

SELF-STUDY COURSE

Education and Youth in Foster Care

March 2009

3.0 Training Hours

This self-study course is based on the Training Curriculum Pride: Working Together to Improve Educational Outcome for Youth in Foster Care developed by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and the Child Welfare League of America, with additional information from the following sources:

Credits:

Same Homework-New Plan (2005) Child & Family Press, Washington DC. Parent Education Involvement and Support, Education Services; 2002; Casey Family Programs.

Working with Schools (2007) Foster Parent College DVD From Northwest Media, Inc.

Educational Advocacy Curriculum National Foster Parent Association
<http://www.nfpainc.org/> As Retrieved from
<http://www.nfpainc.org/content/?page=EDUCATIONALADVOCACY>

Casey Family Programs Northwest Alumni Study (2005) As Retrieved from
http://www.casey.org/NR/rdonlyres/4E1E7C77-7624-4260-A253-892C5A6CB9E1/123/nw_alumni_study_sum_apr2005.pdf

Parent Education Involvement and Support (2002) Education Services; Casey Family Programs.

Helping Kids Succeed in School (2008) Video from Boys Town Press, Boys Town, Nebraska

Alaska State Special Education Handbook (9/2007) State of Alaska Department of Education and Early Development as retrieved from
<http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/SPED/Handbook.html>

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RESOURCE PARENT COMPETENCIES

Education and Youth in Foster Care Self Study Course (3.0 Hours)

This self-study module addresses the following competencies.

The resource parent:

- Understands the need for education advocacy
- Knows the types of education advocates and the roles that they can fulfill in meeting the needs of youth in family foster care.
- Can work directly with school personnel and related community providers to meet the educational needs of youth in family foster care.
- Understands the basics of the special education process including what is meant by IEPs, 504 Plans, evaluations and surrogate parents.



Education and Youth in Foster Care

Part One: *Why Is Knowing How to Work With Schools Important?*

“As a foster parent caring for children in that are in the school system, you may encounter difficulties when working with your child’s school. It is important to remember that school issues are important not only in day-to-day life, but also in the eventual outcomes for foster children in their lives.”

--Lylly, foster parent, from *Working with Schools*, produced by Foster Parent College

The federal government has recognized that the education needs of youth in care should be a priority for the child welfare system. The federal government has adopted **The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA)** which requires states to undergo Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSRs). These reviews examine seven general outcomes related to children’s safety, permanency and well being to determine a state’s overall performance in child protection cases. One of the well being outcome is whether children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs. The state risks losing federal dollars if they are not achieving these outcomes, which include the educational needs of youth. Successful education advocacy can result in a decrease in stressors for the caregiver, youth, parent and worker that are involved in the case.

Why is There is a Need for Education Advocacy?

It is a commonly shared belief that a good education is important to every youth’s transition from childhood to adulthood. This is especially true for youth who have spent a great deal of time in the foster care system. It is essential that we improve the educational outcomes for youth in care. The link between foster care and low academic performance has been documented nationwide.

- Studies that examined the educational progress of children and youth in care showed that many of these children and youth repeated a grade and were more than one grade level delayed.
- Youth in care generally have lower scores on standardized tests.
- Youth in care have higher absentee and tardy rates and are twice as likely as the rest of the population to drop out before finishing high school.
- Youth in care who are, or have been in foster care, are two or three times more likely than other students to have disabilities that affect their ability to learn.
- There is research to show that approximately 30-40% of children and youth in foster care are receiving special education services. 2007 Child Welfare of America

When youth in care do not get their educational needs met, they are at a higher risk for poverty, homelessness, teen pregnancy and juvenile or adult court involvement. Data from Casey Family Program’s Northwest Alumni study in 2005 on educational outcomes for alumni (meaning young adults who were formerly in foster care) reveal that alumni obtain a G.E.D. in lieu of a high school diploma at a much higher rate than the general population. This can lead to less

likelihood of pursuing higher education. Also, many alumni who begin higher education programs do not complete them. This failure to complete higher education program could be due to emotional problems, the need to work, pregnancy or loss of interest.

