

Class is in session: A discussion guide to help families navigate schools

This guide is designed to help adoptive, foster, and kinship support group leaders facilitate a discussion on navigating school systems and advocating for children and youth in a school setting. Even if you do not plan to lead a meeting on this topic, school issues are fairly universal. The suggestions here can help you respond any time educational challenges come up.

First, do your homework

Consider the following as you get ready for the meeting:

- Foster and adoptive parents may have different levels of control when it comes to advocating for their children at school. You may need to adapt the discussion based on your group.
- Remind members that their children's stories belong to their children. This includes information about any past experiences, diagnoses, or behavioral challenges. It is important to share respectfully and with the understanding that the group is a place of safety and confidentiality. We share with purpose and only what is necessary. We share our stories to help one another learn.
- Conversations about school challenges can be frustrating. It is easy for the conversation to turn negative and unproductive. As the facilitator, part of your job is to help your group stay focused on sharing solutions. Help members maintain a mindset that challenges are not insurmountable. At the same time, what works for one person might not work for others.
- Group members may have children with vastly different academic and social/emotional abilities at school. It's important to not compare one child's experience to another. Encourage members to not minimize the challenges of others. Success will look different for everyone.

Learn about your local support resources

It's important to learn about resources in your community so that you can help your group members when they are struggling.

Families may feel overwhelmed and alone in advocating for their children at school. Depending on the family's circumstances, professional educational advocates may be available to help children and youth get what they need. Many jurisdictions include educational advocacy as part of their support services for eligible adoptive and guardianship families.

You can learn more about educational support for children impacted by child welfare by visiting the Child Welfare Information Gateway website. It has resources on adoption and school, as well as educational services for children in foster care. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education has information on protecting children with disabilities.

It is useful to know the laws and national resources. But this should be paired with an understanding of what is available locally. A good place to start is on the AdoptUSKids website. You can look up your state or territory to find information on the post-adoption and guardianship support in your area. The site also shows agency contact information.¹

Also, each state has a Community Parent Resource Center.² This is a federally-funded resource hub for parents of children with disabilities. Many of them offer training, advocacy help, and other support caregivers can use.

Discussion themes

Consider these themes that you may need to bring up throughout the discussion. Being prepared to address common challenges can help your group be more solution-focused and prevent some negativity.

- **Teachers usually care deeply about children.** When your child isn't getting what they need at school, it can be hard to remember that parents, teachers, and other school personnel are on the same team. Educators go into teaching because of their love for children. They are often as frustrated as parents by our educational systems. Remind parents of this when they are having trouble empathizing with teachers and other school staff.

1 Look up your state or territory's support services and providers at adoptuskids.org/adoption-and-foster-care/parenting-support/support-services-by-state.

2 Look up your state's Community Parent Resource Center at parentcenterhub.org/find-your-center.

- **Relationships are key.** Kids learn the most from teachers when they have a connection. And when parents form strong relationships with school personnel, everyone benefits. But it's not just on the parents; we also need to encourage educators to build strong relationships with our kids. We all learn better when we feel connected to those who are teaching us.
- **Kids can't learn if they aren't regulated.** Unfortunately, teachers receive a lot of pressure to get kids to perform academically. It is often up to parents to advocate for their children's emotional and relational well-being. If homework is a battle every night, this puts strain on the important relationship between the caregiver and the child. It's important to push back on things that you feel are harming your child. Sometimes the expectations need to be changed to match their strengths.
- **It can be hard to adjust expectations.** For many kids who have experienced significant trauma or prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol, brain differences may mean that their educational goals do not match their peers. This is especially true if the child has a scattered developmental profile and they don't function at their chronological age in all areas. Caregivers may grieve the loss of how they thought their children would do in school. Giving space for this is important. Consider leading a discussion on parental grief and loss using a discussion guide from AdoptUSKids.³

Try these solutions

Though no one solution will work for all children or all families, here are some suggestions that can help caregivers navigate challenges at school. Offer these ideas if you get stuck or if the group is deviating from finding solutions.

