

INFORMATION PACKET:

Adoption at School

March 2023

CREDITS:

Adoption at School Schoettle & Singer, Fact Sheet #9 (2016) Center for Adoption Support and Education
<https://adoptionsupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/09-Adoption-at-School.pdf>

Preparing Your Adopted Child for School The Cradle (2019) <https://cradle.org/blog/preparing-your-adopted-child-for-school/>

Adoption Language (2013) Adoption Learning Partners <https://www.adoptionlearningpartners.org/catalog/downloads/schools-in-session-adoption-language.cfm>

The following articles are from Creating a Family Resources and Training:

- ***7 Tips for Adoptive Parents at Beginning of School*** <https://creatingafamily.org/adoption-category/how-much-to-share-with-teachers-of-your-foster-or-adopted-child-past/>
- ***School Issues for Foster & Kinship Children*** <https://creatingafamily.org/adoption/resources/school-issues-for-adopted-children/>
- ***Supporting a Child Who Struggles with Executive Function and Organization Skills*** <https://creatingafamily.org/adoption-category/adoption-blog/supporting-a-child-who-struggles-with-executive-function-and-organizational-skills/>
- ***Easing the Transition to a New School Year for Adopted, Foster & Kinship Kids*** <https://creatingafamily.org/adoption-category/adoption-blog/easing-the-transition-to-a-new-school-year-for-adopted-foster-kinship-kids/>
- ***Advocating for Your Foster or Kinship Child at School*** <https://creatingafamily.org/foster-care/fostering-blog/advocating-for-your-foster-or-kinship-child-at-school/>
- ***A Letter to My Adopted Child's Teacher*** <https://creatingafamily.org/adoption-category/adoption-blog/a-letter-to-my-adopted-childs-teacher/>
- ***The Dreaded Family Tree Assignment in Adoption*** <https://creatingafamily.org/adoption-category/family-tree-assignment-adoption/>

The following packet contains information on the above topic. If you wish to receive training credit for reading this packet, please fill out the "Information Packet Questionnaire" at the back of this packet. Return the completed questionnaire to the Alaska Center for Resource Families for 1.5 training credits. The articles are yours to keep for further reference.

For more information about this topic or other topics related to foster care, please contact:

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C.A.S.E. Fact Sheet Series No. 9

ADOPTION AT SCHOOL

BY MARILYN SCHOETTLE, M.A. AND ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

Of all the experiences we have in life that help us to know who we are and what we can be, school is surely one of the most powerful. School's enormous influence makes it a critical component in the development of children's self-concept, including what it means to be part of an adoptive family. From experience and research, we know that it is normal for children and teens to have a wide variety of feelings and thoughts about having been adopted, which can impact school performance in different ways. In turn, kids are often greatly affected by how others at school perceive adoption. If they can receive positive feedback, they will have a better chance of feeling self-confident about themselves.

TEACHERS ARE KEY TO ADOPTION AWARENESS

The school environment can be a wonderful support for adoptees and adoptive families. If educators are comfortable with the subject of adoption, there are many opportunities to help students learn that adoptive families are permanent and real. When teachers understand the normal emotions of adopted children, they can develop effective strategies to address some of the challenges the children face at school, including certain assignments and intrusive questions from others. Most importantly, educators are powerful adult role models who are in a position to easily and simply validate for all children that adoption is a good way to build families.

Unfortunately, educators do not normally receive training to prepare them to talk about adoption. Instead, most of them form their knowledge base like the majority of the public, that is, through personal contact with members of the adoption circle (including students who were adopted) and what they are exposed to in the media. The old standard of secrecy around adoption and the lack of preparation results in uncertainty about what to say. The consequence is often careful silence on the part of educators when adoption comes up at school. The possibility of support is lost, and for small children in particular, their teacher's silence can be interpreted as disapproval or shame.

Parents are not likely to know all that is being said about adoption at school. By 3rd or 4th grade, most children keep that information to themselves because they realize that it might upset their parents. However, we have learned from both adult adopted persons and children that adoptees are often asked the toughest questions about their adoption stories when they are at school. The questions and comments can be generated for a variety of reasons – curiosity, nosiness, or bullying. School personnel may not hear all of the communication about adoption because adopted children are not told that they can seek help from teachers or guidance counselors when the questions or comments become too much for them to handle. With education about ways to support adopted children, teachers can be made aware how critically important they can be in providing adopted kids with emotional support.



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WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Parents can promote the need for open, informative communication about adoption in schools by talking to teachers and providing them with information about resources for learning more about adoption on their own. Authors such as Holly van Gulden, David Brodzinsky, Joyce Maguire Pavao, and C.A.S.E. C.E.O., Debbie Riley have written excellent books that provide a foundation of knowledge for educators. It is important to remember that teachers need to always be cognizant of the needs of all of their students, and therefore parents are likely to be most successful when they, too, consider the rest of the classroom as they make their suggestions.

Some parents have found their schools to be receptive to the formation of a parents' committee to advise school staff. For example, the committee might make suggestions regarding speakers about adoption, National Adoption Month activities, or ways to revise assignments that can pose challenges for adopted students, such as timelines, autobiographies, or even the study of genes and family history. Teachers are not always free to change their curriculum, but are usually glad to know how to adjust work for all students that will be more inclusive of differences.

Another way to promote understanding about adoption is to empower children and teens to educate their peers and teachers themselves. Parents can share with their children some of the questions they are asked, and discuss how they handled each situation. Children can be helped to understand that all members of the adoption circle are beginning to speak up to define the boundaries for appropriate discussion about adoption, and that children can let their teachers know more about adoption (but not necessarily about their personal adoption story).



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RESOURCES

S.A.F.E. at School: Support for Adoptive Families by Educators, A Manual for Teachers, Educators and Counselors is written specifically to promote a positive, informative environment about adoption and adoptive families in the schools. The manual provides background information about children's developmental understanding of adoption, as well as strategies and guidelines for opening communication about this subject that was for so long kept secretive.

