

Success In School For Children and Youth In Care

Tips For Caregivers

There are many opportunities for caregivers, such as foster parents, group home staff, and extended family, to help children and youth in care be successful in school and in life. Caregivers help young people in care discover their strengths and abilities and increase their confidence in decision-making. Caregivers celebrate successes with young people in care, and help them learn how to overcome challenges and adversity.

Caregivers are often in a better position than others to identify the strengths and needs of the children and youth in their care. Caregivers are a critical voice in advocating for the young person and working with the school system to meet the educational needs of those in their care. By assisting the child or youth to express wishes and set goals in and out of schools, caregivers help young people in care to build life skills.



Youth in Care Say...

■ *“There is nothing someone in care wants more than to feel ‘normal.’ I want to make mistakes and know that I will still be able to stay with you and that you will help me learn how to deal with things in a different way. It’s a lot of pressure for any youth to be ‘perfect,’ especially if that someone is already dealing with other issues in his or her life.”*

■ *“Please remember that I am not the ‘bad guy’ in most cases, but you can’t put parents in foster care, now can you? I sometimes feel like I am stuck paying for my parent’s mistakes. I am away from my friends and my home, and living with this big fat ‘damaged’ stamp on my forehead.”*

■ *“I know it doesn’t make sense that I still want to talk to or visit my parents, even after what happened, but they are my parents, and I need to have a sense that the people who are supposed to love me unconditionally really do love me. So what if I have to make it up in my head? For many of us, love is a need that often comes before shelter or food or clothing. You might not understand, but I need you to stand back and just be there when my world of make-believe shatters.”*

■ *“A lot of what I am feeling is fear – fear of what’s going to happen or not going to happen, not knowing about something, getting attached, making mistakes, my 18th birthday – the list goes on. Most of the time though, I don’t really know what I’m afraid of, so I act it out ... if you could sit down with me and talk it out, it would really help me a lot.”*



How Can I Support Educational Success for Young People in Care?

AT HOME :

■ Build A Relationship Based On Trust.

Because many children and youth in care have experienced some level of trauma in being removed from their home, it is critical for caregivers to show the young person that they are important, cared for and valued, even when they may test the boundaries.

■ Talk to and listen to the young people.

Communication with young people is very important. Talk with the young person in your care about school, friends, activities, teachers and assignments. Be sure to have a two-way conversation, not a one-way lecture. Be a good listener and let your young person have the stage. Tell them truthfully and confidently what you think and why you think this way. If you're not sure about some issues, it's okay to tell them so.

■ Teach your foster children life skills as you would your own children.

As one teen says, "For the five days or five years that I am with you, I need you to help me be normal. Give me chores and teach me. If I am old enough, let me cook sometimes, make me file my taxes, and talk to me about RRSPs and credit cards."

■ Provide a quiet study area.

Equip a designated study area of your home with items such as paper, markers, a ruler, pencils and a dictionary. Keep the area as free from distractions as possible.

■ Help with homework.

Show enthusiasm about school and homework. When the caregiver takes the time and effort to help a young person with homework, it sends the message that school is important and that you care about their success at school. Talk with the school about the homework needs for the young person. Share your observations with appropriate teachers about how the young person is doing with his or her school work.

■ Help your young person get organized.

Help the young person break down assignments into smaller, more manageable parts. Teach and help them to set out needed items (clothes, homework, permission slips, etc.) the night before to avoid last-minute rushing around in the morning.

■ Play games and engage in activities together.

Many young people love to play age-appropriate games that also develop and support different aspects of growth and learning. Take them places and participate in different activities together such as sports or cultural events. These support well-rounded development and educational achievement. Having fun together promotes a sense of family togetherness and belonging, and shares your enthusiasm about the importance and enjoyment of learning.

IN SCHOOL :

■ Recognize that the young person in your care needs extra love, care and respect.

The youth in your care has extra needs because of their past experiences and circumstances. Work with the school to help the staff recognize, empathize and accommodate for these needs, which are important to success in school.

