

Serving Students in Foster Care: Implications and Interventions for School Counselors



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Students in foster care frequently experience barriers that influence their personal, social, and academic success. These challenges may include trauma, abuse, neglect, and loss—all of which influence a student’s ability to be successful in school. Combined with these experiences, students in foster care lack the same access to resources and support as their peers. To this end, school counselors have the opportunity to utilize their unique position within the school community to effectively serve and address the complex needs of students in foster care. This paper addresses the current research, presenting problems, implications, and interventions school counselors can utilize when working with this population.

***Keywords:* students, foster care, school counseling, support, interventions**

In 2017, there were a total of 442,995 children and youth in the foster care system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Given the number of these students in schools and communities, school counselors have the opportunity to utilize their position within the school system to identify, respond to, and advocate for the needs of students in foster care to ensure equity and access in all areas. Although all students need positive relationships and stability to be successful, students in foster care often lack the same access to support, resources, and opportunities as their peers (McKellar & Cowen, 2011; Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). These barriers and challenges contribute to gaps in achievement, relationships, and skills for these students (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). Compared to their peers, students in foster care are more likely to be absent from school, repeat a grade, and change schools (Cutuli et al., 2013; Palmieri & La Salle, 2017; Unrau et al., 2012), which ultimately impacts their ability to establish and maintain relationships. Additionally, students in foster care are twice as likely to receive out-of-school suspensions, over three times as likely to receive special education services, and over 20% less likely to graduate from high school (National Working Group for Foster Care and Education [NWGFCE], 2018).

When it comes to higher education, students in foster care are less likely to enroll in college preparatory classes, attend college, and obtain a 4-year degree when compared to their peers (Kirk et al., 2013; Unrau et al., 2012). Research suggests that as little as 3%–10.8% of youth previously in foster care attain a 4-year degree, compared to the national college completion rate of 32.5% (NWGFCE, 2018). However, it is important for school counselors to realize that between 70%–84% of students in foster care desire going to college (Courtney et al., 2010; NWGFCE, 2018). Although students in foster care feel motivated to attend and complete college, academic achievement can easily become another barrier. On average, students in foster care receive both lower ACT scores and high school GPAs and perform lower on standardized tests compared to their peers—all of which influence one’s admission to college (O’Malley et al., 2015; Unrau et al., 2012).

Unfortunately, it is also common for students in foster care to experience other challenges that influence their success in school, such as trauma. Trauma can include abuse; neglect; and the loss of family members, friends, and communities (Scherr, 2014). Without adequate support, trauma can

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impact a student's executive functioning and memory, ultimately affecting their ability to learn (Avery & Freundlich, 2009). Additionally, separation from family members, disrupted relationships, and frequent transitions lead to an increased risk for difficulties in expressing and regulating emotions, tolerating ambiguity, and problem-solving (O'Malley et al., 2015; Unrau et al., 2012). These interrelated and complex factors contribute to the achievement gap experienced by students in foster care as evidenced by lower academic achievement and less engagement in school (Pecora et al., 2006; Unrau et al., 2012).

Importance of Serving This Population

When considering interventions to support students in foster care, it is important to explore what they believe will be helpful for their growth and success. It is likely that the majority of students in foster care already feel a lack of control over what occurs in their lives (Scherr, 2014). Therefore, this is an opportunity to encourage student involvement while increasing student self-efficacy. Clemens et al. (2017) found that students in foster care emphasize the importance of having opportunities to connect with others in similar situations, learning practical skills, and implementing different strategies to better their lives. To provide a sense of normalcy and belonging, school counselors can advocate for interventions that promote connectedness and engagement with other students (Unrau et al., 2012).

