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SUPPORTING STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE

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Students living in foster care are at risk for experiencing many challenges in school, spanning domains of social–emotional, behavioral, and academic functioning. They are twice as likely to be absent from school and to have received and out-of-school suspension and up to three and a half times more likely to receive special education services. Therefore, it is important for schools to recognize and respond to the unique needs of students in foster care to provide the necessary resources for school success. When working with students in foster care, school psychologists should be equipped to support the success of these students by determining what the needs of students in foster care are, and how to meet identified needs. The current paper will discuss the education-related vulnerabilities and presenting problems for children in foster care and outline social–emotional, behavioral, and academic supports that school psychologists can offer. © 2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Students in foster care face significant challenges and are at risk for a myriad of vulnerabilities that create barriers to their success in school. Data from the U.S. Department of Education show that the number of students and youth that are homeless is at a record-breaking 1.36 million. This represents .27% of the total public school enrollment (50.4 million). Among homeless youth, approximately 400,000 children are in foster care placements each year (Goldberg, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Children may be placed in foster care for many reasons including emotional or physical neglect or abuse, caregiver domestic violence, substance abuse, or parental mental illness. Histories of maltreatment and/or instability of caregivers put these students at risk for experiencing many challenges in school (McKellar, 2007; Williams, 2011). Specifically, students in foster care are twice as likely to be absent from school and to have received and out-of-school suspension and up to three and a half times more likely to receive special education services (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014).

It is well documented in the literature that the difficulties students in foster care face span domains of social–emotional (Landsverk et al., 2009; McKellar, 2007; Pears, Fisher, & Bronz, 2007), behavioral, and academic functioning (McKellar & Cowen, 2011; Scherr, 2007). Therefore, it is imperative that schools recognize and respond to the unique needs of students in foster care to optimize their opportunities for educational success. Social–emotional needs must be taken into account as they form the foundation for students' well-being, and have an impact on behavioral and academic outcomes that can inhibit the students' ability to be successful (Landsverk et al., 2009).

All children require a stable and supportive environment to thrive; however, the needs of foster children may be considerably different from the needs of their counterparts (Rebelez, 2013). The goal of school psychologists should be to focus on the supports that can be provided within the school by first determining their unique needs and identifying appropriate supports to meet such needs. The current paper will discuss the education-related vulnerabilities and presenting problems that children in foster care may experience, as well as outline social–emotional, behavioral, and academic supports that school psychologists can facilitate to address students' needs.

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Presenting Difficulties in School

Students are often placed into foster care settings because of adverse child-rearing experiences, resulting in increased risk of social–emotional, behavioral, and academic problems (McKellar, 2007; Scherr, 2014). Schools often do not have access to private files that indicate precisely why students were removed from their residence and placed in foster care, so school personnel cannot presume to know the specific circumstances leading to removal from the home. In addition, without access to comprehensive background information, it is likely that schools will not have complete access to information such as student health and school history. Each student's unique foster situation will affect the legal restrictions on sharing information about the student and obtaining parental permission for any necessary assessment and services.

Equally important, schools should recognize that, despite the reason for placement in foster care, these students have been displaced from their families, which may result in a change in a sense of community, loss of pets, belongings, familiarity, and culture (Scherr, 2014). Further, the effect of maltreatment or home removal from familiar individuals and contexts may result in behavioral problems, anxiety, attention problems, or other internalizing or externalizing behaviors in the school setting (McKellar, 2007). School psychologists are positioned to plan and implement the necessary structures of supports to address the unique needs of students in foster care (Scherr, 2014). As a caution, schools should recognize that a one-size-fits-all approach would be insufficient because not all students in foster care have the same experience, nor are they affected by their experiences in the same way.

