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Author: Carol Stock Kranowitz

For more information locally - Dupont Hospital Occupational Therapy Department

THE CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: ENCOURAGING INTELLECTUAL AND EMOTIONAL GROWTH

Authors: Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D. and Serena Wieder, Ph.D, Addison Wesley: 1998 Reading MA. Parent oriented discussion of floor time with children with special needs.,

INFANCY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD - THE PRACTICE OF CLINICAL ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION WITH EMOTIONAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGES

Author: Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D. International Universities Press, Inc. Comprehensive coverage of the range of behavioral, sensory spectrum disorders addressed to clinicians.

ASSESSING ATTACHMENT, SEPARATION AND LOSS

Author: Linda Bayless; Lillie Love, Editor. Child Welfare Institute.

<http://www.gocwi.org/>

UNDERSTANDING THE DEFIANT CHILD AND MANAGING THE DEFIANT CHILD. A GUIDE TO PARENT TRAINING

Russell A. Barkley, Ph.D., Guilford Press, New York

**CONVERSATION
WITH
AN
EDUCATOR**

CASEY FAMILY PROGRAMS

A Conversation with an Educator

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Lynne Steyer Noble is Associate Professor of Education at Columbia College in South Carolina, and is both a biological and adoptive parent. She has fostered many children, has trained foster and adoptive parents and caseworkers for the South Carolina Department of Social Services, and has made adoptive placements through her private adoption agency. She is truly the epitome of the term "resource parent." In her role as an educator, but with her experience as a parent, she talked with us about children in foster care in the school setting. We asked Dr. Noble to share with us her ideas on what teachers should know about children in foster care.

It is important for teachers to know, first of all, that a child is in foster care, and then to be able to access the child's relevant academic records. Often, teachers think they can't ask about foster care, agencies think they can't tell, and foster families are afraid to violate the child's confidentiality. Rules may be different from state to state and even from district to district, but teachers should explore what they are entitled to have access to, and then try to get that information.

Resource parents, like all parents, may be either uninvolved in the academic life of the children in their care or may be relentless advocates for the children's needs. Teachers need to understand that when parents are "bulldogs" it's a good thing - these children especially need someone who is on their side. It's up to the teacher to harness the energy and commitment of these parents to promote positive change for the child in care.

Every teacher should look at his or her curriculum, routines, expectations, and classroom with the question in mind, "Is this foster-care friendly?" For example:

- Children in care, as well as those in adoptive, kinship, guardianship, and blended homes may be unable to complete assignments that call for the construction of a family tree.
- Even a "simple" assignment, like bringing in a baby picture, may be impossible for a child who has lived with multiple families.
- In some jurisdictions, foster parents may not have the authority to complete a permission slip for a field trip. Teachers need to allow the family time to get the

form signed through the agency, and need to be sensitive to the need of the child to not be "different" in yet another situation.

- Classrooms should contain materials that are "foster care friendly" such as books that contain depictions of different kinds of families, including foster, adoptive, and relative caregiving families.

Many children in foster care are behind academically. Often this is due to inconsistent school attendance, multiple moves, and lack of support from home, rather than lack of ability. However, teachers need to understand that they can't necessarily bring children up to grade level in one year. Children with multiple concerns, including loss and grief issues and uncertainty about their futures, are not going to be able to focus their attention on academics. There are many areas other than school subjects where teachers can make a significant difference. They can contribute to meeting the social and emotional needs of children in care by understanding, caring, and attending to the day-to-day interactions with other children in the classroom. Teachers can back off on academic expectations when more pressing needs come first.

Teachers can contact a child's former teacher to find out not only the child's academic status, but to learn what other strengths and challenges the child may have.

Materials and tasks in the classroom can be structured so that the child is able to achieve success in some areas, even if academics are a problem. The teacher needs to start with the child - where is he/she academically, socially, emotionally - and then find ways to help that child fit into the class. Reduced academic expectations is one area, but there are other places the child in foster care may be able to feel successful. For example, give the child responsibility for a caregiving activity such as feeding an animal, watering plants, or passing out supplies to provide an opportunity for feeling useful and competent.

Remember, though, that many children in foster care find it difficult to trust adults, often for good reason. Teachers should recognize their own status as potential disappointers in the *eyes* of children in care, and be willing to accept the child's initial lack of trust, working to achieve a better relationship over time.