Removing barriers, improving access to services, maintaining enrollment, improving attendance, and facilitating academic progress is critical in promoting success for students in foster care (Gilligan, 2007). Therefore, school counselors should be aware of the barriers related to access that exist for students in foster care and should be intentional in taking steps to remove any inequities. Working proactively and using a strengths-based approach that acknowledges the skills, strengths, and resiliency of students are ways in which school counselors can effectively meet the needs of students in foster care (Gilligan, 2007; Scherr, 2014). To illustrate, a strengths-based approach can be utilized with students who have anxious attachment patterns by acknowledging their ability to care for others, rather than focusing on the negative aspects of their attachment behaviors (e.g., being too "needy"). Although it can be easy to focus on the behaviors and disruptions that occur, school counselors have the opportunity to instead focus on these students' accomplishments, strengths, and dreams. Ultimately, it is evident that students in foster care face many challenges that influence their ability to be successful. In an effort to address this need, the following section outlines interventions for school counselors to use when working with students in foster care.

Interventions

School Climate

Positive school relationships are an essential part of school climate and can serve as a protective factor for students experiencing adversity (Furlong et al., 2011; O'Malley et al., 2015). Therefore, focusing on school climate may be an effective approach in supporting students in foster care, as positive school relationships can also help close achievement gaps between these students and their peers (Clemens et al., 2017). For example, positive school climate decreases rates of disruptive behaviors, truancy, fights, and suspensions at school (Hopson & Lee, 2011). In addition, Voight et al. (2013) found that students' positive school climate perceptions also contributed to academic achievement as indicated by state standardized test scores. School counselors can enhance school climate by allowing student voices, utilizing empowerment strategies, implementing evidence-based programs, providing adult mentoring (O'Malley et al., 2015), and working to create a positive peer culture (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

School Culture

It is particularly important to pay attention to school culture, as these shared norms, beliefs, and behaviors affect perceptions of school climate (MacNeil et al., 2009). To create a positive school culture, Ziomek-Daigle et al. (2016) recommended that school counselors implement interventions using a multi-tiered system of supports. For example, providing classroom lessons on topics such as kindness, empathy, and acceptance are Tier 1 interventions that work to cultivate a positive school culture (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2016). Additionally, school culture can be influenced by creating shared values and expectations for students throughout the school community (MacNeil et al., 2009). For example, school counselors can utilize empowerment strategies when teaching students in foster care to advocate for themselves and find autonomy in meeting their needs. The school counselor might say, “Last week, you worked so hard at learning to use ‘I statements’ when expressing your needs and feelings to others! In class, I even saw that you raised your hand to ask for a break when you started to get overwhelmed in math. How might you use similar skills to advocate for yourself when you get frustrated in social studies?” In this way, the school counselor is improving school culture by creating a shared expectation among students, teachers, and staff.

Educational Experiences

Moreover, school counselors can enhance school climate by facilitating enriching educational experiences that contribute to academic success (Gilligan, 2007). To ensure that students in the foster care system receive the same educational experiences as their peers, school counselors can screen, monitor, plan, communicate, and collaborate with other stakeholders (e.g., teachers, administration, staff, and foster families) to ensure equity and access for students in foster care (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). Educating stakeholders about working with students in foster care can encourage inclusive assignments, promote an understanding of potential responses and reactions from students, and decrease negative behavioral perceptions (McKellar & Cowen, 2011). Additionally, including students in decisions about their education, where they attend school, and the support they receive can increase their self-efficacy, goal development, and self-advocacy skills (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). This intentionality can also help them feel welcome, respected, and important—all of which increase their school connection.

Collaborating With Stakeholders

Planning

School counselors should plan to accommodate and work with students who may enter school in the middle of the year, as 34% of students in foster care experience five or more school changes by the time they reach the age of 18 (NWGFCE, 2018). When these students arrive at school, it is important that school counselors welcome them, explain classroom and school procedures, show them around the school, and facilitate connections with other students (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). From the beginning, school counselors can prioritize involving the foster family by calling to welcome them, answering any questions they have, providing them with helpful information (e.g., teacher contact information), and following up with them after a few weeks. For example, packets can be sent home with students so foster families have access to any relevant documents or previous newsletters containing helpful information (McKellar & Cowen, 2011). Additionally, it may be beneficial for school counselors to invite the foster family to meet with them in person to create a stronger foster family and school partnership. Furthermore, incomplete student records can have a significant effect on academic services for students in foster care. Therefore, school counselors should work diligently with other school districts to retrieve and maintain these records (McKellar & Cowen, 2011).

