon” period to pass before they can provide helpful information to school personnel.

The conditions associated with the foster care placement and the plan for the child’s long-term guardianship (e.g., being reunited with the biological parent[s] or adoption) impact legal restrictions on sharing information about the child and obtaining parental permission for assessment and services. The child’s caseworker must be consulted to determine the restrictions specific to that student. For example, biological parents may or may not be legally eligible to receive information about their child’s educational progress. Likewise, if any services such as special education are considered that require parental permission, the child’s caseworker will need to be consulted to determine who may legally give this permission.

School-based interventions

Many children in foster care are among the more vulnerable students in the classroom. The suggestions that follow highlight effective teaching practices that support all students, but that are particularly critical to the success and specific needs of students in foster care.

Plan for Students in Foster Care

Plan ahead to accommodate students who enter your class during the school year. Keep a file of all school notices and newsletters as you send them home with your students. You can then make copies for families who move in during the year. Teach students to introduce themselves to new classmates and show them around the school. Be sure that classroom and school procedures are explained to new students.

Individualize Instruction

It is important to align educational services with the skills and needs of the individual student. Within a week of the fostered child’s arrival in your classroom, have the child complete sample assignments and tests to determine how the classroom curriculum matches the child’s instructional level. Review the student’s educational records once they arrive. Clearly communicate to the student your expectations for both academic and behavioral performance. Contact the child study team promptly if you suspect that the child may have a disability.

Tutoring and remedial instruction should be provided to students in foster care who have low academic skills as well as those whose educational experiences have been disrupted by a move during the school year. Also, children in foster care may need training in life skills, such as how to respond to an emergency or how to fill out an application.

When secondary students change schools in the middle of the semester, they may lose credits for
incomplete classes. Work with other educators to develop procedures for assigning credits in less than whole blocks, so that even when students are forced to move during the school year, they can receive credit for the work that they have completed.

Create a Structured and Supportive Classroom

Be sensitive and responsive to the need of children in foster care for stability and predictability. A consistent, structured, warm classroom environment is recommended. Explain new situations to children in foster care, clarifying expectations and limits. Important classroom practices include daily routines, opportunities for practicing skills, and prior discussion of schedule changes.

Be patient and consistent as you work to develop trusting relationships with students in foster care. Experience has taught many fostered youth to be hesitant to trust adults. Their expectation may be that teachers will also fail them. Even if corporal punishment is permitted in your school district, never use it with children in foster care. If the child has been abused, the corporal punishment reenacts the abuse psychologically (and physically) for the student.

Combat Stigmatization of Children in Foster Care

Children in foster care may be stigmatized because of their biological parents’ actions or the uncertainty of their situation, or simply because they are the new kid at school. Be careful to protect the fostered child’s right to privacy, no matter how tragic or sensational the circumstances that led to the child’s placement in foster care. Use classroom materials and books that include fostered and adopted children to help children in foster care feel less different from their peers and to provide information and modeling for classmates. Be sensitive to the difficulties that children in foster care may have in completing certain assignments, like bringing their baby pictures to school or constructing a family tree. Offer alternative activities to students, if possible, or make assignments more sensitive/flexible from the start.

Encourage Foster Parents’ Involvement

If the foster parents are new to the school community, call to welcome them and to tell them about the school’s calendar, policies, expectations, and opportunities to be involved in the school. Explain how to contact you if they have questions or concerns about their child’s education. If foster parents are unsure what information to seek about their child, suggest questions that they might want to ask. Consider structuring information you share at conferences around similar questions. Offer suggestions to foster parents about how to help their children with homework.

Monitor and Communicate Student Progress

Arrange periodic progress report meetings with the foster parents, caseworker, and student to discuss the student’s accomplishments and needs. Close monitoring of educational outcomes is associated with higher school completion rates among youth in foster care. Including youth in foster care in planning their educational programs addresses their need for control over their lives and can also help them develop goals and self-advocacy skills. Give the caseworker written records of information discussed at the meeting for inclusion in the child’s file. If the student moves abruptly to another school, the caseworker will have educationally relevant information to share even if the child’s school records are not transferred promptly.

Encourage Student Involvement at School

Some children gain their sense of accomplishment through extracurricular activities, positions of responsibility, or sports. Work with other educators to develop procedures for permitting students who enroll after the beginning of the school year to participate in ongoing school programs and activities.

Arrange for an Advocate or Mentor

Many children in foster care need a single adult who has the responsibility of monitoring their education and advocating for needed services. If the child’s caseworker or foster parents do not assume this role, then school personnel can choose to designate a teacher or related services staff to support the child. Mentoring programs that provide students with adults modeling problem-solving, persistence, and achievement have the potential to enhance the fostered youth’s educational aspirations. A volunteer mentor can advise teens about course selection, volunteer and part-time job opportunities, college and technical school applications, and financial aid for postsecondary education.

Refer for Mental Health Services

Given their high risk for mental health problems, some students may benefit from individual or group counseling. If you observe signs of stress, anxiety, depression, or limited social skills, discuss concerns with the foster parent and legal guardian. It is important to determine if the behaviors are due to a recent change in placement, the result of multiple placements, or other factors. Children who have experienced frequent changes in foster placements may have had multiple counselors or therapists. Sometimes a referral to a community agency will be more appropriate and offer a better chance for continuity for children in foster care.
CONCLUSION
School can be a valuable preventive force in the lives of children in foster care by providing stability, belonging, skills, and successful experiences. The school can promote a sense of mastery and success within warm, secure learning and social environments. Teachers have the opportunity to be the secure bases that students in foster care need.

REFERENCE
Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351).

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES
Print


Online


Connect for Kids/Child Advocacy 360/Youth Policy Action Center: http://www.connectforkids.org

Foster Club: The National Network for Young People in Foster Care: http://www.fosterclub.com

Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative: http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org


Video

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