

# EDUCATION RIGHT TIME VIDEO

## Key Points

### General Information:

Children spend a good part of their day at school. School is not only critical for a child's educational growth, it also plays a critical role in a child's social development. For children who have experienced trauma, grief and loss, the school environment can be very stressful.

### Part 1: Challenges

- Academic:

Children who have experienced separation, loss and trauma many not have had stability in their education. This can be a result of frequent moves which resulted in changing schools as well as issues taking place in their life which made it more difficult to focus on school. It is critical for children to find a measure of stability at school so that they can focus better on their education.

Try to identify any potential gaps in their education and/or skills that they might need enhanced in order to succeed in school. There may be specific subjects that they need help with, like math or reading. Children may also need help with skills such as staying organized and focused and being able to sit still and listen. Without these skills, children may struggle even more academically and end up getting in trouble at school because teachers see only their behaviors and don't understand the reasons for the behaviors.

It is important to help children gain these skills which can be done by effectively communicating and partnering with the teachers, finding tutors, providing support at home, and setting routines related to schoolwork. However, it is important for parents who are fostering or adopting to adapt their expectations to fit the child's current academic abilities. The child's wellbeing must be the priority- not only their grades.

- Behavioral:

Recognize and understand the challenges children have faced in life will probably be brought with them to school in some way. Children with histories of trauma and loss may show behavioral concerns in class. It's important for parents and teachers to look past the child's behaviors and try and identify the reasons behind their behaviors in order to gain understanding.

Stay curious about what could be causing children to feel overwhelmed, afraid, or stressed. For example, classrooms have a lot of stimulation, such as other people vying for attention, the opportunity for interaction with others, lights/noises, etc. People who have experienced trauma often overreact to a lot of sensory stimulation, which means the school can be a hard place to focus due to all the noise, smells, lights, and constant interaction with others.

It is important to remember that children’s behavior is their language. It is our job to help them learn to calm themselves and their behaviors, not to punish them for their response. Figuring out how to lighten the root causes of their behaviors will eventually help improve the behaviors themselves.

Children who have experienced separation, loss, and trauma need to feel like they belong. The school setting itself can be challenging. If children have difficulties interacting with their peers, then this can make it even more difficult. If children are also behind in academics and do not feel as though they are able to understand and perform at the same level as other children in their class, then this makes them feel even more like they don’t belong.

- Social Emotional:

Trauma and loss affects emotional development, which can make it difficult for children to connect with their peers. It can affect their focus, their motivation for being in the classroom, and their ability to develop relationships with their classmates and with the teacher.

When children have lived with trauma and loss, they often have not had the experience to learn how to socialize well with others; this leaves them with a shaky foundation of knowing how to interact, especially with peers. It is important to try and find opportunities for children to interact with other children in controlled settings, like organized sports or activities. These types of controlled environments can help children build the skills that are needed to interact appropriately with their peers.

Change can be hard for anyone, but children who have experienced separation, trauma, and loss often need extra support during transitions. These transitions can include small things such as moving from the classroom to the playground or larger things such as transitioning to a new school or starting a new school year. Parents can help children with these transitions by preparing them in advance, writing out the routine, talking about the transition, and explaining to them what they can expect to take place. Parents may need to take extra steps, such as having children see the classroom prior to starting, meeting the teacher in advance, or walking them through the school day.

## **Part 2: Providing Support**

- Partnering with the school:

Connecting and building relationships with teachers, school administrators, and staff members at the school will help you better support the children’s educational goals. Teachers and school personnel are used to and appreciate parents educating them about the individual needs of children, from allergies to health needs. It is important to provide some information about the children’s’ background that will help the teacher know how to adapt their instruction or classroom setting so that it can meet the child’s needs. When doing this, it is important to do it in an informational way, without flagging the child as “troubled” or “bad”. Be respectful of the child’s story and history: you can explain the child has experienced serious challenges and their development has been affected, without providing the details of the trauma.

