Helping Children Succeed at School After Difficult Experiences

Understanding behavior, finding support, and helping children stay connected to school



What Can Foster, Kinship and Relative Caregivers Do?

You do not have to be an education expert to help.

Your knowledge of the child, your relationship with them, and your willingness to speak up can make an important difference.

1. Find Out What Is Happening at School

If a child is having behavior problems, start by asking questions.

You may want to ask:

- Is the child having discipline problems at school?
- What happened before the discipline was given?
- What is the school doing to help?
- How is the problem affecting the child's ability to learn?
- Has the child been suspended or expelled before?
- What was done the last time?
- Is the same problem happening again?

Try to understand the full picture rather than focusing only on the latest incident.

2. Ask the Child What They Think

Whenever possible, include the child in the conversation.

Ask what they think is happening and how they feel about it. Many children can explain why they believe they are getting "in trouble" at school.

You might ask:

"What do you think would help you have a better day at school?"

You can also ask whether there is a teacher, counselor, school social worker, or another adult at school the child trusts.

Sometimes identifying **one trusted person at school** can be an important first step.

3. Be the Caring Adult

Children who have experienced difficult events may have trouble trusting adults. They may also have had many changes in caregivers, schools, homes, or other parts of their lives.

That is one reason a steady, caring adult can be so important.

As a caregiver, you can:

- Listen without immediately judging.
- Let the child know that you are on their side.
- Stay in communication with the school.
- Help the child identify adults they trust.
- Speak up when you believe the child needs more support.

Schools can also help by having one person serve as a consistent contact for a child and caregiver. That person can help the school team communicate, work together, and address concerns before they become bigger problems.

Simon's Story: One Hour Can Make a Difference



KIDS MATTER CASA volunteer Simon saw that his CASA youth, a second grader, was struggling to read.

Simon is a self-employed software engineer with a flexible schedule. He chose to spend an extra hour each week tutoring the child.

Today, that child is thriving in school.

KIDS MATTER CASA Program Manager Lance Jones says, "Simon's commitment to literacy is incredible. He loves learning and helping others learn, and he strongly believes that all children deserve the freedom and independence that come from literacy."

Read Simon's full story here.

If Your Child Is Suspended or Expelled

If your child is suspended or expelled, you may feel overwhelmed or unsure about what to do next.

Start by learning your school district's discipline policies. Ask questions and make sure the child receives fair treatment.

If the child has an **Individualized Education Program (IEP)**, special rules may apply when the school is considering discipline. The school should determine whether the behavior was related to the child's disability before certain disciplinary actions are taken.

You do not have to figure this out alone. There are organizations and people who can help families understand special education services, IEPs, and school discipline.

Staying in School Is Part of the Solution

When a child is struggling with behavior, ask the school about options that allow the child to continue learning at school.

For example, ask whether **in-school suspension** or another school-based approach is available instead of an out-of-school suspension or expulsion.

For children living in foster homes or other care settings, being sent home during the school day may create additional challenges. It also means the child is missing valuable learning time.

Caregivers can encourage schools to learn about approaches that take a child's past experiences into account and look for ways to prevent problems before they lead to suspension or expulsion.

These approaches can help many children, not only children in foster or kinship care.

CASA Volunteers Can Be Part of Your Team

Grandparents and other kinship caregivers do not have to navigate school challenges by themselves.

If a child has a CASA volunteer, that volunteer can be another person who asks questions, listens to the child, communicates with the school, and helps the child's team understand what is happening.

Education questions are among the issues frequently brought to KIDS MATTER staff. Questions about special education documents and assessments, requests for IEP meetings, suspensions, and absences are common concerns.

KIDS MATTER also has CASA volunteers who are special education teachers, consultants, and counselors. They may be able to provide practical advice based on their experience. Call the KIDS MATTER office to see if a referral can help.

You Don't Have to Face This Alone

When a child is struggling at school, it can be easy for a caregiver to feel worried, frustrated, or unsure about what to do next.

Start with one question. Start with one conversation. Find one person at school who will listen.

No child should have to face a school hallway alone, and no caregiver should have to face it with them alone either. Help is available, and there are people who want to help children succeed.