- **Bring an advocate to meetings.** Having a person at school meetings who is in your corner, who can take notes when you're overwhelmed, or who can simply lend support can be a great way to make tough meetings easier. The person doesn't have to be a professional advocate but can be another parent or friend. The advocate could also be the "bad guy" and bring up things that are harder for you to say if you are focused on maintaining relationships with school staff. This is a great way for caregivers to give concrete tasks to those in their support system. You can even suggest that members attend meetings with each other as a way to bolster the relationships and connections within your support group.

³ An AdoptUSKids discussion guide on parental grief and loss is available at professionals.adoptuskids.org/understanding-parental-grief-and-loss-a-discussion-guide.

- **Look for allies and champions.** It can be frustrating to feel like no one in the school understands your child. When parents feel this way, encourage them to find at least one person in the school or district who can be a champion for their child. These champions don't need to be teachers; consider the librarians, school counselors or social workers, lunchroom monitors, or classroom volunteers. Talking to other parents whose children have similar challenges can be a great way to identify champions.
- **Ask for reports and paperwork in advance.** Encourage parents to ask that reports or draft plans be sent to them before any meeting. Per the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), schools are required to give parents drafts of IEPs, 504 plans, and evaluations at least three days in advance of a meeting to discuss them. You can save everyone time during meetings by skipping through what everyone is in agreement on and focusing on points of disagreement or building updated accommodations. If there are materials that a parent doesn't receive in advance, remind them they can say they need to think and will get back to school staff before any decisions are made.
- **Share this video.** Some kids will only show their more intense behavioral symptoms at home after school. Using this video can help both caregivers and school personnel understand that school is not the entire picture. The child may need more accommodations even if they aren't showing all of their challenges at school. "Delayed effect, after school meltdown" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F18FsiPMFhc>)

Discussion

Today, we're going to talk about navigating schools and advocating for our children. We'll discuss the successes we've had and help each other with strategies for the challenges that can arise for our kids at school. Even if you aren't having challenges right now, this is good information to be prepared for future issues or to help prevent them.

Let's start positively. Can you share some successes that you've had in advocating for your child in school? What strategies have worked?

Tips:

- During this discussion, ask more questions about how those positive experiences came to be. Explore if parents have overcome barriers or challenges to get to these successes and brainstorm how they can be replicated by others.
- If people aren't offering any successes, remind them that incremental success matters. It's important to celebrate all successes, even if they seem small. If a parent normally receives a call from the school every day, but one day last week they didn't, that's amazing! And can they figure out what might be helping?

Does your child have a favorite part of school?

Tip:

- Even if everyone feels like their child is struggling with everything at school, gently push the group to think about what their children like. How can they advocate to help them get more of what they like out of school and less of what they don't like?

What has been hard for your child at school and what have you already done to help them with this? What else would group members suggest that might help?

Tip:

- Remember to help members get to solutions to these struggles. You can use this as a brainstorming session.

Are there ways that you have talked with school staff that make the conversations more successful?

Prompts:

- Describe the problem using an "I" statement, rather than a "You" statement. For example, say, "I am concerned that Jasmine is the one being removed from class, rather than the children who are bullying her," instead of, "You are punishing my child for reporting the bullying."

- Ask for clarification: “Do I have all the information? Is there more I need to know?”
- Monitor your nonverbal cues, such as tone, eye contact, and body language. You could be saying one thing, but your body is conveying something else.
- Suggest some specific solutions, like, “Would it be possible for my child and the other child to both have their seats moved?” You could also say, “Can we also offer some tools they can use when feeling anxious, such as a stress ball or coloring sheets?”
- Include planning a time for follow-up: “Can I call next Thursday to see if things are going better?”
- Thank the school officials for their time and end on a positive note, even when you’re frustrated.

