

Tips for Back to School Success

By Anne-Marie Abruscato

BACK to SCHOOL



Joseph, age 11, stayed up late the night before the first day of school. He snuck a tablet into his room and played video games until he fell asleep at 2:00am. When the alarm went off, he slept right through it. He had to be woken up by his foster mother when she realized he was still asleep. He was grouchy, rude to his foster mom, and did not listen to her instructions to get ready for school. There was no time for him to eat breakfast, and he barely made it to the bus stop. His hair was sticking up and his outfit was mismatched. Other kids laughed at him on the bus. He walked into school angry, and wishing he was anywhere else but there. He dreaded his day.

Andrea, age 9, just moved into her foster home last month. Soon after she moved in, she and her foster father had many discussions about the start of school. He brought her to the school to visit, he validated her mixed feelings about starting at a new school, and he was very clear about his expectations for the mornings. On the first day of school, he woke her up extra early. She got into clothes that she helped select the night before, brushed her hair and teeth, and had a good breakfast. Her foster father praised her for her efforts at getting ready. She got to the bus stop in plenty of time. In fact, another student was there early too, and Andrea and she made friends and sat on the bus together. Andrea walked into the school with a smile on her face and, although nervous, she was excited about her first day.

August 12th is right around the corner...what will be your experience?

Do you have a child that moved into your home this summer? Or, do you have a child that has been with you for a long time but will be attending a new school? In either case, transitioning to a new school year is significant.

First, thank you. You are already one of our community's champions by being a foster parent. Your home is a safe haven for a child in need. You are probably a whiz at coordinating schedules and routines. You also know that transitions are difficult for children that have had chaos in their lives. So, the following are some ideas to consider.

Tip #1 – Start from square one

No matter what your routine is for school mornings, since all families are different, it is not what the child is used to. Just assume it is a new routine for them, and be clear about your expectations. What time do you expect them to go to sleep? What time do you expect them to wake up, and will it be by an alarm or will you wake them? What do you expect about having clothes ready? Who makes breakfast? Will they bring a lunch? What time do you expect they walk out the door?

Tip #2 - Remember...a calm child is a well-behaved child

As you know, when our brains are regulated (calm), we make good decisions. We respond rather than react. We are better at our jobs, because we can focus. We are better in our relationships, because we use effective communication.

Kids are exactly the same!

As a trauma-informed foster parent, you are always considering how your child's behavior is influenced by their past experiences. You adjust your discipline practices accordingly. You already know that trauma causes changes in the brain. You know that traumatized brains and hearts can cause children to be more sensitive, on high alert, and resistant to change. For a lot of children, change meant harm. Also, trauma can make the unknown be something that is feared. Going to a new school is a big unknown, and comes with many things to be anxious about...

Will I make friends?

Will I get good grades?

Will other kids make fun of me?

Will I be safe?

It is human nature to compare our situation to that of our peers. Perhaps the child in foster care wonders if their peers will find out that they are in foster care, and then tease them about it. You as the foster parent can normalize these concerns.

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On a very sobering note, what is the degree of exposure the child has had to news about gun violence in schools? Even if the child is not talking about it, they may fear for their safety based on what they have heard in the news, from peers, or online.

One way to help a child have a calm and regulated mind is by addressing their anxieties, and giving them information, so they feel prepared. Feeling prepared helps a child feel secure and calm, so...

Tip #3 – There is no such thing as being TOO prepared!

Is your foster child's school having an orientation, or "meet the teacher" events? These are invaluable for preparing children and reducing anxiety. If these events are not available, visit the school ahead of time with the child. Even just driving by the school gives the child an ability to visualize where they will be going.

Another way to increase familiarity with the school is for you and the child to look at the school's website together. What is the school's schedule? What activities are shown that interest the child? After you look through the site, you can ask "What questions do you still have about your new school?". Well before school starts, have a calendar posted in a common area. You and the child can mark the first day of school, as well as additional events and occasions, like medical appointments, family activities, holidays, and birthdays. The more the better! This helps children feel secure because they have advance notice of things that are going to happen. For many children, visual reminders will be so much more effective than verbal reminders about upcoming events.

Tip #4 – Address feelings

Ask the child: "How are you feeling about going back to school?"
Then validate their feelings, even if you do not "agree" with the feeling.

This one simple action will reduce the intensity of their negative feelings.
Child says: "I'm nervous. I don't know any kids at this school."
Don't say: "There's no need to be nervous, you'll be fine."

Do say: "It is normal to feel nervous about meeting new friends."

Child says: "I'm dreading going back! I don't want to get up early and I don't want homework."

Don't say: "You shouldn't be dreading it, you've been lazy all summer and it will be good for you to do something productive."

Do say: "I understand, it's hard to go back to school after having so much fun and relaxation over summer vacation."

Tip #5 - Sleep cannot be overrated

At least a few days before school, start transitioning the child toward the bedtime and wake up time that you expect once school starts. Enforce good sleep habits (limit screen time before bed, no screens in the child's room after bedtime, limit caffeine and energy drinks, have a bedtime routine).

Tip #6 - Communicate possibility and encouragement

Such as, your own version of:

"Every year is a new opportunity to have a fresh start, make new friends, and be the student you want to be. You can do a great job this year and I'm here to support you."

The bottom line is, the more prepared your child is for school, the more calm they will feel. You are maximizing their potential for a good start to the school year. School success unlocks possibilities for the future. Thank you for your contribution to making their present and future as bright as possible!

Concerns, issues, questions?

Consider reaching out for support:

- Caseworker
- Foster Parent Champion
- CASA Worker
- Placement Stability Specialist