Training

Along with planning, school counselors can provide all stakeholders with evidence-based information to effectively serve and address the needs of students in foster care (Kerr & Cossar, 2014). With this purpose in mind, school counselors can provide training to stakeholders on topics such as reflective listening, creating secure attachments, recognizing and responding to feelings and behaviors, and setting limits and boundaries (Kerr & Cossar, 2014). Informed stakeholders can more effectively support and respond to the unique needs of students in foster care, and in turn, students may be more successful in managing their emotions and behaviors (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). This awareness can also strengthen relationships that promote school success (Kerr & Cossar, 2014). Additionally, school counselors can be proactive in collaborating with stakeholders to create structured and supportive classroom environments where students in foster care feel safe while learning. For example, working with teachers to modify assignments that have the potential to be triggering (e.g., family-based assignments) is essential in promoting student–teacher relationships and academic achievement (C. Mitchell, 2010; Palmieri & La Salle, 2017).

Inclusion

Students in foster care often experience triggers at school, whether it is from an assignment (e.g., family-based assignments), a topic discussed in class, or a community event that seems to be exclusively for biological parents (West et al., 2014). When these experiences occur, students in foster care do not always have the ability to self-regulate and utilize healthy coping skills (West et al., 2014). For this reason, it is essential to not only advocate for inclusive assignments and events but to also help students effectively manage their triggers so they can be academically and relationally successful. Additionally, it may be helpful to provide stakeholders with information about why certain activities lack inclusivity for students in foster care and offer possible alternatives or modifications for these experiences. To illustrate, events such as “Muffins with Moms” and “Donuts with Dads” can be altered for inclusivity by expanding the population to include anyone in the student’s support system (e.g., “Floats with Friends” or “Popcorn with Important People”).

Additionally, an assignment about creating a family tree could be modified for inclusivity by focusing on the diversity of family structures. C. Mitchell (2010) offers the alternative of creating “The Rooted Family Tree,” in which the roots represent one’s birth family, the student as the trunk, and the foster or adoptive family filling in the branches. Similarly, “The Family Houses Diagram” utilizes houses instead of trees to allow for multiple places of living and the option to form a connection between birth, foster, or other family types (C. Mitchell, 2010). Another common assignment given in schools is to bring a baby picture to share with the class. This lacks inclusivity for students in foster care, as they might not have these pictures or there may be difficult memories attached to them. Additionally, this puts the student in the painful position of having to explain why they do not have these pictures (C. Mitchell, 2010). As a result, C. Mitchell (2010) recommends framing the assignment as a choice: Bring a picture of yourself as a baby or at a younger age, on a vacation or holiday, or engaging in any activity that you enjoy.

Relationships

Knowing how to cultivate secure attachments with students in foster care is especially relevant for stakeholders, as positive student–adult relationships can influence other relationships in the student’s life by altering their internal working model (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Although it can be difficult to create and maintain secure relationships with students who experience insecure attachment (Bergin & Bergin, 2009), stakeholders have the opportunity to fill in attachment gaps that may exist for students in foster care. Secure attachment is related to higher grades and standardized

test scores, increased emotion regulation, and higher self-efficacy (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Golding et al., 2013). Moreover, students with insecure attachment tend to show less curiosity (Granot & Mayseless, 2001), have poorer quality friendships, and exhibit behavior problems (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Golding et al., 2013).

Importantly, attachment to teachers, rather than just biological parents, is linked to school success (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). When students have healthy relationships with their teachers and perceive them as supportive, they show greater interest and engagement in school, which leads to improvements in academic achievement (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Golding et al., 2013). Additionally, students who experience insecure attachment crave positive, warm, and trusting relationships but often lack the skills to create them. For this reason, stakeholders can help nurture secure relationships by being genuine, maintaining high expectations, and providing as much choice and autonomy as possible (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Furthermore, noticing when these students are not at school, or when they return after an absence, can help them know they are valued and cared for.

