

Beating the Odds!!

Improving Educational Outcomes of Foster Youth

http://www.vera.org/publication_pdf/169_280.pdf

(Disclaimer: Not all adults possess the identified perceptions and approaches. This is also true for foster youths; each youth has individual needs and a wide range of experiences that impact their situations. However, research and policies are created from “generalizations” – helpful for understanding the system. Take time to understand the individual’s full picture.)

Outcomes – Cause – Perception based on current research

Outcomes not ranked in order of importance or prevalence

Outcomes	Cause and Perception (*A=Adult, Y=Foster youth)
1. Low academic performance	A – Transfers, gaps in education, behavior problems, missed assignments Y – Worries of family, issues with biological parents, peer acceptance, self blame, nervous about switching homes/schools again, fear of personal safety, behavior, not doing homework, missed assignments
2. Poor attendance	A – Inadequate enrollment process (not consistent), medical and mental health appointments, frequent transfers Y – Medical appointments, therapy, adoption meetings and other social service issues, take care of siblings, contact with biological family
3. High drop out rate	A – Too many problems with school, too many gaps in education Y – Need to work, can’t handle school, don’t trust adults, so far behind anyway, it doesn’t matter anyway
4. More likely to be enrolled in special education classes	A – behavior is more manageable in special education classes, so many gaps in academic study, need these classes to “catch up,” Y – I’m not good at school, I get in trouble, no one in my family is smart
5. More likely to be enrolled in vocational classes (miss college prep courses)	A – Can’t handle college prep curriculum, don’t have the discipline, too many gaps, didn’t get prerequisite courses, low expectations of youths Y – Can’t afford college, for normal kids not foster kids, need to work, couldn’t handle it anyway
6. Behavior and discipline problems	A – Manipulative, angry, delinquent, violent, no self-control Y – Can’t avoid it, drawn to disruption/violence, don’t trust adults to help
7. Poor social relationships	A – Shy, depressed, withdrawn, needy for attention, manipulative Y – Hiding foster care status, draw attention away from family situation, consumed with acceptance, fear of foster care “stigma,” broken promises
8. More likely to be at risk for delinquency	A – Youths experiencing abuse and neglect are more prone to be involved in juvenile justice system. Y – Self filling prophecy of foster care “stigma,” go with what they know, behavior problems
9. Poor homework skills (newest findings)	A – More concerned with behavior (PCG & SW), not my job to coordinate tutoring and teach homework skill, should be PCG (TCH) Y – Don’t ask for help, never did it before, study a lot, adults too old, family lack of education

*Adults are defined in this workshop unless otherwise specified as all adults involved with foster youths. Abbreviations will be used as follows when specifically identifying an adult category:

TCH: Teachers and other school staff,

SW: Caseworkers, social workers, and those representing social services

PCG: Foster parents, kinship parents, and primary caregivers

Prevalent approach for each group of adults:

TCH: Had little knowledge of the student’s foster care situation/background and how bureaucratic demands impact attendance, missed tests or assignments.

SW: Usually not aware of academic progress and more focused on foster care crises.

PCG: Most concerned with child’s behavior and had little involvement with academic progress

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Fact Sheet

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1. Research has been conducted primarily on adult* perception of “why” foster youth have such poor academic performance and preparation. As a result, interventions have been based on adult perceptions.
2. Drops out rates range anywhere from 37% and higher depending on the study. Most people cite approximately half of all foster youths never finish high school.
3. Current research shows that educational improvements are possible:
 - a. School (academic) success for foster youths can overcome all identified outcomes, even for foster youths with very disadvantaged backgrounds.
 - b. Foster youths school attendance improves when placed in foster care.
 - c. Foster youths improve their academic grades when placed.
 - d. Schools with well-defined schedules, policies, and discipline can be a resiliency factor for foster youths. (Clear and concrete)
 - e. When abused or neglected youths (most foster youths) do well in school, they are less likely to engage in violence and become incarcerated.
4. Contrary to adult opinion, experiences in foster care DO have a significant but hidden role in outcomes (listed on Handout A). The outcomes may look similar to those of youths experiencing poverty and unstable homes however the cause differs in scope and depth.
5. Foster youths believe they do well in school even when concrete evidence (grades and test scores) prove otherwise. Passing was commensurate with “doing well.”
6. Adults* although well-intentioned have different approaches to dealing with the education of foster youths and often have conflicting ideas about who has responsibility for what issues.
7. Foster care placement transfers usually occur very early in the “foster care” experience. Average number of placements is 3.5. Not unheard of to see 20+ placement changes in a youths history. Current law tries to achieve permanence within one year of entering the foster care system. This law has benefits but can create more movement in search for a permanent home.
8. Youths do feel like they have someone to help when needed. Adults they turn to (in order of preference): 1) Teachers/school staff, 2) Kinship parents, 3) Foster parents, and 4) Caseworkers and Biological parents (last resort). School staffs were by far the favorite person to go to (75% of youths went to them first). In youths’ mind, they are obviously more than a teacher.
9. Youths typically do not have adequate homework skills. They never had the experience of adult assistance with homework and don’t know how to ask. (See Perceptions –Handout A) Turned to foster parents if adult initiated involvement over kinship parents, and group home staff.

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Not All is Lost!

Suggested Interventions

1. Develop a relationship with young people. Increased trust and support can help manage many of the characteristics leading to listed outcomes. (See Asset building)
2. Designate a liaison communicating with the school staff and foster care workers as well as the primary caregiver and youth. Suggested “School Specialist” role facilitates enrollment, secures documentation, interprets records, communicates daily management as well as crisis situations, and provides support to youths.
3. School staff, social workers, primary caregivers, and youth need to work as a team to determine expectations, “who does what,” and who responds to what issues. Youths learn from seeing adults work together.
4. Joint training for social service workers and educators on a variety of issues related to foster care and education.
5. Partnership between the schools and the local independent living worker in social service agencies. Goals are frequently similar in nature – to help to develop student competencies leading towards self-sufficiency. IL is a program proven to work.
6. Plug into foster youths early, build on strengths, and coach them towards appropriate courses leading towards successful employment and college.
7. Provide consistent and clear protocol for enrollment process. Studies show different schools even within the same district request different records and information for enrolling foster youths.
8. Provide concrete information to both primary caregivers and youths about missed assignments, deadlines, and make-up arrangements. Youths will lose one year developmentally and academically due to placement moves so they typically are functioning below stated age expectations.