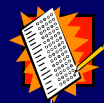## Module 4

Helping Youth in Foster Care Transition to and Be Successful in School

CSMH

Test your Knowledge

- Most children in foster care are resilient and easily adapt to their changing home placements. **(T/F)**
- Children in foster care do not need any special assistance with transitioning to a new school. They just need to have time to adjust. **(T/F)**
- Teachers should always talk to children in foster care about their personal life and foster care experiences. **(T/F)**

Lesson Objectives

Participants will be able to:

- Define school mental health and understand the services provided by school mental health programs.
- Identify children who could be served in school mental health programs.
- Discuss 3 advantages of school mental health.
- Understand how school mental health is relevant for children in foster care.

School Challenges for Youth in Foster Care

- Frequent changes in home placements can result in school transfers – thus requiring the youth to adjust to new peers, teachers, school culture, and curricula.
- Often, new schools lack complete information about student's academic needs.

School Challenges for Youth in Foster Care (Cont'd)

- Due to the trauma they have experienced, many youth in foster care may have poor peer relationships and social skills. This can lead to peer rejection, which is often related to poor school achievement.
- This instability in schooling and lack of coordination and effective partnership between school, students, and families can lead to (a) declines in academic skills, (b) higher drop out rates, and (c) grade retention for youth in foster care.

Brainstorming Activity

- **Activity:** Discuss your organization's process to facilitate a smooth transition to a new school for youth in foster care. Groups can create a flow chart or visual representation of their organization's process for school transitions. What aspects of that process are effective? What aspects of that process need to be improved upon?

  (If your organization does not have a school transition process, how would you implement a formal process at your organization and what steps need to be a part of the new enrollment/transition process? Brainstorm and construct a process (flow chart) that may work in your organization.)

Ways to Smooth the Transition to a New School: *Communicate with Prior School*

- Make every effort to ensure that the student's school record is transferred to the new school before the student arrives.
- Obtain information from the student's current school prior to the student's transition (re: student strengths and successes as well as challenges). Share knowledge with new teachers.

Ways to Smooth the Transition to New School: *Connect Student with Supportive People*

- Identify a support person (e.g., school mental health clinician, school psychologist, teacher, assistant principal, etc.) upon entry into the new school so that the student has someone to talk to if problems arise.
- Identify a strong student who can serve as a "buddy" or "peer mentor" who can help the student find his/her way around the new school, answer questions, and provide peer support.
- Get input from adult supports (guardians, mentors, etc.) involved in child's life.

Ways to Smooth the Transition to a New School: *Establish Guidelines & Policies*

- Consider development of specific guidelines that outline the roles and responsibilities that support staff and foster care parents should have when enrolling students in a new school and to ensure continued success in school.
- Establish policies that facilitate information sharing between the school and foster care workers/other agencies and programs working with the child.

General Strategies to Help Youth in Foster Care Succeed in School

- Foster parents and school mental health providers should have regular contact with the student's teachers.
- Encourage foster parents to advocate for student educational and social/emotional/behavioral needs.
- Ensure that relevant educational laws and resources are shared.
- Provide each student in foster care with an educational advocate who can continually work with the student, despite changes in placement, and effectively advocate for the student's educational needs.

General Strategies to Help Youth in Foster Care Succeed in School (Cont'd)

- Identify students in foster care who may be in need of more intensive educational and mental health services. Work collaboratively to see if more intensive services are needed and develop action plans for implementing interventions/ supports for the child.
- Refer the child to the team in charge of student supports/assessments for more intensive evaluation if needed.

General Strategies to Help Youth in Foster Care Succeed in School (Cont'd)

- Start providing adequate academic supports early (e.g. tutoring, enrichment programs, state achievement test preparation, ACT/SAT preparation, college tours, job fairs).
- Consider enhancing an existing school or organization newsletter to provide info on typical experiences of youth in foster care, as well as ways in which school staff can support them
  - See example of a newsletter developed by the Nat'l Foster Care Month http://www.fostercaremonth.org/GetInvolved/Toolkit/Support/Documents/What_Teachers_and_Educators_Can_Do.pdf

Classroom Strategies for Teachers Who Work with Youth in Foster Care

- Help school staff understand signs of mental health issues and concerns for children in foster care.
- Maintain consistency and structure in the classroom.
  - E.g., Notify youth in advance of changes that will take place in their daily routine in order to help them as they learn to adjust in a new environment.
- Inform school staff of the need to respect the student's privacy.
  - E.g., Do not assume the student wants to discuss aspects of their transition or family situation– but let students know that you are available to talk if needed.

Classroom Strategies for Teachers Who Work with Youth in Foster Care (Cont'd)

- Be sensitive to the student's living situation. As school staff creates assignments, they should communicate with the student and/or foster care parents.
  - E.g., An assignment that requires bringing in family photos or creating a family tree can be overwhelming for a student in foster care.
- Be sensitive of the language used when communicating with the student.
  - E.g., Use 'parent or guardian' language.

Brainstorming Activity

- What can you do differently at your school(s) to help school staff improve understanding of how best to work with students in foster care?
(e.g., Think of a child you've worked with who was or is in foster care – how could their educational experience be improved?)

Retest Your Knowledge

1) Most children in foster care are resilient and easily adapt to their changing home placements. (False)

   Explanation: While some foster care youth may easily adapt to a changing placement, most foster care youth find it challenging to adapt to a new placement. At the same time that they are contending with the trauma behind a foster care placement, they are having to adjust to a new school, home environment, foster family, community, etc.

Retest Your Knowledge

2) Children in foster care do not need any special assistance with transitioning to a new school. They just need to have time to adjust. (False)

   Explanation: Due to the trauma they have experienced (both prior to placement, and during placement due to transitions), children in foster care may benefit from additional supports within the school to ensure that they will have positive academic and social-emotional outcomes.

Retest Your Knowledge

3) Teachers should always talk to children in foster care about their personal life and foster care experiences. (False)

   Explanation: Teachers should be aware of the need to respect the student's privacy, and should not assume the student wants to discuss aspects of their transition or family situation with them. A teacher should let their student know that he or she is available to talk if the student is interested. If the teacher notices signs of mental health issues, he/she should refer the student to a mental health professional.

Practical Resources

- School Mental Health.org: www.schoolmentalhealth.org This website provides information and fact sheets on children's mental health for clinicians, educators, families and youth. Specific information about mental health for youth in foster care is also available at this site.

- Additional tips for teachers and parents regarding classroom assignments and effective communication can be found in the PowerPoint presentation that was developed by the University of Massachusetts Center for Adoption Research and can be found here: http://www.umassmed.edu/uploadedFiles/Adoption%20in%20%20the%20classroom.pdf

Practical Resources

- The Vera Institute of Justice developed a toolkit, "Foster Children and Education: How you can create a positive educational experience for the foster child" that can be used by caseworkers and teachers. The toolkit can be downloaded at http://www.vera.org/publications

- Casey Family Programs http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/EndlessDreams.htm
  The Endless Dreams video showcases the great potential of schools to support and enrich the lives of youth in care. The video features a young woman in care and describes how life in foster care impacts her education. Casey Family Programs offers this 15 minute video upon request at no charge. For a copy of the video, please send e-mail to contactus@casey.org.

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