Adults with a history of foster care are overrepresented in the homeless population. The Casey Family Programs Northwest Alumni Study referenced earlier has shown that former youth in foster care experience homeless at a rate of anywhere from 11 to 22.2%. This is much greater than the general population of 1%.

What are the Education Challenges for Youth? What Supports do They Need to Achieve Educational Success?

Youth in foster care have experienced trauma that impact their self esteem, behavior, attachments and relationships, which affect their ability to learn. When one is expending so much energy worrying about survival and dealing with separation from family, school will often take a back seat to other concerns.

Another challenge is the lack of communication between the school system and the child protection system. Some school officials may not expend much effort on serving youth in care because they assume youth are likely to leave the school anyway.

Youth involved in the foster care system are more likely to be suspended and expelled from school than those in the general population. Many youth in care don't participate in extracurricular activities. However, involvement in extracurricular activities tends to promote self-esteem and could be essential to staying engaged in school. Youth in foster care frequently move foster care placements. Usually, the longer a child is in foster care, the greater the number of placements. A placement disruption often results in emotional, social and behavioral problems, as well as a magnitude of academic challenges and problems. The lack of educational stability is thought to be the single biggest obstacle to educational achievement for youth in foster care. It is often difficult to ensure that complete educational records follow the youth. Not only can it be difficult to facilitate the transfer of the educational records from one school to another, it can also be challenging for the foster parents to gain access to the other educational records. A lack of accurate and complete records creates inadequacy in school programming. Caregivers, workers and teachers need accurate information to help them determine appropriate school programming as the youth moves from one school to another.

Many youth in foster care are never identified as needing special education services. The reverse is also true. Often, referrals are made quickly without assessing the entire picture, and a youth may be inappropriately placed in special education.

Youth in foster care also may become frustrated and leave school before graduating. They may not have families who have been good role models, such as embracing education and valuing the completion of high school. Or, youth may just be too distracted by the instability in their family situation to focus on school.

Recommendations from Members of the National Foster Youth Advisory Council (NFYAC) 2003

A group of foster youth made the following top ten recommendations for improving educational outcomes for themselves and other youth in the foster care system.

1. Connect me with “people resources.” Or help me create a circle of support.
2. Make sure I have a place to call home.
A “home” is much more than just having a place to live. It is knowing that you’re safe, wanted and have a permanent place to be. Somewhere to go home for the holidays and it means you don’t have to take all of your belongings when you leave.
3. Let me be involved in making decisions in my life.
4. Get to know me for who I am, not what I’m in.
The stigma of foster care has negatively impacted the lives of many young people.
5. Focus on what’s right about me, not what’s wrong.
6. Help the adults in my life, especially my teachers and guidance counselors, understand the system with which I’m involved.
7. Connect me with information.
8. Respect my privacy.
NFYAC members highlighted the fact that many young people in foster care do not want information about their family history or living situation shared with their peers or other adults not involved with their educational planning.
9. Teach me to take care of myself.
Young people in foster care need both formal and informal learning opportunities to acquire, practice and utilize basic living skills.
10. Develop federal and state policies that promote our success.



Education and Youth in Foster Care

Part Two: *The Role of the Resource Family*

We know it is important that all children and youth have the support of their families. And we now know that children and youth in foster care have a more difficult time succeeding in education. So what can foster parents do to help improve educational outcomes for youth in foster?

Following are some suggestions taken from the Foster PRIDE Advanced Training “Working together to improve the Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care”

Collaborate with Case Workers

Work with the social worker to ensure that the current school has the youth’s complete school record.

Provide all educational information to others making decisions about the youth when you attend reviews and court hearings.

Collaborate with School Personnel

Build a good working relationship with the teachers and other school personnel.

Educate the teachers on the system and how foster care impacts a youth and his/her education. As a foster parent you are the person most knowledgeable about your foster child. Therefore, you need to participate as a member of the educational team.