To advocate, school counselors can help stakeholders understand why students with insecure attachment are behaving and reacting in certain ways, while also helping staff to respond in ways that disconfirm students' insecure working models (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). In this way, staff can show that students' particular beliefs about relationships with others may not always be true. To illustrate, not asking for help in the classroom, ignoring the teacher, or denying the need for assistance could be a manifestation of an insecure avoidant attachment style (Golding et al., 2013). This student does not want to become close or show vulnerability, as they fear that the teacher will reject or separate from them (e.g., their internal working model). For these students, it can be easier to not ask for help or engage in classroom projects at all than risk the hurt of rejection (Golding et al., 2013). A teacher who misunderstands this might believe they are unable to adequately support the student. As a result, they may stop trying to help, which confirms the student's internal working model of fear and rejection. Instead, the teacher can disconfirm this student's internal working model by providing reassurance of their consistency and availability (Golding et al., 2013). For example, the teacher conveying that they want to help, while also asking how they can help, offers healthy choice and autonomy. Encouraging small changes in how stakeholders respond to students in foster care provides a space for positive and secure relationships to develop.

Skill Development and Addressing Unique Experiences

Behavior Management, Emotion Regulation, and Social Skills

Difficulties in behavior management, emotion regulation, and social skills are common among students in the foster care system, as they lack control over many events that occur in their lives (Octoman et al., 2014; Scherr, 2014). These students' unique and complex experiences can impact their ability to appropriately manage their emotions, behaviors, and interactions with others. Unfortunately, these extreme emotions and behaviors often result in several different placements, the loss of relationships, and the loss of school and community connections (Octoman et al., 2014).

Given this information, school counselors can contribute to student success by collaborating with stakeholders to communicate appropriate behavior, identify boundaries, and explicitly state expectations. Providing behavioral support, management, and individual attention can help students engage in positive behaviors that facilitate their success at school and in the classroom (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). Additionally, working with students to identify and manage emotions decreases externalizing behaviors, reduces stress levels, and improves relationships. Likewise, providing education about control, acceptance, coping skills, and distress tolerance are applicable emotion regulation interventions to utilize

with students in foster care (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009). Groups and interventions on topics such as social skills, problem-solving, making and keeping friends, and appropriate behaviors can help students develop healthy interpersonal relationships (Scherr, 2014; Zins & Elias, 2007).

Grief and Loss

Additionally, it is crucial that school counselors intentionally address the unique and complex experiences of students in foster care. For example, these students often experience non-death losses that go unacknowledged, including the loss of parents, siblings, friends, and communities (M. B. Mitchell, 2018). These losses may involve a lack of clarity and create confusion about a loved one's physical or psychological presence, commonly referred to as *ambiguous loss* (Boss, 1999; Lee & Whiting, 2007). To illustrate, being separated from one's family and placed into foster care can generate grief and loss reactions, including confusion, isolation, distress, uncertainty, helplessness, denial, extreme behaviors, and guilt (Lee & Whiting, 2007; M. B. Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010). Disenfranchised grief occurs when others disregard and do not acknowledge a loss (Doka, 1989; M. B. Mitchell, 2018). Unfortunately, it is common for the child welfare system and society to ignore experiences of grief and loss in foster care (M. B. Mitchell, 2018; M. B. Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010).

In an effort to address this, school counselors can begin by identifying, acknowledging, and validating losses that are not caused by death but produce many similar grief responses (M. B. Mitchell, 2016, 2018). Additionally, school counselors can educate stakeholders about ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief, as it is important for the entire school community to have an understanding about manifestations of grief and loss when working with these students (e.g., internalizing and externalizing). In general, school counselors can advocate for students in foster care by validating their experiences, equipping them with education and resources, helping others understand why their experiences embody grief and loss, and acknowledging the inherent confusion involved in their unique situations (Lee & Whiting, 2007).