Social–Emotional Difficulties

Social–emotional well-being serves as the foundation for school-readiness skills (Landsverk et al., 2009). When compared to nonmaltreated peers, children with histories of maltreatment showed significantly greater maladaptive functioning, and these social and emotional problems are likely to permeate into all domains of school functioning, including behavioral and academic skills (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995). The impact of early relationship disruptions must not be underestimated and may even have an indirect effect on the teacher–student relationships, another key component of student achievement (Schwartz & Davis, 2006). Children build new relationships based on their early experiences, and if early attachments have been characterized by abuse and neglect, new relationships will often reflect the troublesome composition of their early relationships (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992).

Additionally, it has been found that one of the most significant results of early relational trauma is a child's loss of the ability to effectively regulate the intensity of their feelings and impulses (Van der Kolk & Fisler, 1994). A student's ability to regulate emotions and behaviors, in regards to the development of relationships, is a pivotal prerequisite skill required for school readiness and academic success, and may be impaired in foster students (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004). Further, the emotional, social, and behavioral adjustment to school is just as important as cognitive and academic preparation, and children who cannot pay attention, follow directions, appropriately socialize, or control their emotions often do poorly in school (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997). Learning in schools has a strong academic, social, and emotional component (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Relationships and emotional processes affect the ways in which students learn in schools; as such, we must adequately address these aspects of the educational environment for students to maximize their ability to be successful (Durlack et al., 2011).

Because schools are social places and learning is a social process, students' social and emotional skill set can either promote or hinder their success in school (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). Students who receive social and emotional support in school are better positioned

to build skills that foster their motivation, self-confidence, effective communication, and academic progress (Zins et al., 2007). Moreover, Zins and Elias (2007) highlight that social-emotional competence and academic achievement are undoubtedly intertwined and the provision of education in both of these areas maximizes students' potential to succeed in school and throughout their lives (p. 233).

Social Skills. Social skill deficits are more commonly seen in foster children, when compared to their counterparts (Pears et al., 2007). A deficit in social skills is likely to be far reaching and permeate into other domains of students' functioning. Impairments in self-control and social skills are more commonly seen in children who have been victims of parental neglect. In contrast, children who have been physically or emotionally abused may experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Students in foster care may also present in school as detached and apathetic, overly sociable, or even disruptive, defiant, or antisocial (McKellar & Cowen, 2011).

Behavioral Difficulties

Behavioral difficulties in school create significant barriers to academic success for students and may present as difficulty with rule following, low frustration tolerance (McKellar, 2007), difficulty controlling impulses (Pears et al., 2007), and more frequent discipline infractions (Scherr, 2007). Students in foster care have higher discipline rates than their peers, with 24% of foster youth facing at least one suspension or expulsion, while the national rate is 7% (Scherr, 2006). Furthermore, students in foster care are three times more likely than their peers to be expelled from school (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014).

One significant contributing factor to the behavioral difficulties faced by children in foster care is their increased level of school mobility, as compared to their counterparts (McKellar & Cowen, 2011). Between 56% and 75% of foster youth change schools when first entering care, and 34% of students in foster care have experienced five or more school changes by the time they are 18 years old (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). The impact of frequent school changes, in addition to early attachment disruptions, is often observed in the difficulties foster children have in forming and sustaining relationships with peers and school staff. Children who have been placed in foster care, or who have had multiple caregivers, may present with significant interpersonal deficits, leading to more severe problems relating to teachers and peers (Ritchie, 1996). Moreover, about 50% of foster children placed in special education are identified with emotional or behavioral disorders (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2010). As such, it is important that school psychologists be able to recognize that these deficits may present in different ways, including deficits in social skills (Williams, 2011), poor peer relations, difficulty controlling impulses (Pears et al., 2007), delays in forming connections, and a lack of coping strategies (Viezel, Lowell, Davis, & Castillo, 2014). These students may also have general feelings of fear, anxiety, and guilt, and social withdrawal (Landsverk et al., 2009). Put simply, students may be unaware of the new schools' norms for behavior and as a result, staff can misinterpret their behaviors. For example, McKellar and Cowen (2011) noted that when faced with a threatening situation, these students might withdraw or become unresponsive, which can be misinterpreted as defiance.

