

EQUIPPED FOR THE JOURNEY

# Back to School





Friends,

When my boys first came to me, they were several grade levels behind academically. Their records indicated they had missed a substantial amount of the previous school year and from what I could tell, home work and school tasks were probably not something that was a focus on at home. They struggled with staying regulated in the classroom, which led to behaviors, which led to way too many phone calls from the school. Honestly, as I think back on this season of our life, the phone ringing in the middle of the school day became such a trigger for me. Academics had always been an important part of my life and I wanted to raise good students. I wanted to catch my boys up, give them the skills they didn't have, and help them to be successful. And it was a good goal to have. Helping a child succeed academically will always be a great gift.

It's just that there was another great gift I needed to give my boys first.

I needed to give them a safe home life. A consistent home life. A nurturing home life. An adult who saw them.

And this was not a lesson they would be able to learn overnight but would be home work we would have to practice together for the months (and years) to come.

A child living in fight, flight, or freeze and a child without a safe adult to come home to simply doesn't have the brain space to learn his multiplication facts or state capitals. His brain is always in protection mode, trying to keep himself safe.

There simply isn't room for academics when you don't feel safe.

Maybe you have recently welcomed a new child and you're starting out a new school year together and aren't sure what to expect. Maybe a child who has been with your for awhile, still really struggles at school, and you're looking for new ways to support him. Maybe you are at the point where you have realized that the control battles over school work are just simply not worth the damage it is causing to your relationship.

Whatever led you to check out this resource, I am glad you are here. School is important and helping your child succeed academically is a good goal. I'm grateful your kiddo has you in his corner.

This resource is meant to come alongside you as you navigate the complexities of school with your child and give you a new lens through which to see a few things; like those after school meltdowns and home work struggles. It's here to be a resource for you as you navigate your child's anxieties and regulation needs and give you some new ideas for ways to meet these needs.

This resource may be a good start for you, but each child is different and has unique ways that their story shows up for them at school. If you want a safe place to discuss ways to help your specific child, don't hesitate to reach out to your County Director or myself as we'd love to walk through this alongside you.

Here's to a more regulated & connected school year!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ashley Bennett', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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# Provide predictability and felt-safety

One of the components of a successful school year for our kids is that they feel safe there. And one of the major ways we all feel safe in a new situation is by knowing ahead of time what to expect and having some predictability. Working alongside the school, we can help give our kids this gift. This is needed for all of our kids—no matter whether you are introducing your child to their first day in preschool or their first day in high school. Your older youth might seem too old for this level of support or might even roll his eyes at you or think you're being too much...but trust us, they need this level of support too.

## **Talk about the coming changes.**



A few weeks before school starts, talk to your child or youth about the changes that will happen in your home when school begins. Set the expectations for earlier bedtimes, earlier wakeups, changes to the morning routine, and other routine changes like when homework will be done or if there will be changes to the use of electronics during school days. A week before school starts, start practicing this new routine so that you will have a week's worth of experience before you actually have to put it into practice. This "practicing outside the moment" can be really beneficial to your child knowing the expectations and making the changes needed when it really counts.

## **Include the child in the preparations.**



Include your child or youth in the back to school supply shopping or at least have them go through what you bought and fill their backpack with the new items. Show your child the items they need and talk to them about why they might need them. Give them choices for colors of notebooks and folders and help them to get excited about the new year. Let them pick out a new outfit for the first day of school or an awesome new backpack. Use this time to talk about what their school routine might look like as you remind them about what it looks like to go back to school.

## **Take full advantage of orientation night.**



Most schools have an orientation night where you can meet the teacher and visit the classroom. Take full advantage of this opportunity, especially if this is the child's first time at the school. Spend extra time walking around, pointing out the important places: the cafeteria, the gym, the playground, the library, etc. Show them their desk, where they'll hang their bookbag, and where their homework will be turned in. Ask the teacher if she can provide you with a printed version of the daily schedule so you can take it home to talk through it with your child in preparation for the first day. Consider making a small classroom schedule that can hang from your child's bookbag or be taped to her desk.


Go over your high schooler's schedule several times together-help him find where each class is located. Help him come up with an easy way to keep that schedule near on his first day. Even better, call the school the week before school begins and ask if you can come with your child to tour the school without the congestion of other families and children. Use this time to orient him to the space. If you have a younger kid, see if his teacher is available and ask if the two of you can help her set up the classroom or bring lunch to share with her. See if your older youth can meet with his guidance counselor or a coach for the sport he is interested in playing. All of this provides your child with a sense of "knowing what is going on" which helps lessen anxiety and allows a child to feel safe.