Accessing School and Community Resources

School Engagement

Students involved in their school community through extracurricular activities, leadership, and positions of responsibility often experience more motivation and engagement in learning (Gilligan, 2007). Additionally, such engagement is beneficial in creating a sense of normalcy, belonging, and community with other students. Unfortunately, these opportunities can seem limited to students in the foster care system because of cost, timing, and transportation barriers (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). Therefore, it is critical that school counselors collaborate, advocate, and act to remove these barriers, as engagement in the school community can result in academic, social, and behavioral improvements (Scherr, 2014). School counselors can facilitate this involvement and engagement in the school community by collaborating with other stakeholders to provide opportunities. For example, encouraging and assisting students in foster care to navigate and obtain leadership positions (e.g., student government) will not only improve their engagement in school, but also increase their self-efficacy and sense of belonging within the school community. Additionally, school counselors can collaborate with other professionals (e.g., social workers, school psychologists, and school nurses) to identify and address different areas of support, resources, and opportunities for these students.

Group Counseling

With a national student–school counselor ratio of 455:1 (American School Counselor Association, 2019), group counseling is a promising approach to help school counselors meet the complex needs of students who are in foster care. Additionally, this is an effective way to encourage involvement and connectedness with students who have similar backgrounds, while providing these students with the

skills that they need to be successful (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). Involvement in group counseling can help create a sense of normalcy, belonging, and community with other students (Alvord & Grados, 2005) and can also result in academic, social, and behavioral improvements (Scherr, 2014).

Hambrick et al. (2016) found that children in foster care experienced improvements in behavior, academics, quality of life, attachment, placement stability, and emotion regulation following their participation in group-based interventions. Although participating in a small group with other students in the foster care system may provide the opportunity to feel understood and less alone, students may also benefit from engaging in group activities with typical peers. For example, students in foster care might participate in a “lunch bunch” group where they eat in community with the school counselor and other like-age peers. In these groups, students can play, learn from watching the interactions of peers, and develop the skills necessary for initiating and maintaining positive peer relationships.

Utilizing a reality therapy approach for group counseling seems particularly beneficial, as it addresses choice, control, and healthy ways of getting one’s needs met—all common issues students in foster care may struggle with (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009; Cameron, 2013; Kress et al., 2019). These components are essential in empowering students to choose how they respond to and face the challenges in their lives (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009). In this approach, school counselors can assume the roles of teacher, advocate, and encourager by educating about responsibility, choices, and the importance of meaningful relationships (Kress et al., 2019). Utilizing the WDEP system (i.e., wants, doing, evaluation, and planning) to explore questions, including “What do you want?”, “What are you doing?”, and “Is it working?”, helps students assess if their current behaviors are getting them what they desire, and if they are not, how they can change in healthy ways (Wubbolding, 2011).

Because behavior is intentional, it is beneficial to look at each student’s behavior as an attempt to satisfy their needs (Glasser, 1984, 2000). Additionally, focusing on the here and now is helpful in guiding and educating students about effective and appropriate ways to get their needs met by others (Glasser, 1992, 2000). As many students in foster care have not always had their needs met in the past, they must learn to have their needs met in healthy and effective ways (Octoman et al., 2014). For example, a student who is grabbing and touching other students might be trying to get their need of love and belonging met. In this situation, it would be a helpful learning experience to guide this student to meet this need in a different way, such as asking the peer permission for a hug or setting aside time to spend with them later (Octoman et al., 2014).

When using this approach, school counselors can reframe behavior to emphasize student strengths, identify and celebrate students’ acceptance of choice and responsibility, create anticipation for change, and communicate hope about success (Kress et al., 2019). School counselors can also prioritize rapport building; creating safety through rules, goals, and expectations; and helping students realize that they are not alone in their experiences (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Gladding, 2016; Kress et al., 2019). Other small groups that address issues such as social skills, making and keeping friends, and college and career exploration may also be helpful for students in foster care.