Have there been any teachers or other staff who have been an ally to your family at school? Did you choose them or did they choose your child? How did you start to build that relationship? What could you do to build strong relationships with other adults at the school?

Prompt:

- It helps if caregivers become familiar with their children’s schools in casual ways. That way, it will be easier to approach the school when there is an issue. Possible ideas include:
 - Asking for a tour of the school
 - Subscribing to the school newsletter and following their social media accounts
 - Going to school plays, concerts, and sporting events
 - Looking into volunteer opportunities
 - Visiting the school library to see the resources available to students
 - Attending school board or PTA meetings

Are there teachers who have really connected with your child? How did they find success? How could other teachers replicate that?

What accommodations have been the most helpful for your child?

Tip:

- Remember that school is not just about academic growth. If an accommodation or intervention helped your child make friends or feel more comfortable being themselves at school, that matters just as much—if not more.

Prompts:

- Have you requested any changes to their homework? You can do this in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 Plan.
- Does a worksheet full of problems or questions stress out your child? The school can put one question on a page to prevent overwhelm.
- When your child is starting to feel overwhelmed, are they able to regulate better with silence and being left alone? The school can find a space—sometimes even within the classroom—where they can go for quiet and calm.
- Does your child struggle with changes to routine, like when there is a substitute teacher? You can ask to be notified, when possible, before a change like this happens. If you know in advance that they will have a substitute on Friday and that will make the day hard for them, you can keep them home.
- Does your child struggle with multi-step instructions? If so, an accommodation for breaking steps down can be added.
- If your child is getting in trouble frequently, you can request that the school does not use exclusionary consequences, such as removal of recess time or free time. The school can give some alternative consequences, such as finding a separate location for the child to complete school work, giving the child an assigned seat in the classroom, or providing the child with nonverbal communication tools to prompt the teacher when they need a break.

Are there any accommodations that you have requested but that haven't been honored or consistent? Does the group have any suggestions for what might help change this?

Prompts:

- Contact the local Community Parent Resource Center to find out what they suggest.
- Ask that school staff are trained on how trauma affects the growing brain. A child with brain differences caused by trauma can often appear to be a typical child, as they frequently have strong expressive language skills. As a result, teachers sometimes don't understand the need for their accommodations.
- Document in writing the consequences for your child of not having the accommodation.
- Ask for alternatives if what you are hoping for can't happen—or isn't happening yet—and a plan to touch base to go over the results. Test those alternatives as long as it is safe for your child and document if they aren't working.
- Consider contacting someone at a higher level, like the principal, to ask questions about how to make this work. You can also request a special education evaluation.

HANDOUT 2

Template email for caregivers

Use this email template to address a problem your child is having at school.

Dear [principal's or administrator's name]:

[**In the first paragraph**, say who you are. Give your child's full name and what class they're in. Before you state your reason for writing, say something positive, such as a recent success with classmates that made your child feel included.]

[**In the second paragraph**, *briefly* explain why you are writing. Give relevant history and facts that support your concerns. For example, your 3rd grader is struggling with peer interactions at school. You might say that your child's attitude about school has been getting worse and cite one or two examples of the challenges they've experienced. Avoid talking about challenges from past years, keeping the concerns relevant to the present. Remember to use "I" statements, such as "I'm concerned that my child isn't being protected from bullying," rather than "His teacher isn't protecting him from bullying."]

[**In the third paragraph**, state what you would like to have happen or see changed. You may *briefly* say what the school has already tried. However, spend most of this paragraph saying what you want for your child. Explain what type of response you would prefer. For example, if you are requesting a meeting to discuss your concern, state who you would like to attend the meeting, such as the child's teacher, the counselor, and the principal.]

[**Finally**, end with an acknowledgment that you all share an interest in helping your child and that you appreciate a prompt response. Consider giving a date by which you'd like a response.]

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Your name

cc: Your child's teacher, counselor, and/or any other staff with relevant information