Read through the school handbook and go over the rules, disciplinary policy and academic criteria with the youth.

Check in with the teacher on a regular basis.

Follow up on all reported problems.

Make sure the school has the information needed to provide the appropriate education for the student.

Maintain student confidentiality.

Work with the school personnel to determine the appropriate placement. Some student have IEPs, or Individual Education Plans which mean the written plan that will outline and describe the specific special education services that the child will receive. If the

youth has an IEP, it is important that the needed services are being implemented so as not to disturb the support the youth has been receiving.

Determine if a referral is necessary to test for special education and support.

Make reasonable effort to ensure the youth's is regularly attending school, and notify the school attendance office when the youth is absent due to an illness or appointment.

Make a file to keep educational records. Report cards, homework and other information should be kept. It is recommended that foster parents purchase a three-ring binder with pockets and tab dividers for organizing information in a simple, useful way.

Participate in parent/teacher conferences, IEP meetings and other school activities. This shows your child that school is important to you, and allows you to build a positive relationship with the teachers and school staff.

Address school and classroom concerns as soon as they arise. Do not let concerns pile up, and be sure to direct your questions to the appropriate person.

Support the teacher's enforcement of rules and consequences.

Partner with Youth to Achieve Academic Goals and to Plan for the Future

Following are some suggestions taken from the Foster PRIDE Advanced Training "Working together to improve the Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care".

Read to and with your child on a daily basis.

Have a conversation about their school experience, how they are doing on their homework and talk about the school events. Be positive about school.

Provide opportunities to normalize their school experience. Foster children and youth are just that: child and youth. Even though they may come from extraordinary circumstances, they need opportunities to build peer relationships with their classmates.

Help the youth take responsibility for his educational needs.

Foster children/youth may be lacking in academic/school skills. Monitor homework daily so you can have realistic expectations.

Ask the school for special help if needed

Praise and reward children for academic achievement and successes

Expect children to experience some stress about school, tests and friends and help them with that stress.

Teaching the youth self advocacy skills

- Assist the youth to understand their rights and participate in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP)
- Work with the youth to assess postsecondary financial aid options.
- Prepare the youth to make the transition from high school to either college, technical school or employment

When Problems Arise at School

Stay calm and asked for an explanation.

Work with teachers and school staff to find an effective solution.

Discuss the problem and proposed solution with your child.

How to Establish a Working Relationship with the Youth's Teachers



The best way to establish a good relationship with the youth's teacher is to be proactive. Meet with the teachers at the beginning of the school year to introduce yourself. This will let teachers know you are interested in the youth's school success and that you want to be a part of the team. Show respect for the teacher's position and the complexity of the job. If you are able to offer some assistance to the teacher, this is greatly appreciated. Attend the school's open house, but refrain from discussing the youth in your care.

This is a good opportunity for the teachers to let you know how they run their classroom and what they expect from students. Meet privately to inform teachers of any significant learning and or behavioral problems and of past interventions that may have been helpful.

Check in with the teachers on a regular basis. Be sure to attend all parent-teacher conferences and follow up on reported problems. Acknowledge when good things have happened and special efforts have been made. Contact the teacher as soon as problem arises and make it clear that it is important for her to do as well. When contacting the teacher, be sure you have a list of questions and concerns available. If you need to leave a voice mail, be clear as to what you need and be sure to indicate the days and times you will be available for a return phone call. Avoid going over the teacher's head to a supervisor unless the teacher has not responded to you in a timely manner. Ask teachers for feedback on homework completion and progress. Keep the teacher informed of major events in your child's life. Attend and volunteer at school events.

The National PTA has offered these suggestions for volunteering in and out of the School.

- * In the classroom-reading with individual students, working with small groups, presenting a lesson and helping with paperwork.
- * In the office-answering phones, assisting parents, writing grants, creating data bases and spreadsheets, etc.
- * On the bus-as bus monitors or walking children to and from the bus.
- * In and around the school building-repairing playground equipment, landscaping, etc.
- * On the playground-teaching sports and games, assisting with playground supervision.
- * At special events or programs-planning events, directing school plays, etc.
- * In workshops-speaking on a variety of topics related to one's interest (e.g., about foster care at a staff meeting or PTA meeting).
- * At home – preparing mailings, creating learning material.

