Advocating for Your Child in the School System

Starting in a new school can be stressful for both the child and the parent. Between the forms, medical records, IEPs, parent-teacher conferences, and so on, there is a lot going on. As the child's parent you will become their best advocate. Your child will be looking to you to make sure their needs are met not only at home, but also in the school system. It is so easy for them to get lost, so you will need to be on top of your game and make sure your child's academic needs are being met.

It cannot be stressed enough that YOU are your child's best advocate in the school system. Don't count on a child's caseworker or school officials to tell you what your child needs. It will be your job to educate your child's teacher on their needs and how they can be met.

Easing the Transition Back into School

The following are some ways you can help make the transition back into school easier on both you and your child:

Create a contact card
- Create a small card for your child to carry in his/her backpack with your contact information on it until he/she is able to memorize it. You may want to include your phone number, a neighbor's or relative's

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Resources for Teachers

The following are some resources you may provide your child's teacher with. You may also find it helpful to review them yourself:

IFAPA - Adoption Basics for Educators: How Adoption Impacts Children & How Educators Can Help

Center for Family Development - An Overview of Reactive Attachment Disorder for Teachers

Adoptive Families -

phone number in case of emergency, your child's bus number, etc. Make a few copies and laminate them.

Obtain medical records
- Ask your child's caseworker and/or former foster parent for your child's latest medical records. Make sure your child is up to date on his/her vaccines, physical, immunizations, and any other medical procedures the school may require.

Contact information
- Make sure you provide the contact information for previous schools your child attended. Also, make sure your school has the name(s) and number(s) of approved family members or friends who are allowed to pick your child up at school in case of an emergency.

Education plans and IEPs
- Many children in foster care have an education plan or IEP. Talk with your child's caseworker about any IEPs that may have been in place at a previous school, and find out what you will need to do to make sure your child is receiving the services he/she needs at this new school. Confirm with the school registrar and counselor that they have everything in place to help your child succeed. If you are given your child's teacher's information in advance, talk with them as well about your child's educational, behavioral and emotional needs.

For more information on IEPs, click here.

For a checklist to keep track of your child's school performances to bring to meetings with teachers, counselors and other educational professionals, take the National Center for Learning Disabilities' survey here.

Take a practice tour
- Practice a school day routine with your child. Get up at a time he/she would on a regular school day, go through the morning routine, show them where they will catch the bus, and if possible, take a tour of their

Scroll down to the section How to Explain Adoption to Teachers and Classmates for additional resources and articles.

Resources for Parents

You may find the following additional resources helpful:

NCLD - Back-to-School for Parents of Students with LD

Adoptive Families - Adoption and School

Adopting.com - Telling the Teachers: Adoption and School

LocalSchoolDirectory.com - The Impact on Adopted Children at School

NACAC - School and Adoption: Navigating IEPs, IDEA, and Special Services

College Resources

Just-in-Time Training by QPI Florida - College Admissions: What Foster Parents and Youth Must Know

> *A 90-minute webinar on the college admissions process for parents and students.*

NACAC - How to Cover College Expenses for Your Adopted Child

New York Times - Out of Foster Care, Into College

school. Point out where their classrooms are, and where their locker is. Show them where they will eat lunch, and where the bus will pick them back up after school. Talk with your child about family members or close friends who are approve to pick them up in an emergency, and about never talking to strangers.

Answering Tough Questions

Your child's peers will probably ask him/her questions about adoption, some of which may be intrusive or ones your child is not comfortable answering. The more prepared your child, the more comfortable they will be establishing boundaries with their friends and peers surrounding the details of their adoption. Some common questions you can practice with your child are:

- "Why were you in foster care?" - For a question like this, your child can choose to walk away, say its private information, or say they simply needed a safe place to live.
- "Do you know your real mom?/Why didn't your mom want you?" - Again, your child may choose not to answer by walking away. Or, they may say that they have a family who loves them and that's all that matters, or that they don't want to talk about it.
- "Why don't you look like the rest of your family?" - Your child can answer this question by saying not all families look the same, and the only thing that matters is you love each other.

The best way to answer questions is by keeping the answers simple. This will help prevent more questions and awkward situations for your child.

For more common questions and answers,

click here.

Handling Family-Oriented Assignments

It is inevitable during some point of your child's academic career that there will be an assignment surrounding their family, genetics, heritage, etc. which may bring about some uncomfortable situations and questions for your child. This is why it is so important that you talk with your child's teacher prior to them joining the school, and make them aware of your child's adoption. Ask if he/she can come up with alternative assignments for your child. *Adoptive Families* magazine has a list of common "tricky" assignments children face in school, how to handle them, and alternatives for teachers. You may view the list here.

The *Adoption Advocate* also has suggestions for handling those assignments, and provides alternative sheets for your child to use in their publication Back to School: A Guide to Making Schools and School Assignments More Adoption-Friendly.

Working with Teachers

The relationship you and your child build with his/her teacher is very important. Since they will be with them more than you during the week, the relationship your child has with their teacher will play a critical role in their growth, development and healing. The following are some suggestions for ways to develop a relationship with your child's teacher(s):

Meet before the school year starts
- If possible, set up a meeting with your child's teacher before the school year begins. This will give you some one-on-one

time to explain your child's situation, behaviors, and needs. Share information about your child that his/her teacher may not get from interacting with him/her in the classroom, such as their hobbies, favorite books, movies, etc. Make sure to reiterate all the positives about your child, so the teacher is not overwhelmed with emotional and behavioral diagnoses. Exchange email addresses and ask to be updated at least once a month about your child's progress. Check in every so often if you have not received a report, or to follow up on any incidents.

Maintain your relationship during the year
- There are many ways to be involved at your child's school, which will give you the opportunity to advocate for your child on a more regular basis. Offer to chaperone class trips, or volunteer in the classroom. Attend open-house nights, parent-teacher meetings, and other school-sponsored events where you will have an opportunity to meet with your child's teacher face-to-face. Share any information your child tells you about their likes and dislikes at school with his/her teacher.

Share your appreciation
- Everyone likes to be recognized for the work they do, especially if they go above and beyond the requirements. Teachers are no different. If your child's teacher does an exceptional job at working with you and your child, let the school principal, vice principal, and superintendent know.

For more suggestions on how to work with your child's teacher, visit the National Center for Learning Disabilities' article Tips to Build a Good Relationship with Your Child's Teacher.