



Attention Foster Parents: Let's Work Together!

By: John M. Palladino (2004)

Foster parents know all too well the many needs of the youth for whom they provide care that include academic services associated with special education. The reality is not a surprise given the literature reports at least 50% of youth in foster care require intense academic and behavioral interventions at school. What should foster parents do?

First, it is necessary for foster parents to educate themselves about their legal roles in the provision of special education services. Although the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) accounted for foster parents, differences in its interpretation may exist. Therefore, foster parents should contact the public school districts where their foster children attend and request copies of the districts' special education procedural guidelines that are public documents. Foster parents may also want to contact their states' Departments of Education and speak with directors of special education to further clarify their roles in special education decision-making.

Second, foster parents should discuss with their caseworkers about the roles of birth parents in special education decision-making. Since the ideal intent of foster care is to reunify families, it is most imperative that foster parents' special education decisions empower and involve birth parents, if feasible and appropriate. In fact, it may be best for birth parents to have sole decision-making authority in preparation for their children's return to their care.

Third, foster parents should understand protocols that special education personnel must follow, especially strict adherence to confidentiality standards. Special education administrators and teachers often voice concern that they do not have all the facts about foster care cases and may hesitate when foster parents step forward to advocate. Foster parents should make appointments with special education teachers and address ambiguities prior to any special education team meetings. In response, foster parents should validate teachers' concerns and contact caseworkers to provide further clarity.

Once foster parents accomplish the above three steps, they should advocate for the "big picture." Foster parents are probably the only ongoing, stable contact for special education teachers. They are able to help school personnel understand immediate and long-term goals for the youth and allow educators to plan accordingly.

As foster parents dialogue with teachers, they should voice any struggles or concerns they have with their foster children and seek advice. Special educators may have a different perspective or know certain techniques that could assist foster parents at home. Likewise, teachers may need support and advice from foster parents. An ideal win-win situation ensures.

When special education plans and decisions are made throughout the academic year, foster parents should ask themselves: "Do the plans and decisions best match what I know and predict will happen for these children?" For example, a Nebraska foster family provides care for a 12 year-old child with Autism. They know that the child's caseworker and guardian ad litem are in the process of contacting the child's relatives in Florida to pursue a guardianship. The foster parents are aware of the time frame involved and understand that a move to Florida will not occur in the immediate future. However, they notice that the school's IEP includes transition goals for the child that require life-long dependence on Nebraska's social agencies and that are necessary given the child's strengths and needs. The school is unaware of the potential move to Florida. The foster parents should voice the possible move and encourage the school to include additional transition goals that align with services in Florida.

Foster parents should always seek to earn trust throughout their contacts with special education teachers. It is inevitable that frustrations and disagreements with teachers will occur. The myriad views about what is best for children in foster care make it impossible to please all parties all the time. To earn trust, foster parents should assert their opinions and insights while accepting input from other parties. Before, during, and after the meetings, foster parents should speak about each party in positive terms and model respect and dignity. Last and most important, foster parents should show a willingness to adopt their practices when requested and feasible.

Remember foster parents: Think with your head, act on your heart, and keep focused on the "big picture." You are often an unheard voice in special education decision-making. Help us help you. Our youth in foster care will benefit from such collaboration!

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