Steady contact, over time with the school will be valuable in building the relationship with school officials. This can be done by sharing information about behaviors that the child may exhibit and methods that work at home. Communicating regularly with their teachers will also help you avoid misunderstandings. It is important for the parents and school staff to work together to help the child. This will help to improve accountability and support and will hopefully help the child feel like they belong in the school.

- **Advocacy:**  
Sometimes the child's academic challenges will require the parent who is fostering or adopting to advocate for specific supports in the classroom. It is estimated that between 35-50% of children in foster care have or are in need of some form of special education services. It is critical for parents who are fostering or adopting to find out what works best for their child, and then work with the school to get these accommodations provided.

When advocating, it is important to be polite, but be sure to clearly inform the teacher about the child's specific needs and the services that you think the child could benefit from. It is not realistic to expect teachers to understand everything; so you may need to educate the teacher to some of challenges that children who have experienced trauma, separation and loss may experience.

- **Education laws:**  
Becoming familiar with education laws can help parents who are fostering or adopting to advocate for formal supports.

The Individuals with Disabilities and Education Act (IDEAL) provides rights and protections for children with disabilities and guarantees access to a free, appropriate, public education in the least restrictive environment. IDEA includes the "IEP"-Individualized Education Plans, which is a written educational plan that is designed to support a child's special learning abilities. The IEP sets reasonable learning goals for the child and outlines the services and supports that the school will provide so that the child can meet these goals, while at the same time being educated as much as possible with their peers. For example, a child who needs more time to complete tasks may have an IEP that provides extra time for assignments to be completed. The IEP can also provide for such things as one-on-one reading assistance or speech therapy.

IEPs set reasonable learning goals and outline the services that the school will provide so the child can meet these goals. The IEP identifies specific areas or subjects where the child is struggling, with a measurable goal of how progress in those areas will be measured. When it's written well, it is a powerful tool to gain and show educational progress. It also gives protections for the student and understanding of their behaviors. The IEP also makes sure children can get the services and supports that they need so they can stay in an unrestricted setting and be with their peers.

It is important for the parent to be educated about what to ask for in an IEP. You can ask for an IEP early in the child's education or anytime they are in school. It is important for parents to become familiar with the IEP process, including how to request an assessment to determine if a child needs

an IEP, the types of services and supports that can be included in an IEP, and how to successfully advocate for an IEP.

The Rehabilitation Act, which is part of the Americans with Disabilities Act, includes “504 Plans,” which are another support for children at school. The qualifying definitions of disability are a little bit broader in a 504 than they are in an IDEA, so a child might have a disability, but doesn't warrant special education services or intervention. However, that same disability could warrant them to have a 504 plan. To qualify for a 504 Plan, a student must have a recorded or known physical or mental disability or a problem that impacts or limits one or more major life activities. There are no goals or benchmarks as there are in IEPs, but 504 Plans do allow for ways to meet a child's needs, such as having a specific seat in class, access to special technology, being given extra time to complete a task, and other creative ways to meet a child's social need. 504 plans can be effective for children whose struggles may get better with support and can help give further understanding of a child's learning differences.

### **Part 3: Managing Your Expectations**

- Parents who are fostering or adopting may have expectations of what academic success look like. However, it is important to keep in mind that children who have experienced trauma, grief, and loss may struggle academically, and the parents may need to adjust their ideas of what academic success looks like.
- Parents must be flexible and change their expectations around academics to fit with the child's current capacity. It is important to remember that each child is unique. Parents need to define success differently, such as asking yourself if you did the best you could for the child, and did they give the child as much patience, love, kindness, and boundaries that the child needed.
- Schools are now starting to understand how to better prepare children for learning, such as recognizing and being therapeutic around their life challenges. Schools should be seen as a resource that can help children. Parents who are fostering or adopting should focus on partnering with the school to help the child be successful at school. A child can be bright and beautiful regardless of what their academic achievement is!