It is available on C.A.S.E.'s website.—adoptionsupport.org.

W.I.S.E Up! Powerbook is a workbook for children based on a simple, easy to grasp program that C.A.S.E. developed to help children handle the many questions, comments and misunderstandings of others about adoption such as "*Where is your real family?*" "*Why did they give you away?*" "*Why don't you look like your mom and dad?*" **It is also available online at C.A.S.E.'s web site—adoptionsupport.org.**

An important resource for educators is Child Welfare Information Gateway at www.childwelfare.gov

Adoption Services (<https://cradle.org/blog/category/adoption-services/>),
Counseling & Education (<https://cradle.org/blog/category/counseling-education/>)

Preparing Your Adopted Child for School



Among the boxes of Kleenex, the 10-cent spiral notebooks and multicolored dry-erase markers is the well-known stress (coupled with relief) that comes with the start of a new school year. For families formed through adoption, this stress is

especially complicated. Helping your child's teacher understand what language to use in the classroom, or ensuring your child's sensory needs are met can often be frustrating. We've compiled advice to help you prepare your adopted child to succeed in the classroom.


Establish Communication With the Teacher

If available, attend an open house or make an appointment with your child's teacher or school social worker to tour the school before the first day. This will reduce anxiety for both you and your child—your child will see what the school looks like and have an opportunity to meet some adults. And you'll take comfort in knowing who will care for and help your child grow throughout the next year.

If you haven't already, take time to speak with your child's teacher about your family's background. Explain not just the language you use (for example, your son wasn't "given up") but also your hopes that the teacher will reinforce positive attitudes toward adoption. Let the teacher know you hope to continue open communication, especially should difficult things come up. This will also help normalize the situation and reinforce to your child that adoption is not a secret.

Watch for Signs of Struggle





Take note of when your child will be able to eat at school. Some children experience behavioral changes when their blood sugar dips. This is especially true for some adoptive children who may have experienced early trauma. Your perfect angel at home may take on mischievous behaviors at school when hunger strikes. If it has been an issue before or becomes one, talk to your child's teacher about accommodations to allow your child small, healthy munchies throughout the day.

Think about your child's sleep patterns. Coming off a summer schedule is hard for everyone, and can sometimes result in lack of sleep. For some children, a lack of sleep can result in behavioral issues, as their bodies respond more acutely to a lack of rest. Before school starts, start implementing new wakeup routines and bedtimes, even naptimes, to allow your child time to adjust before the first day. You may need to continue to adjust this once the school year begins.

Be on the look-out for any signs that your child might be struggling in school. Many children require Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to help them remain successful in school. It's never too early to ask for your child to be tested for special education services if you have any concerns.

Create a routine to reconnect at the end of the day. School can be hard for our adopted kids because they are sometimes prone to attachment issues.

Create a routine to physically and emotionally reconnect at the end of the day to make the time apart easier on you and preserve that precious bond between you and your child. The routine can be as simple as cuddle time in front of their favorite Disney show or playing a familiar board game for a half hour. Try to avoid questioning your child about her day. This should be a time to connect on an emotional, not cognitive, level.

Educate the School About Adoption

At the end of the day, we can't control what others will say or do. Your child's teacher may be completely understanding and cooperative, but that may not stop another student from making a comment about how your child "wasn't wanted" or "should look more like his family." Help your child with kid-friendly ways to explain her story to other students.

Consider donating some adoption books to the school library and explain why you like them and think they're important. This will ensure the topic is treated in a natural and appropriate manner. Often, books with adoption storylines have something of value for every child, adopted or not.

Encourage the school to be more inclusive in their language and activities. For example, if a grade plans to create family trees, encourage the teachers to include more inclusive options for families with different structures (options where the birth family represents the roots to the tree work well).

And don't forget to have fun! Take joy in this next stage in your family's life.



7 Tips

For Adoptive Parents at Beginning of School

Every year right about this time, children everywhere are going back to school. The lines at the discount stores are long. Shopping carts are full of brand new boxes of crayons and brightly colored spiral-bound notebooks. As thoughts turn to school, parents of adopted kids often wonder if they need to do anything extra to ensure their child has a smooth school year.



In most respects, the beginning of the school year is no different for adopted kids than for kids born into their families. You buy the same school supplies and new clothes, fill out reams of paperwork and send them off with a kiss and a prayer. But adoption can add layers of complication to your child's school experience:

- Maybe your family is transracial, and you worry that your child will have to field questions about your family.
- Your child might have a large, extended birth family, and you wonder if you need to give the teacher a cheat sheet card to know who is who.
- Your child came to you with the emotional scars and behavior of a hard life, and you wonder how much information to share with her teacher.
- Johnny has learning differences/disabilities caused by prenatal alcohol or drug exposure, and you question what, if anything, the teacher needs to know to help.

- Maybe you are worried that your Suzy is a little fuzzy on the difference between privacy and secrecy and has a tendency to overshare information that she may later regret telling her peers.
- And then there are the dreaded school assignments that may just draw unwanted attention to how your child joined your family.

There are negative stereotypes about adoption, and we get it – you don't want to needlessly burden your child or overshare with his teacher. On the other hand, you do want to be proactive to avoid any potential problems. We discussed these concerns on this recent [CreatingAFamily.org](#) podcast, [Back to School with Foster & Adopted Kids, featuring Heather T. Forbes, LCSW](#).

Beginning of School Checklist for Adopted Kids

1. If your family stands out, prepare your child to answer questions from other children.
2. If you want to ensure that different families are valued in your school, ask your child's teacher if you can come to class to read a book about different ways families are made. Check out our [list of the best books that highlight different types of families](#).
3. If your child was adopted internationally, consider asking the teacher if you can do a lesson about that country. Hint: bringing candy from that country to share is always a hit.
4. Share the information about your child's life necessary for the teacher to help your child. It is usually not necessary to share intensely personal details with the school.