If the youth has been placed with you in the middle of the school year, consider taking a couple days off work to prepare him for this transition (two big ones in one short amount of time!). Take him shopping, help him pack up his supplies, overcommunicate about the school plan and ask if he has questions. When you go to register, ask the school for a tour and to meet the teacher. Consider delaying his enrollment by a few days just to help him ease into this new situation.

**Alert child of unexpected changes.**

A lot of our kids thrive in school because of the high structure it provides. Their hardest moments might come when there are unexpected changes. When there are going to be changes to your child's school routine, let them know about it ahead of time and give them reminders. Surprises don't work well for our kids and they have trouble "just rolling" with the changes. Encourage the teacher to use these same tools of predictability in her classroom with your kiddo as well.





# Support the relationship between your child and his teacher

The other component of a child's success in school is connection. Our children have suffered intense relational harm, and they often come to us with brains that are wired for protection instead of connection. They have a hard time trusting—especially with adults. They may also have trouble allowing an adult to be in authority because they have never seen that done safely before; they've always had to look out for themselves. They often have low self-worth and self-esteem, which leads to feelings of being unliked and unwanted. And they carry all of this into the school building each day.

We need to help our teachers and those who work in education to see our children through the lens of having a history of relational harm. We need to show them that the way they can reach our children is to provide them with felt-safety and connection. We can't make our schools become trauma-informed, but we can do our part to help them to see our children.

## **Reach out to the teacher.**

Before your child starts school, send an email to the teacher telling her about your child. Leave out the family drama and messy details of your child's story; that's not for others to know about. Let the teacher know that your child is in foster care and how long she has been placed with you. Tell her what the child calls you and whether the child has contact with her biological family members. Give some positive attributes and characteristics of the child. Mention the challenges that she might see present itself in the classroom. Give strategies that you have found that work that she could try as well. If your child struggles with fears and anxieties, give a brief explanation of why that it is and what helps with that. If the child struggles with authority or control, explain why that is, and explain the power of her connecting early and often with your kiddo. Tell her when birth parent visits or counseling appointments are if you see triggered behaviors the next day so she too can be prepared. Let her know that you are happy to hear from her to navigate any challenges and be part of the team to help your child succeed.





## Sample Letter to Teacher:

*Hi! My name is Ashley and I am the foster mother of J. J and his brother have lived with me for 6 months. When J talks about me, he calls me "Ashley" not mom. J has two other siblings who live in another foster home. J has weekly contact with his birth mother via supervised visits on Tuesday afternoons. Sometimes Wednesdays can be hard for him after these visits so I ask that you would have an extra dose of empathy and understanding for him on those days! J is a hard worker and loves science. He also loves bugs and is pretty good at sports. J is behind in some of his academics because he often missed school and rarely did homework before he came to live with me. School is important to me, but in our home his education will take second to his feeling safe and connected to caring adults. J missed out on having healthy adult mentoring through the first 8 years of his life and it takes time for him to trust new adults. This can come off as disrespect or challenges with authority, but that isn't really what it is. Behind those behaviors is a little guy who learned to take care of himself and learned to mistrust adults because they were often unpredictable and scary. Every week we are making progress at home in helping him feel safe and cared for. You can help us too! In your classroom, J will do best if he truly thinks you care for him. Maybe there will be moments throughout the first few weeks where you could get to know him a little better? I could bring him up after school one day for you to share a snack with him or we could set up a zoom call where you could chat. We'd be happy to come to the school and help you prepare your classroom too! Any extra time like that will go a long way in helping J feel safe, which in turn will help you have a better school year with him! J does best with routine and structure and you'll find that unstructured times are when he gets dysregulated-often leading to getting into trouble. I have found it really helpful to give him a job to do during these times or to stay close by as both these things keeps him more regulated. He doesn't do well with change, so if your school day routine is going to involve a change, it would do best for him to be told ahead of time or for you to let me know so I can explain the changes to him. I appreciate you taking the time to read more about J-I know how busy you are! I am here to be part of his team so if you ever have any questions or want to talk any challenges through, please don't hesitate to reach out!*

### **Spend time with the teacher before school starts.**



When you reach out to the teacher, see if you can visit with her before school starts. See if she needs help setting up her classroom or if you can stop by and bring her lunch one day. Let she and the child spend some extra time together, forming a bond, before the complication of other children in the classroom. If school has already started, see if you can bring the child up after school one day for a snack or if a zoom conversation between them might work. Have a list of questions the child can ask the teacher to get to know her better and hopefully the teacher might do some of the same!