The cause of a disproportionate discipline rates for students in foster care, as compared to their counterparts, may be twofold, suggests Scherr (2007). Students in foster care may legitimately face more behavioral difficulties than their peers due to adverse life circumstances; however, it may be just as likely that these students are being unfairly targeted due to negative staff perceptions and a lack of staff preparedness. School psychologists should be aware of the differing ways in which behavioral difficulties may present for students in foster care, as well as recognize the link of behavior problems and academic problems.

Academic Difficulties

The accumulation of social–emotional and behavioral difficulties faced by students in foster care also puts them at great risk for academic difficulties. Students in foster care face psychoeducational difficulties that tend to begin early and persevere (Scherr, 2014). Although social and emotional functioning is generally linked to nonacademic outcomes (e.g., self-efficacy, self-esteem), social and emotional behaviors and functioning also play a critical role in the ways that students perform academically (Zins et al., 2007). Schools are social places and students do not learn alone, instead they learn in collaboration with others within the school environment. Their ability to manage social behaviors and emotions has an impact on their learning and interventions within the school environment (Zins et al., 2007). More so, social–emotional challenges can result in challenges including discipline problems, lack of commitment, alienation, and even dropping out. Additional challenges may include poorer memory skills, cognitive deficits, and language problems (Leve et al., 2012). Moreover, foster children often demonstrate math skills below grade level, literacy delays, especially in phonological awareness, and, on average, have lower grade point averages than their classmates (Cox, 2013). Developmental delays as result of potential repeated traumas, difficult attachments, lack of access to basic needs (e.g., safety, nourishment) might also be evident and have an adverse impact on their ability to learn at a level commensurate with their typically developing peers (Leslie et al., 2005).

Such deficits may be, in part, attributed to school mobility (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). Every time a student switches schools, they lose 4–6 months of progress due to acclimation to the new environment, delays in transfer of records, and assessment for special services (McKellar & Cowen, 2011). Incomplete student records can have a significant effect on the academic services for students in need. Without a full record of a student's prior educational performance, needs, or supports, there may be interruptions in the continuity of instruction and services (McKellar & Cowen, 2011). The cumulative effect of these important educational variables results in a heightened risk of academic problems for students in foster care. Specifically, rates of eligibility for special education are between 30% and 50% for children in foster care, while nonfoster youth are eligible for special education services at a rate of 11.5% (Scherr, 2007; Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012). Correspondingly, research has shown that children with disabilities typically remain in foster care for longer periods of time and experience more transiency in placements than foster children without disabilities (Hill, 2012).

Protective Factors

School psychologists have a responsibility to focus intervention efforts on student strengths, rather than deficits, and those individual variables that they will have the greatest likelihood to affect (Scherr, 2014). Students in foster care have shown characteristics of resiliency, despite the overwhelming challenges they face, which arises from protective factors and mechanisms operating according to life circumstances and developmental trajectories (Gilligan, 2007).

Positive educational experiences have been found to contribute to resiliency factors and to be a resource for helping students recover from trauma and stressful home environments (Gilligan, 2007). In a 2002 study by Martin & Jackson, high-achieving students in foster care were questioned on the best ways to enhance their educational experiences. Positive support and encouragement for academic success from school staff and caseworkers was a significant contributory factor in school achievement (Harker, Dobel-Ober, Lawrence, Berridge, & Sinclair, 2003; Martin & Jackson, 2002). A supportive person was described as one who acted as a mentor and took time to listen, made them feel valued, and provided acceptance, encouragement, and motivation for them to work hard at school (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Martin & Jackson, 2002). Mentoring can also

benefit at-risk students by offering protective support, depending on the quality and length of the mentoring relationship (Scherr, 2014). Students who are engaged in consistent, long-term mentoring relationships that provide developmentally appropriate activities have shown improvements in family and social relationships, behavior at school, academic achievement, school attendance, involvement in recreational activities, and trauma symptoms (Williams, 2011).