5. If you are concerned about specific behaviors, consider talking with the school counselor in addition to the teacher. Brainstorm ways to help your child and ask for open lines of communication.
6. If your child freely and proudly shared details about his adoption and life before coming to your family, consider whether he is oversharing details he will regret later. Being proud to be adopted is one thing. Sharing that you were abandoned in a field or that both birth parents are in jail might be too much. Some kids need help understanding the difference between privacy and secrecy.
7. Ask your child's teacher if there will be school assignments that might be problematic for your child, such as creating a family tree, bringing baby pictures, or sharing early life stories. Creating a Family has specific suggestions for handling these assignments on our resource page, [School Issues for Adopted Kids](#). We also have a related resource page, [School Issues for Foster & Kinship Kids](#).

Image credit: [William Warby](#)

Categories: [Adoption](#) [Adoption Blog](#) [Blog](#)

Tag: [School Issues](#)

AUGUST 20, 2015

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School Issues for Foster & Kinship Children

Schools can unintentionally be a minefield for foster and kinship children, as well as for foster parents and kinship caregivers. Some of the common school issues that foster families face can include:



- The language used to talk about foster care, birth families, and even adoption
- What to share, with whom to share it, and when to talk with school personnel about your foster child's history
- Traditional assignments such as family trees and baby picture projects
- Learning issues caused by interrupted education, history of neglect or deprivation or prenatal exposure
- Incomplete grade-level progress caused by multiple placements or changes in districts/buildings
- Ethnicity and racial issues

Of course, there can be much more to the struggle than the things listed here. Preparing for the challenges a foster or kinship child might face is helpful.

Creating a Family has many resources on school issues for foster children. A few of our more recent ones that we think you will find particularly helpful are:

- [Supporting a Child Who Struggles with Executive Function and Organizational Skills](#) (article)
- [Easing the Transition to a New School Year for Adopted, Foster, & Kinship Kids](#) (article)
- [Advocating for Your Foster or Kinship Child at School](#) (article)
- [A Letter to My Adopted Child's Teacher](#) (article)

Supporting a Child Who Struggles with Executive Function and Organizational Skills

Raising a child who struggles to stay organized – whether it’s their bedroom, the playroom, or backpack – can be challenging for parents. Do you feel like you are repeating yourself over and over? Does your tone sharpen with each reminder? Are you struggling to remain calm and regulated? Learning how to support a child who struggles with executive function and organizational skills takes education, practice, and willingness to learn new parenting skills.

Why Executive Function Matters

Executive function is the [set of processes the brain performs](#) to carry out tasks, organize thoughts, and learn other development skills. Several contributing factors impact the development of executive function skills, such as neurodivergence like [ADHD](#) (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), impacts of [prenatal exposure](#), [trauma](#), and developmental delays. Sometimes, as adoptive, foster, or kinship parents, we will never know what impacted the delays or impairments to our child’s executive function skills.

Think of it like this: packing a backpack on Sunday night for school requires us to forecast and plan. We need to remember what we used last week. Then we need to organize it all for access tomorrow. Some of us can pack the backpack with little thought, and no reminders are needed. Others need help to start and suggestions to complete the job so we don’t leave out crucial things we’ll need the next day. Organizing that process is the work of executive function in our brain.

The backpack might be a simplistic example, but it’s critical to understand that executive function impacts physical and emotional health, relationships, educational progress, and career successes. It’s foundational to learning how to become a healthy, productive adult. Our consistent, loving care can scaffold them to develop that executive functioning.



Start with These “Soft” Skills

1. Believe there is hope!

Your child will feed off your hopeful, unwavering belief that they can succeed. But you need to believe it as well! If you can train yourself to think of their challenges as puzzles to be solved rather than obstacles that they cannot overcome, you will convey that to your child.

A critical piece to holding onto hope is [shifting your mindset](#) from “won’t” to “can’t.” Ask yourself what your child needs to feel like they can tackle the mess. It’s not that they won’t clean their room. They can’t figure out how to start the overwhelming task.

2. Structure is your friend.

A child who struggles with executive function needs you to run a consistent, predictable household. Manageable routines across the

day are crucial. No matter how old your child is, they benefit from visual schedules, social stories, and checklists to help navigate their days.

3. Be involved.

When raising a child with executive function delays, it's tempting to step back and take a break while in sessions with support professionals. However, the interventions will be far more effective when you are involved. Be present and frequently connect with your child's team. Joining in will tell your child you value them and how they learn. Make the learning into a family effort to further surround this child with safety and support. You are the safe place your child needs in the struggle to learn.

4. Tell them what you know.

When you or your child become discouraged or overwhelmed by the challenges of these delays, go back to what you know. Speak out loud the hopeful messaging you both need to hear.

- You are a valued part of our family.
- We know you are trying your best.
- Everyone needs help with something.
- Your brain works differently, and that is okay with us.
- We have tools to help you succeed.
- You can do this, and we are here to help!

5. Find ways to tell them what TO do.

Most kids get tired of hearing "no" and what they can't or shouldn't do. The child who struggles to stay organized or has delayed executive functioning is even more at risk for the fatigue of "no" from the adults in their life. Instead, look for ways to tell them what TO do. Even when their behaviors are challenging or annoying, direct them in the positive.

For example, when he is repeatedly thumping his spoon on the table between bites, say, "Johnny, you can put your spoon down on the napkin between bites."

6. Focus on the positives

It can be a lonely, frustrating experience for a child who recognizes they are struggling. Positive affirmations of their efforts and character traits will buffer them from anxiety and discouragement. Find one thing every day to praise in their choices or behaviors. When you feel tempted to repeat directions or instructions for the 4th time, choose instead to call out one great thing they've done so far in the task.

How to Avoid Triggering and Being Triggered by Our Kids

7. Practice self-care.

Raising a child with any delay or significant challenge in skills requires that you handle them with patience, compassion, and grace. Are you offering the same to yourself? Think about how it feels to be well-rested and refreshed. Then schedule time for yourself to get that refueling. Make that date immovable. Another necessary means of investing in yourself is finding [excellent learning resources](#) that equip and empower you to tackle the challenges you face. You can best meet your child's needs when you care for your mind, body, and spirit.

