

Tips for foster carers supporting pre-school children with the transition to primary school

Developed by Leicestershire Educational Psychology Service in conjunction with Leicestershire Virtual School

The last few months have been a strange, and sometimes difficult, time for us all. The coronavirus pandemic is likely to have meant that your foster child may not have had the enhanced transition to primary school that you and the professionals supporting them had been planning. It is important to remember that this will have been the same for all children and that schools will have a key focus on supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of all children after a challenging few months where they may not have been able to access pre-school.



The following information provides some tips and ideas on how you can support your foster child in getting ready to start school, during their first year, and beyond! It is important to remember that all schools have their own approaches so some of the ideas below may look a little bit different in your foster child's school, especially in the current climate.

Why might children in care find the transition to primary school more difficult than some of their peers?

Each child is unique with their own set of individual early life experiences. The reasons children come into care can vary greatly and these personal differences may impact on the ease with which they transition to primary school. Whilst some children thrive despite adversity and cope remarkably well, it is important to acknowledge that for some children in care, their early experiences of trauma, upheaval and uncertainty can make the transition to primary school more challenging for many reasons, including:

- Transition inevitably involves loss and some uncertainty; feelings that might be exacerbated for children in care who may have already experienced significant trauma and loss in their early life. As such, your foster child may find losing touch with key adults, peers, and even the safety of their pre-school environment particularly challenging.
- Children in care may find it more difficult to separate from their caregivers to attend school. These heightened feelings of separation anxiety may exist due to their previous life experiences having taught them that adults cannot be relied on to be consistent and may not always return. Difficulties separating from key adults might be particularly exacerbated after spending a more intense amount of time with their foster carers during lockdown.
- Experiences of inconsistent caregiving prior to coming into care may have led to attachment difficulties which could make it more difficult for your foster child to trust new adults and feel safe in their school environment.
- Many children in care may not have had the range of enriching early life experiences which help to develop early language, personal organisation, attention, emotional regulation, and learning skills. Remember that even though your child is starting school, they may be emotionally functioning at a younger age and may not be as ready to learn as their peers yet.

Getting ready to start primary school



- Engage in any resources provided by the school to support with transition. This might include watching videos of the school or their new teachers, looking at photos, or looking at the school website together.
- If your child hasn't been leaving the house very often due to the pandemic, it would be helpful to take small trips out in the weeks leading up to starting school to get them used to being out of the house again.
- Take a walk or drive to the school together so that your child can get used to the new route.
- Get back into a routine a week or two before term starts so that your child can get into the habit of going to bed and getting up at certain times again.
- Make use of social stories, books and activities which may help to familiarise your foster child with routines, expectations and events in their new school environment.
- Give your child time to get used to their new uniform by allowing them to try it on in the days leading up to starting school, helping them to practise putting it on and taking it off with minimal support (if possible).
- Ensuring all your foster child's belongings are clearly labelled will help them with personal organisation. Allowing them to help you pack their belongings for school can also help them to become familiar in what they need to remember at the end of the school day!
- Help your foster child to develop their independence by giving them increasing chances to have a go at things on their own, such as going to the toilet independently, following simple instructions and making simple choices.
- Take time to look at the school lunch menu together and think about whether your child wants to have school dinners everyday or whether they would like to take packed lunch some days. Having a look at the menu in advance can provide a nice opportunity to try some of the less familiar foods at home before starting school.
- It is important to remember that your child does not need to be able to read, write or do sums before they start school. Teachers are skilled and knowledgeable in working with children who start school with a wide range of abilities and will support your child to make progress at their own pace and level. However, it might be useful to help your child to recognise their name to support them in finding their peg, tray and belongings!
- Encourage your foster child to talk about their feelings, using visual prompts of different emotions (e.g. emojis for happy, sad, angry, tired etc.). Wonder aloud with your foster child about how they might be feeling by reading their demeanour and using phrases like 'I wonder if you're feeling...because...'.



- Have answers prepared for "what if?" questions such as...
 - What if I get lost?
 - What if I hurt myself/feel sick?
 - What if I don't like the lunch?
 - What if no-one wants to play with me?
 - What if someone is mean to me?



Helping your foster child to settle into their first year in primary school (and beyond!)

- Remember that even though your child is starting school, they may be emotionally functioning at a younger age than their peers so may sometimes need more support and reminders - and that's okay!
- It is natural for children to feel a little bit 'wobbly' during their first few weeks at a new school (and beyond!) as they get used to their new environment and adults. It is possible that it will take your foster child a little longer to settle into their new school than their peers.
- Making use of transitional objects which they can take between home and school may support your child in feeling reassured, safe and settled at their new school.
 
- Many children, even those who are used to long days at pre-school, may find school very tiring. Therefore, it is important to ensure that they have plenty of relaxing time in the evenings and at weekends.
- Once your child starts to bring home learning activities, such as reading books, it is important to set aside quiet time to look at the tasks together. Some children may feel too tired to do more learning in the evenings after school so may find it easier if you set aside some time in the mornings.
- Using visuals may help to support your foster child in understanding the routines of school and organisation. Having copies of the visual timetable used at school and making use of visual checklists to act as a reminder to support organisation may both be helpful.
 
- Let your child know who will be picking them up from school and where they will be waiting for them. Sharing this information with the school can be useful in allowing staff to provide reassurance to sooth any worries during the day.
- Find ways to communicate regularly with the school that work for you, your foster child, and the school. This could be through a home-school communication book but texts or emails are just as good. Communications should always have a positive focus, not just reporting issues that have arisen or concerns that you have. Thinking about what he/she has learnt or enjoyed or that you are proud of should form an important part of communications.

- If incidents do occur in school, it is important to boundary these to the school environment. Give yourself permission to accept that the school will have dealt with any problems that have arisen and they therefore don't need to be revisited at home.

Useful resources

Books

'Harry and the Dinosaurs go to School' by Ian Whybrow

'Starting School' by Jane Godwin and Anna Walker

'I am too absolutely small for school' by Lauren Child

'Everybody worries: A picture book for children who are worried about Coronavirus' by Jon Burgerman
(<https://home.oxfordowl.co.uk/books/jon-burgerman-everybody-worries-free-ebook/>)



Websites



The Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY) website features a range of activities you can do with your foster child to help in preparing them for the transition to primary school, during their first few weeks, and throughout their first year in school: <https://www.pacey.org.uk/parents/toolkit/>

The Leicestershire County Council website signposts to a range of resources which can help you in getting your foster child ready for school:

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/education-and-children/early-years-and-childcare/school-readiness>

Useful contacts

Leicestershire Virtual School

- Tel: 0116 305 6097; Monday to Thursday, between 8:30am and 5pm, and Friday between 8:30am and 4:30pm
- Email: virtuelschool@leics.gov.uk (we aim to respond to emails within 3 working days)
- Website: <https://resources.leicestershire.gov.uk/leicestershire-virtual-school/foster-carers>

Leicestershire Educational Psychology Service

Leicestershire Educational Psychology Service is currently providing a daily helpline during the coronavirus pandemic to offer telephone advice and support to Leicestershire parents and carers. You don't need to pre-book and can just call on the day.

- Tel: 0116 305 5100; Monday to Friday, between 9am and 11.30am including school holidays.
- Website: <https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/education-and-children/special-educational-needs-and-disability/education-and-childcare/educational-psychology-service>