Moreover, for these at-risk students to succeed, they must be motivated to learn, be engaged in the process of learning, and must be invested in membership of the school community (Gilligan, 2007). School engagement and connectedness represents a student's sense of social support and attachment to adults and peers within the school (O'Brennan & Furlong, 2010). Key factors that may support school engagement for students include positive perceptions of teacher support and encouragement (Gilligan, 2007), perceptions of safety, and positive peer relationships (O'Brennan & Furlong, 2010). An additional protective factor noted by students in foster care was the opportunity to participate in extra-curricular activities. Students reported that these opportunities were very limited to them, based on their care arrangements, and expressed that participation in extra-curricular activities would foster a sense of normalcy and give them opportunities to confidently socialize with peers (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Additionally, in the Harker et al., 2003 study, students in foster care reported that they desired the opportunity to be included in decisions that affected their lives (e.g., educational rights, transition planning, academic support, etc.). The examples of success in these students provide further rationale that preventative and intervention strategies can support the educational success of students in foster care. Schools must shift from assuming that these students will be unsuccessful, based on their past, and assume that they will be successful when the appropriate supports are provided.

Practical Implications for School Psychologists

The unique needs of students in foster care and the numerous challenges they face have significant impacts on their educational outcomes. Moreover, these students often feel very different from their peers, based on the traumatic events and challenges they have endured (Rebelez, 2013). Still, while there are many challenges, there are several protective factors that can support students' potential for success in school. Students spend a significant amount of their time in school; thus, school staff members have the capacity to provide substantial supports while students are in school. School psychologists must act as leaders to ensure that students are receiving essential supports, screening, progress monitoring, and that planning is comprehensive, and communication and collaboration with staff and families is meaningful (Scherr, 2014).

To provide the most effective services for students, school psychologists must recognize the variable range of vulnerabilities for these students, and be prepared to provide comprehensive, consistent supports for addressing their unique needs within a multitiered framework. It is also appropriate for school psychologists to keep teachers informed on the foster care status of their students, consult with teachers to provide supports for students, and act as a liaison between home, school, and the child welfare system (Zetlin et al., 2010). Because the needs of this population vary widely, the programs and supports discussed for students in foster care may not be appropriate for all students. Therefore, schools must establish a home–school partnership to work with caregivers, child welfare agencies, and students to decide on appropriate individualized supports. Schools have an obligation to create a structured and supportive environment for all students. The needs of each student are unique and the supports that schools provide will be contingent on those needs in conjunction with the availability of the school's resources. Due to the diverse needs and challenges of students living in foster care, the following sections will focus on providing strategies for effectively supporting these students and their families.

Recommendations for Support Services

Social Skills Support. Due to the fact that students in foster care are more likely to display social skills deficits, as compared to their nonfoster peers (Pears et al., 2007), and that these deficits are likely to permeate into other domains of functioning, it is crucial that school psychologists be prepared to assess for and provide a range of social skills supports, based on student need and school resources. School psychologists should be aware that these students might be in need of therapeutic social skills groups, individual counseling sessions, and problem solving, conflict resolution, and anger management interventions (Scherr, 2014).