Practical Tips To Support Executive Function Growth

A brain that feels safe is a brain that can learn! Your child can benefit from a variety of activities that are both fun and provide opportunities to learn. These tips can help you build safety, trust, and room for growth in your relationship.

1. Tell all the jokes.

Your child's brain often takes a bit longer to process, especially when some inferences or interpretations are required to connect information. Dad jokes get a bad rap for being corny. Still, they can also help encourage our kids' logic and processing skills. In this case,

the punnier, the better. (We're sorry. We had to.)

2. Play games together.

We get it. Family Game Night doesn't sound appealing [when a child struggles with impulsivity and raging](#). However, start small and simple. Your child can develop the logic, self-control, and emotional regulation needed for you to have fun together eventually. Look for games that build a sense of achievement while also engaging the child's interest. Find opportunities for quick rewards and play up their successes. Focus on fun, not competition. Board and card games that skew slightly younger than your youngest child (or younger than the child who struggles the most) will keep the focus on fun while learning valuable skills.

3. Work together.

A regularly scheduled family workday can be a great environment to foster your children's executive function skills. Autumn is an ideal time to put this into practice. Gather your family to plan how to prepare the house and yard for winter. Include everyone in the brainstorming. Then [break the tasks down into manageable parts](#). Assign who will carry out which jobs. Ask for ideas on when to take breaks and what would make it fun. Plan a family reward for a job well done at the end of the day.

4. Teach life skills.

Weekly or daily chore charts are helpful tools to structure the home routine. Figure out what tasks will strengthen each child's executive function skills now but will also be of value as they grow.

For example, feeding and watering the pets daily can teach planning, initiation, and emotional regulation skills. But it also teaches the value of taking responsibility to care for another being.

Some vital life skills that will also develop executive functioning include:

- Doing laundry
- Making their bed
- Setting out clothes for school
- Picking up their toys daily
- Setting and clearing the table
- Washing dishes or loading/unloading the dishwasher



5. Establish simple household rules.

As we said earlier, kids who struggle with executive functions can get frustrated by how often they hear "no," "stop it," or "don't do that in the house!" We get tired of saying it, too.

Set up [basic family rules](#) and frame them in the positive. "No shoes in the house" can become "We leave our shoes in the mudroom." Kids with ADHD or a history of prenatal exposure will need the rules posted prominently in the house. Visual cues you can point to can also help defuse tensions when you feel a rant or escalating tone coming.

Note: Pair your rules with predictable consequences.

To help a child further develop executive functioning skills, consider how to streamline your enforcement of these rules. Enforcement should occur promptly. Consequences should closely connect to the infractions. The goal is to teach your child that they are responsible for their actions and that actions have consequences, so those close connections are vital.

Supporting Attachment with Your Child Who Has Executive Function Delays

Many of our adoptive, foster, or kinship parenting skills are rooted in building secure attachments with our kids. When our kids know that they can trust us to lead them well, we can teach them how to cope with these challenges and set them on a secure path to thriving. Whether our child's struggle with executive function started with trauma, neurodivergence, or prenatal exposure, we must pave that path to healing with trust and safety.

[Articles](#)[Find a Professional](#)[Partners](#)

Easing the Transition to a New School Year for Adopted, Foster, & Kinship Kids

Adopted, foster and kinship kids often struggle with new experiences and relationships. Truthfully, transitions and change are scary to most folks, but our kids who have been exposed to trauma, abuse, or neglect have [heightened sensitivities to change](#). The impacts of their trauma require predictability, connection, and routine to settle those fears and navigate life. How can we ease the transition to a new school year for our kids?



12 Tips for Easing the Transition to a New School Year

1. It all feels new.

Even if your child has been in the same building for several years, remember that this new school year will still be new. Carve out some emotional space as summer winds down, so they can feel safe to express the stress about all the new things they are anticipating.

2. New = Unsafe.

For our kids who have histories of trauma, we must set an expectation for ourselves that new = unsafe. It doesn't matter to our child's hypervigilant brains that the teacher had his sibling two years ago. The start of a school year means that everything is new to our kids – the teacher, paths through the building, classrooms, the blend of peers, the schedule, and so on.



3. Shift Your Schedule.

Ease your child's transition from summer break brain to school year brain by shifting your schedule before the first day. Shift it gradually by changing the bedtime and wake-up time over several weeks, especially if you have late sleepers who have been enjoying the lazy, hazy days of summer.

4. Make a Practice Run, or Three.

Drive to the school or walk there together a few times before the year

starts. Follow the likely bus route if you know it. Ask your child questions while you are practicing the route that will help her express her anxieties or excitement.

5. Take a Tour.

Call the school and request a tour or walk-through before classes start – especially if it's a new building for your child. It's a great time to talk with the principal or other support staff that are there, without the chaos of other students present.

6. Schedule a Meeting.

Request a meeting with the child's team or teacher to do some introductions. Some kids will want to participate and even lead the meeting with a power point about themselves or a hand-written note "All About Me." Others will be reticent to share much at all. Figure out what is in your student's comfort zone and go with it.

Advocating for Your Foster or Kinship Child at School

7. Map it Out.

Download a map of the building for your older kids to get familiar with the routes they need to follow between classes. If you have access to their schedule online, highlight the routes they will need to take from class to class. Ease their minds with reassurances that everyone is late the first few days of school so they should expect that teachers will be helpful about the learning curve.

8. Give Them a Voice.

Host a family meeting to review morning and after-school routines to allow your kids some voice in the matters. Talk about the routines you all followed last year and get their input on what changes might be considered.

9. Set a Predictable Routine.

After the meeting, consider how to practice the routine by easing into the physical practice of how to get up, get ready, and get to her classroom. Whether your child uses an alarm to wake or prefers you wake her, your routines should be repeatable, predictable, and sustainable for you all.