### **Present a united front with the teacher.**



Some of our children have developed manipulation and triangulation strategies as a survival skill. To combat this, you are going to want to present a united front with the teacher. Let the child see you together, explain to the child that the two of you have each others email and phone numbers and you'll be in regular contact with each other. Explain all of this to the teacher so she doesn't allow the triangulation to happen on her side. Back each other up, keep each other in the know about things, and show the child over time that you are on the same page and are going to regularly stay in contact. This united front actually helps a child feel safe and allows them to begin to put down the strategies that don't serve them any longer.

### **Designate a safe person at the school.**



If your child really struggles with anxiety or fears in school, see if the school can appoint a safe person your child can go to when dysregulated or having a hard time. Maybe this is a secretary, the nurse, a resource teacher, etc. Several families have been able to work this out with the school and it has been successful!



#### **Tip:**

[The Connected Child's chapter 4 on fear](#) is available for a free download. Consider sending it to a teacher who asks how she can better understand your child's story!





# Support separation anxieties

Our children can often really struggle with separating from us, which makes sense again when we stop and think about their story and the loss of people they have experienced as well as just the unknowns of being in foster care. Will someone come pick me up at school today and take me somewhere new? Even our older youth feel this way sometimes—and it's easier to miss this in their big bodies because their anxieties about times of separation can sometimes look like disrespect and power struggles to us. It might look like them asking the same questions over and over again which likely becomes frustrating to us. But look further and you might realize what is really going on—these moments of separation are hard for them but they're likely not going to tell you that with their words.

If your child is struggling with the idea of separating from you for school, try these things:



## **Ask your child to share what is worrying them:**

They may be able to share with you what they're feeling which can lead to a good conversation where they will feel seen and soothed by you. You may also be able to offer them a practical solution that provides them with the felt safety they need.



## **Have a morning ritual before drop off or bus pickup:**

Consider playing a round of cards, going for a walk, eating breakfast together, or doing something connecting before you have to separate. It can be easy to just busy yourself with the morning routine and focus on getting everyone out of the door on time, but if you have a child who is really struggling, this busy morning routine might be a bit too much, without a moment of slowing down to connect. You could try something as simple as a secret handshake, a joke of the day, a shared youtube video, or a morning car ride dance party. These are simple ways to help your child feel good about the morning separation.



## **Be creative with ways to stay connected while they're in school:**

Send a note in his lunchbox or book bag, give him a special memento of yours to carry in his pocket or put in his desk, share a piece of jewelry (think something you made together, a locket, a friendship bracelet, etc). Consider if there are touchpoints throughout the day you can make with one another such as having his teacher read him a short email you send, having a brief phone call halfway through the day, or maybe texting your teenager on their lunch break. This likely won't be a long-term need but may be something to help get him through the initial transition into a new school year. We have done these mid-day phone calls with several kids who have shown separation anxieties and it has worked exactly as we had hoped!



**Talk about the plan for AFTER school:**

Sometimes, honestly, our kids just need some reassurance they're coming back to us at the end of the school day. Reassure the child they're coming home to you, that you'll be there at the bus stop or in the pick up line at 3pm. Give them a watch to wear to regularly check the time. Create a predictable after school ritual you can talk about; just something consistent they can look forward to, nothing big (a snack, a card game, free play in the yard, a cartoon, etc.).

Note: Let's say your youth normally does pretty well with morning routines for school, and then there are a couple days where there seems to be a struggle. Instead of just seeing the "unacceptable behaviors," consider that something new may be going on at school that has caused your child some stress or anxiety, and check in with them. Be curious, patient, and empathetic. They may be experiencing something new and need your support to handle it.



# Support regulation needs

A child's state of regulation greatly affects how they show up in the classroom. Every child has moments where they are more dysregulated—maybe due to hunger, being tired, sick, or just having a bad day. But children who have been affected by early adverse experiences can spend more time in states of dysregulation, or get there quicker, and this often shows up in the classroom as behavioral challenges. Keeping a child regulated, and getting them quickly back to calm after they're dysregulated, is an important component of their success at school. All of us need something different to regulate our bodies but below are several things we have found helpful in regulating a child that you might be able to include in your child's school routine.