Supporting Youth's Academic Achievement in School and at Home

*Taken from Sally G. Hoyle. **Same Homework-New Plan** (2005), Child and Family Press, Washington DC*

- Monitor homework daily.
- Serve as role models for a strong work ethic.
- Set high expectations for youth and expect achievement.
- Encourage youth to participate in worthwhile activities.
- Provide a place and set time for homework.
- Use homework help resources.
- Contact teacher about homework problems.



How can I create a learning environment at home for my youth?

1. Provide written materials that have topics of interest for youth.
2. Serve as a role model by reading and writing for fun as well as to get things done.
3. Discuss current events and cultural events.
4. Teach youth problem solving skills and encourage them to think for themselves and figure things out.
5. Encourage reading and independent learning.
6. Provide necessary tools for completing school assignments.

7. Provide a place and set a time for homework.
8. Establish and maintain structured, predictable routines.
9. Limit the viewing of TV and monitor and discuss what they watch.
10. Assist youth in organizing their daily and weekly schedules and check to see if they are following their routines.
11. Praise youth for their educational successes, efforts to achieve, and interest in learning.
12. Talk to them about how school is going.



Monitor Homework Daily

- ✓ *Ask the youth everyday about assignments.*
- ✓ *Make sure the youth understands the assignment and when it is due.*
- ✓ *Check over the assignments.*
- ✓ *Ask about work that has been returned and graded.*
- ✓ *Provide more supervision with youth who are not doing well, less for those whose school work is satisfactory.*
- ✓ *Be a coach and provide guidance, but don't do the homework for them.*



Education and Youth in Foster Care

Part Three: *What about Special Education?*

Special Education describes programs that are meant to meet the special needs of students, especially those with disabilities. There are two primary laws that protect students with disabilities. The **Individuals with Disabilities Act**, commonly referred to as IDEA, is the primary law that protects students with disabilities. This law was enacted by Congress to ensure that a child with disabilities would be provided a meaningful education experience. There is another law called **Section 504**. This law was also passed by Congress as part of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which made it illegal to discriminate against people with disabilities in programs that receive federal funding. It provides services for a broader group of students than does the IDEA because it has a more expansive definition of disability. All students eligible IDEA are also eligible for protection under Section 504, but not all disabled students who are under Section 504 are eligible for Special Education.

Of the more than 500,000 children in foster care in the United States, approximately 30-40% are receiving special education services. Many others may need these services but have not been identified. Still others have been identified inappropriately. As a foster parent, it is good to know how the special education system works and understand the benefits and services that can be accessed for youth in foster care.

If a parent feels that their child needs to be evaluated they will need to make the request in writing. Often it is the school district that notices an evaluation may be necessary. Before a child may be evaluated, the district must notify the parents in writing. This notice must describe any evaluation procedure that the district proposes to use. Parents must give their consent in writing before their child may be evaluated.

You can read about the initial evaluation and the evaluation procedure in the **Alaska State Special Education Handbook** which is available online at <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/SPED/Handbook.html>. The school district has 45 school days to conduct an ESER (Evaluation Summary and Evaluation Report) meeting. IF a child is determined eligible for special education services, the IEP must be implemented within 45 school days of receiving parental consent for the initial evaluation.

The **Individual Education Plan (IEP)** simply put is the written plan that will outline and describe the specific special education services that the child will receive. It should be very detailed and specific to the individual needs of the child. The IEP must have measurable goals and objectives. This will allow you and the teacher to assess your child's progress and track when goals have been met.

When a parent is unable to represent a child in matters of his or her Special Education programs, ***the school district will appoint a surrogate parent.*** The surrogate parent acts in place of a parent and has no personal or professional interests that could conflict with the interests of the child.

One change in the State of Alaska Special Education Handbook is the addition of foster parents as potential surrogate parents.