10. Post the Schedules.

[Post visuals of the new routines](#) and allow plenty of time to practice, practice, practice the new or different parts of the schedule. For your pre-readers or kids with prenatal exposure, clipart or photos of your child performing each step of the routine can be extra helpful.



11. Consistency is a Priority

During the back-to-school transition, keep as many things consistent about your daily family life as you can. Don't mess with Taco Tuesday or Friday Family Movies — at least not for the start of the year!

12. Reach Out Proactively.

Proactively connect with the teachers and staff who will be interacting with your student to talk about the issues that might be challenging for your kids, like "All About Me" essays, baby picture assignments, family tree projects, or Punnett squares. Also, consider what activities and

transitions in the classroom could be triggering for your student and discuss them with the teachers or team involved.

Do you have tips to share for easing your child with trauma exposure into a new school year? Let us know about them in the comments!

Resources

Articles

Find a Professional

Partners

Advocating for Your Foster or Kinship Child at School

If you don't have experience with the jargon of educational supports, IEP's and 504's prior yet, advocating for your foster or kinship child in school can feel intimidating. It might sound like a whole new language at first. However, learning how to advocate for your foster or kinship child in school is an extension of the care you've been offering this child already.



Why Do I Need to Advocate for My Foster or Kinship Child In School?

If you are fostering, you undoubtedly learned in your training classes that trauma impacts a child's developing brain. For those who are offering kinship care outside of the foster care system, you might not have had the benefit of those courses. The good news is that it's not too late to learn! CreatingaFamily.org has fantastic resources to help you understand the [effects of early childhood trauma](#), as well as [practical tools to parent children from difficult beginnings](#).

Trauma Impacts Learning

Some studies estimate that as many as 80% of foster children have significant *enough* exposure to trauma that the child's ability to learn is impacted. The many losses in this child's life can also negatively impact the child's brain growth. When we think that the [growing brain develops "from the inside out,"](#) we must remember that a child's social and emotional skills follow that pattern. When a child's brain regularly functions in self-protection or survival mode, it cannot also focus on learning.

This starting point will help prepare you for behaviors that seem younger than your foster or kinship child's chronological age. Maybe you've already observed "acting out" misbehaviors or difficulty with



self-regulation. You may also notice your child lagging in the emotional or social milestones necessary for the classroom.

You Can Be Your Child's Voice

With this information under your belt, advocating for your foster or kinship child in school equips you to be his voice and represent him well on the educational team. Your role as his advocate will help you stay attuned to his needs and track his progress. You will also have the opportunity to educate the educators on this child's ability to find success in school.

What Does My Foster or Kinship Child Need?

First, Safety

The first thing your foster or kinship child needs is to feel safe in your home and your ability to care well for her. When you learn what makes her feel safe, share that with her education team. They can use that information in their classroom. A developing brain that feels safe is much more able to learn! Advocating for your foster or kinship child in school expands the felt-safety that you've created at home into her school environment. It's a practical way to set her – and her teachers – up for success.

Second, You: Prepared

If your foster or kinship child comes to you with supports or services already in place, familiarize yourself with the information in his files. Request the file from your child's caseworker – or his former school. Review the documentation of his needs and educational plan. If your home means a new school setting for your foster or kinship child, your informed advocacy will help him settle more quickly. You will also be helping his new team meet his needs as documented. From this point of preparedness, you and the teachers can also change the interventions to support his learning better.

How Do I Advocate for My Foster/Kinship Child in School?

1. Be the Team Leader

Clear, Frequent Communication.

Advocating for your foster or kinship child in school will require clear, regular communication between all of you. You can establish your role with the team by opening clear communication channels. That could look like an introductory email or a phone call. Some parents prefer to do it in person, so they arrange a tour of the school and an introduction to the team before school starts. At the start of your relationship with the new team, you will likely need more frequent contact. Issues like homework, behaviors in the classroom, family visitations, and things that directly impact the child's school day will need to be tweaked out as you get to know what works for this child.

[This letter to the teacher will be helpful for introductions.](#)

Keep a Paper Trail.

Many experienced foster parents stress the need to communicate primarily by email to establish a "paper trail." Sadly, sometimes accountability and documentation become necessary. [The documentation will come in handy](#) should you need to change his services, request further evaluations, or brainstorm additional supports.

Remember: if the school is unable or unwilling to provide the support your child needs, you can inquire (*again, do it in writing*) about alternative resources to meet the needs you are observing. [Keep your](#)



[caseworker in the loop](#) no matter what!

You are Your Foster/Kinship Child's Person.

Remember that many schools don't have frequent experience with foster or kinship families. They might need you to walk them through the ways you want to be involved. Conversations that establish you as the child's point person should include the foster care caseworkers or CASA advocates if your child has one. Kinship caregivers who are not under the umbrella of the foster system should have legal documentation of guardianship in place.

2. Be Involved

Your foster or kinship child will benefit from the "whole" school experience, including extra-curricular activities and community-building events. Sign her up for soccer. Go to the school's Fall Fest. Volunteer in the classroom. If you have time before the school year starts, make play dates with other kids who attend the same school. It will be comforting to have familiar faces on her first day.

Yes, this will mean some extra time investments for you and your family. However, it's vital to a well-rounded educational experience. It also goes a long way to building your foster/kinship child's social and emotional skills in a fun, non-threatening setting. The added benefit is that many of these events offer your whole family some time to [play together!](#)

3. Be Open

You should be able to expect your foster or kinship child's educational team to be willing to learn from you about what works well for the child. However, it will be beneficial for your child if you also are ready to learn from the educators. This is especially true if this is your first go-round in the world of IEPs, 504s, and support services.

When presented with suggestions for curriculum modifications, take time to read up on their recommendations. Talk with the team about how they plan to implement the changes – ask for examples to help you understand. If they ask you to consider evaluations for possible learning challenges, request reputable resources to educate yourself for the follow-up conversation. Brainstorm with his teachers for classroom management alternatives and embrace the information shared.