## Consider oral sensory support.



Chewing bubblegum and sucking on peppermints have been found to help students in the classroom. Researchers say that gum increases the flow of oxygen to regions of the brain responsible for attention and the scent of mint stimulates the hippocampus area of the brain, the area that controls mental clarity and memory, particularly long-term memory. Basically, the aroma of peppermint - primarily the menthol component - triggers you to wake up and pay attention. If bubblegum or mints aren't being allowed, a peppermint essential oil roller may be another option.

## Encourage food every two hours.



It can be a long day for your child if the only thing he gets to eat at school each day is lunch, and we can't really guarantee they're not half eating something and then heading out to the playground! Snacks every two hours keep your child's blood sugar regulated which keeps their mood regulated. In addition, many of our kids have food insecurities which could show up at school in the form of dysregulation and challenging behaviors. Talk to the school to see what their rules are about snacks. If you can have them, pack a morning and afternoon snack for your child and encourage them to eat it. Consider snacks that are high in proteins—beef jerky, protein bars, etc as this is especially helpful to their brains. If snacks are not allowed, explain your child's situation and see if they can quickly eat a snack from home in the nurse's station or office instead. Don't forget your teenagers—this can be especially helpful for them too!

## Encourage hydration.



Just like with food, your child's behaviors can increase if they are dehydrated. To ensure your child isn't, see if they can have a water bottle with them at their desk or made available to them in the classroom.

### **Make a plan for transitions and unstructured times.**

Often times we find that our children are most dysregulated, and we have the most behavioral challenges, during transitions and unstructured times. At school this would most likely be on the school bus, in the hallways, at assemblies, during lunch, and at recess. If you know this is the main reason for your child's struggles, see if you can brainstorm a solution with your child and their teacher. Can the child be given a fidget to focus on during these times? Can the child be given a job to do to help her successfully transition (like being the line leader after recess or the one who comes in first to get something ready in the classroom)? For our older kids, this may be that they have an adult that will be around to check in on them during these times or maybe they are able to be dismissed from class a few minutes before everyone else, to help with hallway struggles.



### **Make a plan for movement breaks.**


Some of our children really need movement breaks to stay regulated. Brainstorm with the teacher how your child is already getting movement breaks in the classroom and where more might be added.



### **Explore sensory supports.**

Some fidget items can bring calm and regulation to our children so experiment at home to see if anything helps. These are not just 'toys,' they serve a purpose for calming and staying regulated. For oral kiddos, try chew jewelry or pencil toppers so they don't chew on their clothes or school supplies. Try flexible seating options for kids who need to move. Try calm strips or other items that can be touched for kids who need tactile input. Try weighted items for kids who need proprioceptive input-like clothing, vests, lap blankets, etc.





# Be a safe person for your child when it comes to school stuff

For me, this next part about homework is a make or break it issue for foster families. Too often, school issues lead to control battles and something that disconnects us from our children. With birth children, this disconnection can be temporary and because of the relationship, we may be able to bounce back easier. With a child you just met or a child who has a history of relational harm, school battles with you can be really damaging as you try to build trust and restore what has been broken in their previous adult relationships.

I want you to know that I am pro education. I want to raise good learners and kids who do well in school. But way more important than education is that we as foster parents focus our time with our children on being safe adults and connecting with them.

This is really important: felt safety and connection proceed learning.

A kid who feels safe and loved by the adults in his life, does well in school because his brain is free to learn, grow, and be creative. A kid who feels unsafe and disconnected will spend a lot of time in survival and protection mode. And that's when we see classroom behaviors, authority issues, peer issues, and school work struggles. So, how do you become their safe person when it comes to supporting them educationally? Here are a few ideas:

- **Help them organize their space & materials.**

For children with ADHD, processing challenges, or other brain-based changes due to developmental trauma, organizing for school can be a huge challenge. Morning routines can take forever. They can miss needed items in their backpack. They can forget things and struggle to bring home what is needed each day. This isn't laziness; it's an executive functioning can't, not a won't. Help create a system for them that they can rely on. Make printed morning task lists of what you need them to do and when you see them off task just simply redirect them to check their list. Put a printed schedule on their desk at school for their daily routine. Make a printed list of items to pack up at the end of the day and put it on their desk or as a keychain on their bookbag. Sometimes we need to make things visual and concrete for our kids to be successful and encourage growth of some independence skills. Ask the teacher to help with this. Store all their school stuff in the same place at home. Have a designated homework area or organized spot where they can take care of school stuff.