The following is a quote from the State of Alaska Special Education Handbook

“A Foster Parent is an individual employed to provide care to an individual student or group of students. The district may recruit, train and appoint Foster Parents as a Surrogate Parent for the children in the district. NOTE: If a Foster Parent affirms in writing, that the foster parent is able and willing to serve as a parent of an individual child in their care for special education purposes, the appointment of the Foster Parent as a surrogate is not necessary.”

This section from **The State of Alaska Special Education Handbook APPENDIX E: Procedural Safeguards outlines** the rationale for allowing foster parents to serve as surrogate parents in the special education process for the foster children placed in their home.

SECTION 7: MODEL SURROGATE PARENT
RATIONALE FOR APPOINTING SURROGATE PARENTS

Federal and State laws establish the importance of parent participation in the educational decision-making process for their children. Parents often give insight and information that is invaluable in planning an appropriate program for their child. The parent represents the interests of the child in the educational process. Because special educators recognize that the absence of a parent from the special education process may adversely affect decisions regarding the student, federal and state laws and regulations require school districts to appoint a surrogate parent when the parent of a child with a disability cannot be identified and located. *However, if a child has been in the same foster home for a period of time and it is reasonable to assume that the Office of Children's Services will not be moving the child to a different foster situation in the foreseeable future, then, the foster parent may serve as the a parent of a child for the purposes of special education.*

If you are asked to be a Surrogate Parent for the foster child in your home

If foster parents are asked or are interested in being surrogate parents in the Special Education process for the children in their home, they should first consult with/ inform their social worker. Before a foster parent can consent to evaluations, the school district must have a signed Foster Parent Affirmation http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/sped/pdf/Handbook_Revisions_07-08/appe_sec11.pdf . The foster parent will serve as the parent for special education purposes.

The foster parent is requested to fill out the affirmation form stating that they serve as the foster parent for a specific child and how long that child has been residing in the home. It also states that it is reasonable to assume that the child identified in the affirmation will not be moving to a different foster care situation in the foreseeable future. Once a foster parent is has sign the affirmation and received approval from the district (a confirmation letter), they can exercise all the rights, responsibilities and authorities of a parent. Upon receipt of this affirmation, the School District will provide written notice to the foster parent that the foster parent will be considered the parent for purposes of special education. The District will provide training to foster parent who need training. The foster parent will notify the Special Education Director of the School District immediately if the child is moved from their home.

A copy of the Affirmation Form can be found at:

http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/sped/pdf/Handbook_Revisions_07-08/appe_sec12.pdf

This should answer all the questions if a Foster Parent has completed the Affirmation and the school district has sent them the Confirmation. They the Foster Parents have all the authority to sign and request an evaluation, be part of the ESER team, and participate in an IEP. This is backed by 4 ACC 52.600(d). Signing of the ESER and IEP's and the like should not require approval from the social worker, however it important to keep your social worker in the loop. Always talk to the youth's social worker prior to the meeting to be sure that the worker is in agreement with you signing.

A suggestion to parents who are going to be involved in the development of the IEP is to take the ESER e-learning module available online. This will give you the parent a great overview of what it is going to be like being a part of the ESER team.

Suggestions for parents of children with special educational needs:

- Remember, "The squeaky wheel gets the grease." Make sure that the school district keeps to the required time lines and does everything necessary for a student.
- If you believe that things are not going well, request a meeting.
- Share your knowledge about the youth with the school district.
- Become an active part of the IEP team.
- Invite people to the IEP team who can help you advocate for the student.