Build A Feeling of Safety At Home And In School

It might be challenging to know what support your foster or kinship child needs if he comes to you without an educational plan. It can also be challenging to plan educational interventions when tense relationships exist between you and the child's birth family. If welcoming this child happens on very short notice, you might also feel like you are playing catch up.

Give yourself grace – it's an excellent example to the kids about handling challenging circumstances. Remember that you can only do your best when you face these obstacles. Familiarize yourself with the school district's Special Education structure. Read up on the impacts of trauma on learning. Call the school the child will attend and ask about the enrollment process. And remember to ask for his educational files when or if you get contacted for placement plans.

When you commit to these 3 Be's to support this foster or kinship child in school, you increase felt safety and set your foster or kinship child up to succeed in your home and school.

We'd love to hear from you! Are you an experienced foster or kinship care provider? What have you learned about advocating at school that will benefit your fellow readers? Share it in the comments!



A Letter to My Adopted Child's Teacher

Adopted parents may feel uncertain about the messages kids receive in school about their family, their unique story, or the child's individual needs or experiences. If you are like many adoptive parents in our community, you might find it helpful to start the school year with a letter to your adopted child's teacher.



Parenting an adopted child quite often requires that we dig into a different level of advocacy than that in which we see our peers engaging. In many circles, how we've built our family is not typical and thus not always well-understood, even by the educational professionals in our kids' lives.

Why Write a Letter to My Adopted Child's Teacher?

1. It Creates a Partnership.

It's not uncommon for teachers to request an "introduction letter" from parents within the first few weeks of school. This introduction gives a peek into your child's personality, strengths, and weaknesses from a parent's perspective. It's a tool many teachers and parents use to create a partnership between home and school. This year, more than any other time perhaps, that bridge will be a necessity. The pandemic has created many additional concerns about mental and emotional health, both at home and school — regardless of how your district is starting the academic year.

2. You can Set a Positive Foundation.

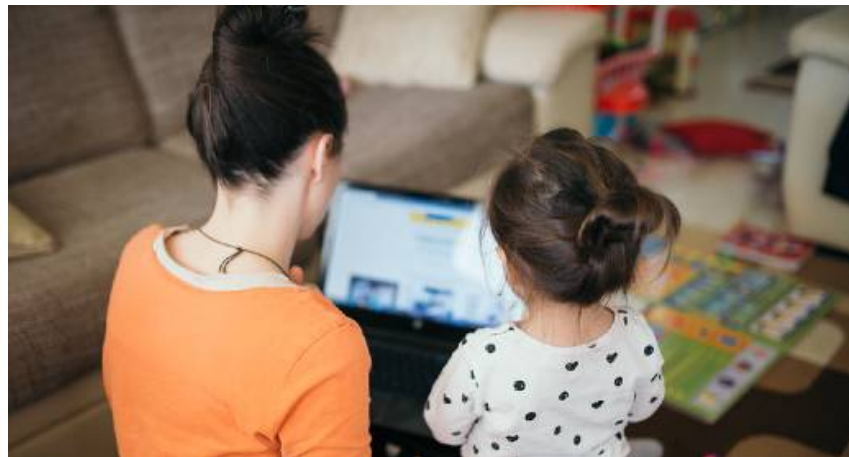
Another reason to write a letter to your child's teacher is to set the stage early for positive, normalized language and interactions around the additional issues that adoption brings to your child's educational experience. Many of us know that kids who have experienced trauma, abuse, or neglect often learn differently than their peers.

3. You can Be a Resource.

Finally, we adoptive parents understand that there are many tools and resources available to parents and educators to gain a trauma-informed approach to parenting and educating. Writing a letter to your adopted child's teacher can set you up as a resource for your child's teaching team. You can benefit your child's experience and expand the school's ability to serve the needs of the many other children in the building who are coming from complicated, hard starts to their lives.

What Should the Letter to My Child's Teacher Say?

We've created a template for parents to personalize for their child's unique set of circumstances. The key elements that we've included are the basics that will help the teacher understand the positive culture you have crafted around the formation of your family and how you are teaching your child to process his adoption story.



This template is written to elementary-level teachers. Feel free to add and tweak it to suit your child's age and voice about his story. Take into consideration the relationship you may already have with the teacher or your understanding of the culture in your child's school.

For example, the motto in my children's elementary school is that we are a "caring community." When I craft a yearly letter to my children's teachers, I use that language and talk about how we've created expressions of care and community at home and how my child will carry that into her interactions at school.

The Template for A Letter to My Adopted Child's Teacher

Dear Teacher,

Johnny is excited about this school year, and so are we. I wanted to share some information about our son that will help you get to know him.

Johnny was adopted at (age), and we have (limited information on his early life,

are in an open adoption with his birth family, etc.).

You are in a significant position to send a message about adoption to the other children in this class.

Our hope is that students will receive a positive message about the many ways that families are formed. Some children are born to their parents, and sometimes children are adopted by their parents. Regardless of how families come about, they are all “normal,” and all are good.

I thought it might make your job easier if I shared some appropriate responses to common questions children may ask about adoption. These are questions that our child has already heard, and we practice answers together that feel most comfortable to Johnny.

- **Where are Johnny’s real parents?**

Johnny has two sets of real parents: the parents who gave birth to him and the parents who will raise him and be his mom and dad forever. That’s Mrs. and Mr. Smith, whom you know.

- **Why didn’t Johnny’s birth parents keep him?**

Johnny’s birth parents were unable to parent him (raise him, be his parents, whichever fits your classroom) when he was born.

- **Why doesn’t Johnny look like his mommy?**

Children usually look like the parents that gave birth to them, don’t they? Johnny probably looks like his birth parents.

[Some school assignments](#) may be hard for us. I’m not asking that you change the task, but I would appreciate an advanced warning and some flexibility to adapt the assignment to fit our family’s circumstances. Some examples of school assignments that might be challenging for Johnny would include:

- creating a family tree

- bringing in baby pictures
- sharing birth or young infancy stories
- discussions of inherited traits

I would welcome an opportunity to meet with you after you have had a chance to get to know my wonderful boy. Can we schedule a time to talk in about three weeks? I would also love to read some books about adoption to the class (or provide some books about adoption for your personal use or for the classroom library). Our family has quite a collection that we read together. We find books to be excellent conversation starters to help increase Johnny's understanding of his own story.