Mentorship Programs

Students in the foster care system experience many transitions and losses, which can result in disruptions to the adult and peer relationships that support educational success. In this way, mentorship programs work to reduce risk and provide protective support to students in foster care (Scherr, 2014). These students value having a mentor who provides support and encouragement on topics related to academics, college, and life (Clemens et al., 2017; Dworsky & Pérez, 2010) and

benefit from having a consistent, trustworthy, and non-familial adult in their lives (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009). Mentorship programs contribute to fewer behavior referrals, less school mobility, and improved graduation rates (Salazar et al., 2016). Additionally, the accountability of mentorship can motivate students to improve their attendance, achievement, and engagement in school. Given this information, facilitating connectedness and mentorship for these students is crucial in providing them with the support, consistency, and encouragement they need to accomplish their goals.

The Check and Connect Model is evidence-based and targets students who show warning signs of disengaging from school such as poor attendance, behavioral issues, and low grades (Tilbury et al., 2014), all of which are particularly relevant for students in foster care. Potential mentors can be natural (e.g., someone already present and supportive in the student's life) or someone from the community interested in volunteering (Salazar et al., 2016). Utilizing natural mentors, if available, is beneficial in acknowledging the natural supports that already exist in students' lives. For example, if a student already has a trusting relationship with a staff member, it is important to utilize this connection to maintain stability. However, if a student is unable to identify any natural mentors, working with volunteers in the community is also an excellent option. Both are impactful in different ways, and the quality of the connection is what is really crucial (Salazar et al., 2016).

It is essential that mentors are consistent, empathetic, authentic, and committed to supporting students in foster care. Mentors not only serve as a relational connection for these students but also help youth expand their social support networks, set goals, explore postsecondary options, and increase involvement in the school community (Salazar et al., 2016). School counselors can work with mentors to monitor student performance variables, such as absences, behavioral referrals, and grades, while helping students solve problems, identify skills, and reach their goals (University of Minnesota, 2019). Mentorship programs should be flexible and tailored to the needs of each student and their mentor, as some pairs might benefit from more or less time to connect (Salazar et al., 2016). Ultimately, these programs can be helpful in providing students in foster care with the connection and support they need to be successful, while also contributing to the development of other secure relationships in their lives (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017).

Community Partnerships

For students in foster care, it is essential that support extends beyond the school community. To do this, school counselors can establish relationships and collaborate with the student, foster family, school, and foster care system (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). These home–school partnerships are critical in meeting the needs of students in foster care. Additionally, foster families feel more supported when they are involved and their input is valued (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). Utilizing and forming plans around academic and behavioral expectations, attendance, flexibility with requirements, and communication with stakeholders can be helpful in promoting success (McKellar & Cowen, 2011). Furthermore, tangible and emotional support can act as protective factors and meet the needs of students through the provision of goods and services (Piel et al., 2017). For example, school counselors can create or utilize community-based food and nutrition programs to ensure that basic needs are being met.

Mental Health Services

Equally important, students in foster care often experience difficulties that affect their mental health. Evidence-based treatments such as trauma-focused cognitive behavior therapy (TF-CBT), behavior therapy, cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), and parent–child interaction therapy can be adapted for the school setting (Landsverk et al., 2009). These models of counseling are helpful in addressing symptoms, while also promoting healthy behavior and functioning. Combined with this,

school counselors can also provide outpatient information to foster families and case workers about local resources and services available to students in foster care. In these cases, it is helpful to collaborate with the designated outpatient counselor to provide the most effective support and generalize learned skills across settings (Landsverk et al., 2009).

Conclusion

Students in foster care experience a number of barriers and challenges that influence their success in school, both academically and socially, as well as in adulthood. In addition, students in foster care lack the same access to resources and support as their peers, which contributes to gaps in academic achievement, relational success, and overall well-being. By enhancing school climate, planning, providing training to stakeholders, and promoting positive educational experiences, students in foster care can receive the foundational support they need to begin learning. Additionally, by utilizing group counseling, implementing mentorship programs, targeting specific behavior, addressing experiences of grief and loss, and accessing community resources, students in foster care can gain the skills they need to be successful in all areas. Despite the many challenges students in foster care face, school counselors have the opportunity to utilize their unique position in their schools and communities to advocate for these students, reach them through evidence-based interventions, remove barriers to learning, and ultimately equip them with the tools and skills they need to experience greater success.

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