Back to academics, educators need to recognize that the reality is many of these children are not going to perform well at grade level, no matter what we do. They are often behind when *they* come to us, and the emotional distractions of being separated from family, home, friends, and previous school are going to make concentration on reading and arithmetic very difficult. If the child is in fourth grade but reading at a second grade level, the teacher needs to start there, and not grade the child on failure to read at the fourth grade level. This is going to be problematic when standardized testing is important to the school and to the teacher, but what we really need to be concerned with is the child.

Many children in foster care are given labels such as "learning disabled." While this can be an

opportunity to secure extra resources for learning, it can also be one more negative connotation in the life of a child who already feels different from his/her peers. Academic problems are not always the result of learning disabilities, but can instead stem from a variety of school and family issues that make it difficult for the child to succeed. What children in foster care need most are strong advocates in the schools. Teachers, resource parents, agency staff and birth families can all contribute to school success if given the information they need to understand the problem and the opportunity to collaborate with the school in providing support to children who need it.

In closing we asked Dr. Noble whether she could recommend any children's books that deal realistically and sensitively with the issue of out-of-home care. She mentioned two, both appropriate to the 5th to 8th grades:

Gibbons, K. (1997). *Ellen Foster*. New York: Random House. A young girl from a troubled family searches for a permanent home. A teacher's guide from Random House is available online at <http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=0375703055&view=tg> with some of the other issues raised in this book, including racial prejudice and responsibility and control, without providing specific guidance on handling the substitute *care issues* pertinent to foster care.

Byers, B. C. (1997). *The Pinballs*. New York: Harper. The story of three children who meet while in foster care in the same home. Ethemes, an Internet site providing resources for teachers, contains a number of links (some out of date) to educational activities for use with this book.
<http://emints.more.net/ethemes/resources/S00000806.shtml>

Another book resource:

Walk a Mile in My Shoes: A Book about Biological Parents for Foster Parents and Social Workers By: Judith A.B. Lee and Danielle Nisivoccia. This book will help foster parents and caseworkers "get into the shoes" of biological parents. Foster parents may use it as a self-help guide. Workers will find it helps attune them to the tasks both foster and biological parents face. Agencies will find it especially effective for use in the separate and joint training of caseworkers and foster parents and for use by teachers and students in learning about biological families. 1989/0-87868-349-6/#3496. \$8.95
<http://www.cwla.org/pubs/pubdetails.asp?PUBID=3496>

School Support For Foster Families

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION DIGEST **Number 147- School Support for Foster Families**, (9/1999). View as:

- [HTML](http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/digest/dig147.asp) (<http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/digest/dig147.asp>)
- [PDF](http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/digest/pdf/147.pdf) (<http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/digest/pdf/147.pdf>)

This digest discusses factors that influence the ability of foster children to achieve academically and offers some strategies that schools can use to improve their educational success and emotional well-being.

What Do Children Think About Foster Care

"What Do Children Think About Foster Care?"

(http://ssw.unc.edu/fcrp/Cspn/vol1_no3/what_do_children_think.htm)

Children's Services Practice Notes for North Carolina's Division of Social Services and the N.C. Family and Children's Resource Program, Vol. 1, No. 3, Spring 1996

Children's Services Practice Notes, a newsletter designed to enhance the practice of North Carolina's child welfare workers by providing them with information about research and practice models. Produced four times a year, Practice Notes is sponsored by the North Carolina Division of Social Services and the N.C. Family and Children's Resource Program, part of the Jordan Institute for Families and the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

What Keeps Children In Foster Care From Succeeding In School

"What Keeps Children in Foster Care From Succeeding in School"

(http://www.vera.org/publications/publications_5.asp?publication_id=169)

Marni Finkelstein, Mark Wamsley, and Doreen Miranda. *Vera Institute of Justice*, July 2002.

As a group, children in foster care struggle academically. Researchers interviewed 25 foster children and 54 of the adults in their lives to better understand how being in foster care affects a child's education, and how adults can help them succeed in school.

Improving Special Education for Children with Disabilities in Foster Care

http://www.caseyfamilyprograms.org/cnc/documents/improving_special_education.pdf

Casey Family Programs Education Issue Brief, June 2002.

This issue brief is intended to highlight the special education issues particular to children and youth in foster care and to suggest opportunities for improving their outcomes.