We are looking forward to working with you to make this a great year for Johnny. Thank you so much for being on our team.

Best wishes,

Johnny's Loving Parents

[Is the pandemic still impacting your child's school experience?](#)

What Else Should Be In The Letter?

Depending on your child's unique life experiences, [it might be helpful to present additional information](#) upfront. If putting it down in a letter doesn't feel right, consider offering it to the teacher at your first in-person meeting. Adapt the following information to fit your child, but always start with the positive.

For example, if your child struggles with stress and anxiety, you could add something like this:

Johnny is enthusiastic about everything and loves school. He tries hard to please – especially the adults in his life.

- Due to his early life experiences or _____, he carries around a lot of stress. When

his stress levels escalate, you may see him _____. Johnny usually responds well when you _____.

- Johnny struggles to remember boundaries, and you may see him _____. He usually responds well when you _____.
- He has some developmental gaps (or delays) that make learning hard.
- English was not his first language, and that makes language arts harder for him.
- Johnny does not have an IEP. We have found that the following techniques work well to help him learn: _____.
- We use the following resources to be of excellent support for understanding his stress (developmental gaps, etc.). I'm happy to share my copy with you (or send the link, etc.).

Keep the Lines of Communication Open

Once you've crafted your letter and set a meeting, be consistent in communicating with the teacher. Offer yourself as a resource if she is looking for additional opportunities to learn about adoption. If the teacher is open to it, suggest podcasts or parent training that addresses the educational issues adopted children commonly face. Share what you are continuing to learn about trauma-informed practices and education.

Be your child's biggest cheerleader to the teacher. Make sure that the teacher also knows you will support and encourage her as she grows a relationship with your child.

Writing a letter to your adopted child's teacher will require an additional layer of intentionality on your shoulders. It's worth it as a way to advocate for your child. Your efforts will speak volumes about your belief in and commitment to your child's preciousness — to the teacher and your child.

Originally posted in 2014; Updated in 2020

Image Credit: [Ryan DugLash](#); [Nenad Stojkovic](#)

Categories: [Adoption](#) [Adoption Blog](#) [Blog](#)

Adoption Language

(As provided in the 2013 Adoption Learning Partners' webinar, School's in Session!)

Often Heard	Preferred
Real mom	Birth mom
Natural mom	Tummy mommy
Real father	Biological father
Natural father	First father
Give up a child	Plan an adoption
Discarded	Chose adoption
Illegitimate child	Child of unmarried parents
Adopted child	Our child by adoption
Foster (or state) kid	Foster mom of this child
A mistake	Unplanned pregnancy
Unwanted child	Waiting child
Hard-to-place child	Child with special needs
Foreign child	Internationally adopted child
Adopted child (for teens or adults)	Adopted person
"You must be such wonderful people"	"Congratulations on becoming parents"
"Someday she'll be so grateful"	"Children are a blessing"
"She's so lucky."	"Congratulations on your family"

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The Dreaded Family Tree Assignment in Adoption



The *Dreaded Family Tree Assignment* stirs anxiety in the hearts of many adoptive and foster families. We worry that our kids will feel different, or that they will feel pressured to overshare. And our hearts really break if our beautiful child does not have some of the information that these assignments require.

While many schools are catching on quickly to the perils of assigning a project that defines “family” or digs into a child’s history, many families still face difficulty when their child is asked to bring in a baby picture or write family names and relationships on a hand-drawn oak tree. Any non-traditional family is subject to the triggers, but certainly, our kids who have come to us through adoption or foster care can really struggle with these assignments.

Variations of The Dreaded Family Tree Assignment

You've no doubt already seen some variations of the assignments that focus on who is family. With six kids in the public schools continuously since 1999, I sure have seen my share! In pre-school and the early elementary years, we saw a few different "All About Me" posters and "Me in a Bag," in which kids are asked to put 5 things in a bag as conversation starters for class introductions.

To teach concepts of time, we've also had many variations of timelines like, "My Ten Point Timeline" or "Past Me, Present Me, Future Me." Some schools use these projects as an opportunity to also practice speaking in front of peers, which can add many extra triggers for kids who dislike being in the spotlight or who feel unready to share their stories.

Certainly, these earliest versions of the project can be pretty benign and are much easier for a student (with Mom or Dad's help?) to tweak for his own developing understanding of his story and his family's comfort levels regarding privacy. But we all know that it doesn't stay this easy (*not much about parenting does, does it?*), hence the dread that so many adoptive and foster parents feel at the start of a new school year.



The Social Media Effect

You don't have to scroll far in an adoption or foster online community this time of year to find posts exclaiming over the very fact that such projects still exist. Or rants about the inflexibility or insensitivity of teachers who won't modify such an assignment. Or worse, parents share their child's anguish at not only having to share it in front of the classroom but also of the pain that "not knowing" some of this information that the child (and thus the parent) feels. These sorts of triggers are hard for our kids and therefore hard for us. Grief and loss are hard topics for anyone. To think about our child addressing those feelings in front of a whole classroom of peers is absolutely untenable for many of us.

In recent years, and maybe thanks to social media's influence, there does seem to be a progressive movement by educators to avoid the dread in The Dreaded Family Tree Assignment. More teachers are pre-emptively researching or embracing educational options and more personalized parameters for the project. Educators do recognize that the definition of "family" is changing rapidly in our culture and that families built by adoption or by foster care often need an expanded ability to choose while still learning curriculum objectives.

You Are Not Alone

Whether you are part of a school that is already offering plenty of flexibility in these types of assignments or you are pioneering the way by advocating with and for your kid to change the face of these projects, we want you to know that you are not alone in your dread. We want to share the resources we've found to creatively modify assignments, talk with your kids to help them feel most supported, and even learn what is out there to help you educate the educators.

