# LEARNING IDEAS
## Building Educational Support
## for Children and Youth in Foster Care

Education is a change agent for children and youth in foster care… [education] creates hope for succeeding in the adult world. Former youth in foster/surrogate care emphasize that placement stability and high expectations from teachers were related to their educational attainment.

*Adapted from http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/ocfs/cw/policy/index.html?v__k_3__school_transfer_policy.htm*

### Get information!
- Open communication with the student's sending school.
- Speak to your district's Keeping Maine's Children Connected liaison. http://www.maine.gov/cabinet/KMC&YC.html
- Know your legal responsibilities regarding students in care. http://www.maine.gov/education/disruption/law.html
- Know the role of surrogate parents if the child has an IEP. http://www.maine.gov/education/surr/index.html

### Be aware that the child may have gaps in knowledge and development. The child may have…
- changed homes frequently (with different routines and expectations in each),
- changed schools frequently, or
- been out of school for extended periods.

*The child may have experienced the loss of family, friends, and everything familiar. Different schools may also have different sequences of curriculum within each grade, which may cause the child to miss crucial information or skills.*

### Establish positive relationships…
- with the student,
- with the child's foster parents,
- if the child has an IEP, with the surrogate parent,
- with the caseworker(s), and
- between the student and peers through cooperative relationship-building activities.

*Children and youth in care have often been so busy trying to survive that they have not had many chances to be "just a kid." Their environment may not have provided the time or opportunity to make friends.*

### Provide structure and predictability in the classroom. New students may need support…
- learning new classroom norms and expectations,
- establishing new daily routines,
- identifying and respecting boundaries, or
- recognizing and making good choices.

*The disruption that children and youth in care often experience can be eased by making the classroom a place that provides a sense of security and organization.*

## Plan the transition:
- Access and review the student's records.
- Contact the child's foster parent and caseworker(s) about the child's transition to school.
- Contact the child's surrogate parent if the child has an IEP.
- Ask about the child's learning style, strengths, likes, dislikes, and potential "triggers."

## Communicate early and often with foster and surrogate parents:
- Establish regular communication between the school, agencies, foster, and surrogate parents.
- Share positive things about the student's day when communicating - not just concerns!

## Address gaps in knowledge:
- Use the student's interests to create individual lessons to help her/him catch up.
- Ensure that all activities are age-appropriate.
- Offer your help confidentially: the student may be embarrassed to ask for help in front of peers.

## Establish positive relationships:
- Remember that trust may come slowly.
- Use cooperative classroom activities to help students practice positive interactions with peers.
- Create friendship-building opportunities:
  » have a regular "lunch club" with you, the child and peers.
  » alert the student and family of extra-curricular options and community events popular with peers.

## Provide structure and predictability in the classroom:
- Take time to guide him/her through classroom or school routines.
- Post important information in class.
- Create an individual schedule, if helpful.
- Clearly state the beginning and ending points of activities or classes and facilitate transitions.

## Design "foster-care friendly" practices and activities:
- Substitute activities such as "My Family Tree" with options like "People in My Neighborhood;" replace genealogy research with the study of a famous local figure.
- Offer alternatives if some activities (such as swimming in PE class) are distressing for the student.
- Remember that the student may need to keep family information private.

## Promote a sense of competence:
- Offer the student some control over and guidance for making choices in his/her daily schedule.
- Teach the student effective ways to advocate for him/herself.
- Help children and youth set short- and long-term goals.

### What is a Keeping Maine's Children Connected Liaison?

Nearly every school district has a trained liaison who works with the DHHS caseworker, foster and/or surrogate parent, and school personnel to ensure that the child's transition to the new school happens as smoothly as possible.

For more information about the Keeping Maine's Children Connected Initiative, and a link to find your district's liaison, see: http://www.maine.gov/cabinet/KMC&YC.html

### Where to learn more:
Annie E. Casey Foundation. Retrieved March 7, 2010 from: http://aecf.org/

Casey Family Programs. (2004). A Road Map for Learning; Improving Educational Outcomes in Foster Care. Retrieved March 7, 2010 from: http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/RoadMapForLearning.htm

Christian, S. (2003). Educating children in foster care (PDF). Washington, DC: National Conference of State Legislatures.

Public Law Chapter 451 (Maine). Retrieved March 7, 2010 from: http://www.maine.gov/education/disruption/timelines.html

Vacca, J. (2008). Breaking the cycle of academic failure for foster children — What can the schools do to help? *Children & Youth Services Review,* 30(9), 1081-1087.

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