- Involve the student in the process.
- Make suggestions for how the school can best serve the student.
- Scrutinize all aspects of the IEP to ensure that the program will really help the student.
- Ask for summer special education services if the student needs them.
- Make sure the transition services are part of the youth's IEP beginning no later than the year the student turns 16.
- Create a file of the student's education records.
 - Keep homework, tests and some of the other school work the youth brings home.
 - Keep an ongoing log of all contacts with school staff.
 - Keep an ongoing log of reports received from the youth.
 - Maintain a log of developments concerning the youth's educational experience. (You can keep a contact log in a notebook that can be inserted into a pocket of a binder. A date you attempted contact, reply, who the contact was and a few brief comments to summarize.)
 - Put all requests in writing to the school.
 - Confirm telephone request or oral request made at a meeting with a follow up letter or e-mail.
 - Keep a copy of letters that you send to the school as well as copies of everything you receive from the school.
 - Take notes during meetings.
 - Hand deliver letter to the school and ask school personnel to sign and date your copy.
 - Organize everything into files or even a three-ring binder, with material under each topic in chronological order. Topics could include: Test results, grades and attendance,



Parent Notebook for documentation

Medical Information:

Allergies

Vaccination Records

Current medications

Conditions that would affect learning (ADHD)

School History:

Names, addresses, and dates of schools attended

Name of current and previous teachers

Contact information for school staff that may have worked with your child

School Evaluation

Results:

Standardized Tests

District or State Assessments

Report Cards

Attendance Records

IEP's

Contact Information

Date, time, name of person contacted

Agency, position of person you spoke with



discipline, IEP, meeting notes, resource/contacts, and contact log. (If a binder is too bulky for you, another option is to use folders or large manila envelopes that you can label with the appropriate content information.)

Examples of a Behavior Accommodations or Modifications that can be used

The following are examples of accommodations that can be considered for a youth who needs extra assistance to learn. When drafting an IEP or 504 Plan, make sure accommodations are tailored to the needs of each youth.

- * Arrange a “check-in” time to organize the day.
- * Pair the student with a student who is a good behavior model for class projects.
- * Insure school rules do not discriminate against the student.
- * Use nonverbal cues to remind the student of rule violations.
- * Amend consequences for rule violations (e.g., reward a forgetful student for remembering to bring a pencil to class, rather than punishing the failure to remember.)
- * Minimize punishment. Provide positive as well as negative consequences.
- * Develop an individualized behavioral intervention plan that is positive and consistent with the student’s ability and skills.
- * Arrange for the student to leave the classroom voluntarily and go to a designated “safe place” when under high stress.
- * Develop a system or a code word to let the student know when behavior is not appropriate.
- * Ignore the behaviors that are not seriously disrupted.
- * Develop interventions for behaviors that are annoying but not deliberate.
- * Be aware of behavior changes that relate to medication or the length of the school day; modify expectations if appropriate.

--Excerpt from School Accommodations and Modifications, from Families and Advocates Partnership for Education (FAPE), PACER Inc.

Resources for Special Education

When you have a child who has special educational needs, remember that information is power and the more you know the better advocate you can be for your child to make sure he gets the best education he can. The following resources are helpful to parents who are caring for a child who needs additional educational services.

The State of Alaska Special Education Web Site can be found at <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/SPED/>. The website also features **The State of Alaska Special Education Handbook** located at <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/TLS/sped/Handbook.html>

On-line training available from the Department of Education for some very specific Special Education issues are available at www.eed.state.ak.us/Elearning

The **Alaska Parent Training and Information Center** at Stone Soup Group works with parents, educators and other partners across the state to build collaborative relationships and offer training to support Alaskan students needing special education services. The Parent Training Center utilizes a variety of different formats to provide training to underserved and rural families. www.stonesoupgroup.org

Building the Legacy IDEA 2004: <http://idea.ed.gov/> is a website from the Department of Education that gives extensive information and training modules about **The Individuals with Disabilities Act**.

Infant Learning Program: <http://www.hss.state.ak.us/ocs/InfantLearning/default.htm/>
The Infant Learning Program provides developmental assessment and intervention for children 0 to 3 years of age with developmental delays.

State of Alaska Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education: <http://www.hss.state.ak.us/gcdse/> The Governor's Council on Disabilities & Special Education was created to meet Alaska's diverse needs. It uses planning, capacity building, systems change, and advocacy to create change for people with disabilities. It is a good source of information for resources and services throughout the state.