- **Prevent the after-school meltdown.**

Okay, let's put this in an adult context for a moment.

You've just spent 7 hours away from your home working hard to pay attention to your bosses' request, requests that came regularly throughout the day. You were told when to transition between activities and regularly told to stay seated. When you were hungry, you couldn't eat and when you had to use the restroom you were told to wait 10 minutes for the whole group to go. Finally, the bell rings letting you know you can leave, but with an added reminder that you have more work to do when you get home.

What would that feel like for you? Ok, let's add to it.

Now you arrive home and your partner starts asking you a lot of questions about your day. He/she tells you that before you can take a break you need to finish the work you brought with you from the office as well as to unload the dishwasher and take out the trash.

Now what are you feeling? Is this hitting a little too close to home?

On a typical school day, our kids have spent all day away from us. They've dealt with other adults telling them what to do all day, navigated social challenges with their peers, and tried hard to learn new material presented to them.

At the end of the day, their brains and bodies are depleted. They need a brain break. They need to eat something and hydrate themselves. They need to run around, play, and reset their bodies after a long day. Some of them need quiet alone time to rest; others might like to be with a friend or family member. If you want to prevent the after school meltdowns from taking over your home, give your kids a brain break after school.

Don't ask them a bunch of questions. Feed them.

Don't talk to them about homework or chores or the rest of the day's expectations. Get them outside and let them do their own thing for 30 minutes. Let your teenager hang out on the couch.

Then after their brain break, you can talk to them about the things you need from them and make a plan for the rest of your evening.

- **Eliminate homework battles.**

Ok, this is really important. Homework battles drive disconnection and worsen attachment struggles. If you are parenting a child that you do not have a strong bond with yet, walk away from the homework battles. I repeat, walk away.



### Here's what to try instead:

- Does the child have a stronger bond with one of the adults in the home? Let them help.
- Does the child allow an older child in the home to help? Let them help.
- Do you have a friend who wants to tutor? Let them help.
- Is the homework the child receiving inappropriate for his developmental age? Talk to the teacher about reducing it in half, especially if the child already has an IEP or 504 plan.
- If the child is really struggling and doesn't have an IEP or 504, request an evaluation to see if they need one.
- Try to make the homework fun or active to encourage learning. A few years ago my twins and I studied for the exams by playing darts and shooting hoops. Not only did they enjoy the process, but engaging their bodies actually helped them retain the information.
- Let the kid do their best and if they have questions, redirect them to ask the teacher about it the next day. Let the teacher administer any consequences for incomplete work.
- Don't do the homework. Yes, this can be an option. Is your child extra triggered on visit days or counseling days? Tell the teacher that on these days, you won't be doing homework with them and see what options there are: Can he do it during class the next day? Can it be saved for the weekend? Can he just get a pass? We need to be willing to see our individual kid in their story and give them some grace for all that they are going through.

***Homework just isn't worth the break in your relationship, especially when you are working so hard to build trust.***



# Support them when they struggle

You can do all these things and still your kiddo can struggle at school. There are so many triggers and factors at school that are beyond our control. It's okay. When your kid struggles academically or behaviorally, try these additional tips:



## **See the need, and try to be creative with the school to meet it.**

Get away from labeling your child as a problem or thinking he is lazy. I promise he isn't. He just needs you to ask some questions and help him problem solve for a solution.



## **Be an advocate.**

If your child continues to struggle with the same issues, consider requesting an IEP or 504 evaluation to determine if there are some accommodations that would help him be more successful. Keep the teacher and school accountable to what they say they are going to do. (See the next section of this module for more information about this process).



## **Let the school be the discipline and you be the safe base.**

Your school has consequences for children while they are there and if your child requires one of those consequences, let the school handle it. Don't add on a punishment at home. Instead, try to help the child figure out what went wrong and learn from their mistake so it doesn't happen again.

Work with the school as part of the team but don't let them sidetrack your attachment building process. The school is not the expert of your child, they are not the expert of your child's story, and they are not the expert in childhood developmental trauma. They are the experts in education and that will be their primary focus. Your primary focus needs to be on helping your youth feel safe and connected at school and at home. The learning then will come!

***Remember. Felt-safety and connection proceed all learning!***



## **Additional Resources:**

[Avoiding After School Meltdowns](#)  
[Classroom Regulation Strategies](#)





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