Creative Modifications

This website is full of [templates for "non-traditional families"](#) and they include a wide array of step-family dynamics, adoptive family trees, and trees for families with two mommies or two daddies. There are even templates for families built by egg donors and surrogacy. Given the many different shapes that families can take, you are sure to find something that you and your child can work with and maybe even that a teacher can agree upon.

When Laura contacted her son's middle school teacher, she took the time to communicate that individual modification of the assignment was not actually the goal:

The answer is to design assignments like this in flexible ways FROM THE BEGINNING so every child feels included and capable of completing the work without feeling embarrassed or afraid of being different.

Ask Your Child About The Dreaded Family

Tree Assignment

If you take some time to sit down with your student and get a read on how this project makes her feel, you can then work with her to find one or more modifications that will suit her. Each child is unique and the conversation can be a really informative peek into your child's mind as she processes the options that feel most comfortable to her.

Karen handled The Dreaded Family Tree Assignment in a calm and non-reactive manner, letting her son lead the way in how to approach the conversation.

I think the best thing to do is not make a big deal about it. I ask my son how he would like to modify the project (if needed) and I email the teacher and let him/her know. I have never had any issue. This approach seems to give my son more confidence that his unique background is something to celebrate and not dread these assignments but take them as an opportunity to be creative.

Valarie uses the conversations to teach a bigger life lesson. They decided together what the project must look like, informed the teacher, and completed the assignment as they had agreed to do between them. This certainly puts the adoptee in the driver's seat and prioritizes control over their own story.

What my kids learned it that everybody has a story. My daughter says that's the most important lesson I've taught her. They never need feel ashamed of their story nor compelled to share it but knowing that everyone has a story they are great compassionate listeners.

Don't Ask Permission.

Some parents don't contact the teacher for permission or even inform the teacher of changes being made. They focus on how to meet the parameters of the assignment without calling down any unwanted attention over the issues.

If this is how your family chooses to handle The Dreaded Family Tree Assignment, be on the lookout for other opportunities to teach your child the skills of self-

advocacy and exercising their voice. This skill is an important one for kids to practice, even if it's in the safety of home to start.

There are also families who outright choose not to participate in the project, even with modifications because their family culture prioritizes the child's right to privacy. Holly said it like this:



We don't participate (daughter's choice) – it's her journey and story to share with who she feels comfortable. Adoptee voice is first for us – her voice says no, so I honor it."

Find Your Path, But Be Flexible

As one mom said, "My 15-year-old daughter has done these projects for years, but only lately have they hit her hard." It's important to recognize that as our children grow in their understanding of their story and of the world in which they live, their feelings about what to share, how to share it, and IF EVEN to share it will also grow and change.

What works now for my little 1st grader will have to be modified as she gets a few more of these projects under her belt. She's a raging extrovert and a very physical, relational learner. Teaching her how to judiciously choose what she can "hold back" to protect and hold sacred will very likely be my task.

I have to take a very different approach with my older daughter. She needs to know the requirements of the project and what she is "allowed" or "not allowed" to share. Coaching her is more about assuring her that it's okay to treat the requirements of the project as guidelines rather than hard and fast rules. That sharing more won't earn her more favor or a better grade. And that the grade is not the goal.

Increasing Complexity Can Mean Increasing Triggers

Of course, as the lesson objectives get more complicated and more biology-focused, such as the study of genetic traits, Punnett Squares, or hereditary diseases, so do the triggers. Delving deeply into the study of blood typing, congenital birth defects, and eye color can trigger anger, anxiety, feelings of abandonment, and more.

At this level of education, it's even more important that our kids recognize their feelings and talk through them. If you can have a conversation with your student, you can often coach them on how to talk with the teachers. A saving grace of technology and social media is that they may be better tools for our kids to have this conversation with their teachers if talking one-on-one with the teacher feels intimidating.

Again, as the complexity of the projects increases, you and your child will have to talk about how they prefer to handle it and what their options for self-advocacy could be. There are many options with these more complex assignments as well. One mom advocated for her child to be able to study the genetic lineage of a person of the student's choosing in deference to her child's discomfort with sharing limited personal details. Other moms have done something similar by studying one famous person in the context of complex historical timelines.

You Don't Have to Dread The Family Tree Assignment

There is a myriad of ways to handle the hard conversations surrounding family-history-focused assignments. It doesn't have to be rife with such dread and anxiety for us parents. With a little preparation, a little advice from parents who have been through it already, and some creative problem-solving skills between you and your student, you can help your child claim ownership and voice in whatever way feels comfortable to her.

INFORMATION PACKET QUESTIONNAIRE

Adoption at School

1.5 Credits

NAME: _____ PHONE NO.: _____

Only one person per questionnaire. Feel free to make additional copies if needed.

ADDRESS: _____
Street or Post Office City/State Zip

EMAIL: _____

YES! I would like to receive ACRF email. (*Includes Training Tracks Newsletter, training reminders and community events or training of interest for Resource Families*)

Are you a foster parent? YES NO If YES, what is your Foster Home License #: _____

If NO, please check one: Pending Foster Parent OCS Birth Parent Adoptive Parent

Residential Treatment Facility (License #: _____) Agency: _____

Other (*please specify*): _____

Please read the information packet. Then fill out this questionnaire and RETURN TO: ACRF, 3429 Airport Way, Suite 202A, Fairbanks, AK 99709. Or email to acrf@nwresource.org or fax it to: 907-290-8765, you will be credited with 1.0 credit for completion of this questionnaire.

1. This packet presents concepts and ideas that may be useful to you as you consider adoption. Please list two (2) specific ideas or concepts which you learned or reaffirmed from reading this packet. Write a short sentence or two describing how you can use them in your family.

a)

b)

Please see reverse side

INFORMATION PACKET QUESTIONNAIRE

2. List each title in this packet. In a few sentences for each article, summarize the main purpose or key points for each article in this packet.

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