■ Become active members of the core team.

Caregivers are automatically a part of the core team that also may include a school point person, the classroom teacher, the caseworker, the student and any other guardian of the student. Make sure that you include yourself in the decision-making process, and keep an open mind. The caregiver has a unique perspective from the amount of time spent with the young person. Share this with the core team.

■ Advocate for the young person to help ensure their success in school.

Share what you know about what works to support the young person's success. Help school staff understand behaviours and let them know what has been successful at home, as well as what has not worked. Help the student and the school staff to know that some behaviour is a reaction to circumstances rather than a symptom of who the student is.

IN THE COMMUNITY :

■ Help school staff understand that the young people in your care may be worried, frightened or miss their parents.

Despite the difficult situations that young people in care may have experienced within their family, most love and care for their families. They may have ongoing concerns which interfere with concentration, learning, socialization and behaviour.

■ Talk with the school staff on an ongoing basis.

Decide on a communication plan with the school and the core team that will work for everyone. To better understand the student, ask staff questions related to curriculum, assessments, social involvement, extra-curricular activities and other aspects of school life that may arise.

■ Support involvement in extra-curricular activities.

Extra-curricular interests such as sports, drama, clubs and volunteering, all contribute to building positive relationships and self esteem. Encourage and assist the young people in your care to participate in activities they enjoy.

■ Spend quality time with your foster child.

Caregivers step into the role of parents for the foster child. Family activities such as going to the movies or taking part in outdoor activities send important messages to young people that they are valued members of the family and community.

■ Support your foster child's attempts to make and keep positive friendships.

Friends, peers and relationships with others are important to young people. Having and maintaining friendships helps to normalize the difficult situation of being in foster care.

■ Assist foster children with making appropriate and discrete self-disclosures.

Most young people in care have experienced abuse or neglect. Coach the young person on appropriate and safe disclosure of information about themselves. Assist the young person with identifying what they should tell their friends or others about their background or experiences. Ask the caseworker or therapist for support in this area.

■ Educate yourself about the various disabilities young people in care may have.

Be prepared to advocate on behalf of the young person and teach others about what does and does not work. However, be cautious about making assumptions of a diagnosis of a young person in care. For example, it may be inappropriate to diagnose for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, Organic Brain Dysfunction, Post Traumatic Stress disorder or attachment issues; instead, document and share your concerns with the young person's caseworker or doctor.

A Message from Caseworkers to Caregivers

You are an important part of the team because you provide hands-on parenting, warmth, guidance and supervision. Because you are there every day, you are the team member who is most perceptive to the needs of the young person.

When working with me, please understand that at times I have to make difficult decisions based on the safety of the young person, while considering available resources and legal and policy requirements. While I try to find the least disruptive option, sometimes I am required to move the young person to a new placement, a new school or return them to their biological home.

As the caseworker, I play a pivotal role in supporting a young person in care with school success and in working with the core team. I have information about the young person, general information about the needs of children and youth in care. I have legal authority to make important decisions on behalf of the child or youth in care.

Please remember that I am often out of the office responding to emergent situations or meeting with children, youth and families. It is helpful when you leave messages or e-mail me. Please give me as much notice and information as possible about what you and the young person need, so that I can respond within the time required. If I cannot be reached and there is an emergent need, please press zero and ask for a back-up worker or supervisor. In an after-hours emergency you may need to call the **Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-387-5437**.

I understand that educators and caregivers play a critical role in helping to keep young people in care safe and supported for success. Thanks for all you do.

A Message from Educators to Caregivers

You are an important part of the core team because you care for the young person on a daily basis. When working with me, please understand that I may make suggestions about how you can support the student's education at home. Please emphasize the importance of school to the young people in your care, and stay involved to demonstrate your commitment to their schooling. By letting your young person know how important their attendance, behaviour and achievement are, you are helping me to help them. Please attend school functions, participate in parent meetings, and encourage and support other school activities.

Together I know we can make a difference for your child and my student.