Addressing students' social and emotional development is a necessary component of supporting their success. Schools may accomplish this task by integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) practices into students' education. SEL is a process through which students learn to recognize and manage their emotions, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors (Zins et al., 2007). Social and emotional education helps foster students' attachment to school and commitment to academics and should be viewed within a multitiered framework such as Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS; Cook et al., 2015) that provides structure for identifying a continuum of services based on student needs. Further, the competencies taught through SEL programming are most effectively implemented when it is purposefully linked to academics and has the continued involvement of students, parents, educators, and community members (Zins & Elias, 2007). Mindfulness might also be considered as an effective way to meet the needs of students in foster care. Mindfulness is defined as paying attention to what is happening around oneself and being fully present and compassionate with oneself and others (Viafora, Mathiesen, & Unsworth, 2015). Viafora et al. explored the effect of mindfulness on middle school students facing homelessness. Using a quasiexperimental design, they found that students facing homelessness reported significantly higher evaluations of the course, higher reports of emotional well-being, and were more likely to use mindfulness and recommend it to peers, when compared to their counterparts.

Mental Health Services. The risk for psychopathologies that impact the social–emotional functioning of children in foster care is heightened and may include PTSD and trauma, disruptive behavior disorders, depression, and substance abuse (Landsverk et al., 2009). The evidence base for treating these conditions lies in behavioral or cognitive-behavioral interventions that specifically address symptoms, behavior, and functioning (Landsverk et al., 2009). Such interventions include: trauma-focused cognitive behavior therapy (TF-CBT), the incredible years, parent–child interaction therapy (PCIT), and cognitive behavior therapy for depression (Landsverk et al., 2009). These programs can be adapted for the school setting, but have all resulted in increased efficacy when caregivers are actively involved in the intervention. Additionally, children with comorbid mental health conditions and those whose functional impairment is associated with long-term risks, will benefit from intensive home- and community-based services (Landsverk et al., 2009). As such, it is important that school psychologists obtain consent to communicate with students' outside providers to foster collaboration and determine if there are any additional supports that may improve students' functioning in school.

Behavior Management. To encourage appropriate behavior in school, students in foster care will likely benefit from explicitly stated expectations, positive behavioral supports, behavior management, self-management, natural consequences, a structured and predictable environment, and copious amounts of individual attention (McKellar, 2007). Students should be explicitly taught school and classroom expectations, and limits and consequences should be consistently reinforced (McKellar, 2007). Moreover, the school environment should be one of security and stability in which

adults model emotional and behavioral limits and interpersonal relations, to enhance the potential for supporting a sense of trust and security in students (Schwartz & Davis, 2006).

Extracurricular Activities. Students in foster care may benefit from involvement in extracurricular activities through the promotion of positive social interactions, engagement in the school community, and decreased time and motivation for problem behaviors (Scherr, 2014). Transportation and cost barriers for these activities may be alleviated by the arrangement of carpools, and schools may also opt to waive or subsidize participation fees.

Continuum of Services. The extensive social–emotional, behavioral, and academic needs of students in foster care require that emphasis be placed on a continuum of care that begins in school and extends to home and the community. First, schools will need to communicate with the child's welfare agency to determine the legal restrictions around sharing student information with biological parents and obtaining parental permissions for assessment or services (McKellar & Cowen, 2011). Schools should also be prepared to form plans for foster students that include explaining academic and behavioral expectations, promoting regular school attendance, being flexible around requirements, and continuously communicating with the students' foster parents and caseworkers (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). Should students be reunited with their family of origin, schools should still be prepared to provide a continuum care that addresses the comprehensive needs of these students.

Due to higher rates of school mobility than their counterparts and incomplete records that inhibit the continuity of supports, academic expectations should be clearly communicated and targeted academic supports to address specific skills that have not yet been taught or that the students have not had the opportunity develop fluently, should be the priority (McKellar & Cowen, 2011). For example, additional supports may include programs such as a credit recovery program due to the possibility of frequent school changes and subsequent incomplete classes, or programs like Letterbox in which children receive books and educational materials on a weekly basis. This allows for students to receive continuous academic materials and resources while working on areas of deficit. The Letterbox intervention was developed to provide direct support to children in foster care by sending reading and math materials to students to improve academic outcomes.

In addition, research has shown that effective parenting techniques have led to increased academic outcomes for students in foster care (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). School psychologists should be prepared to offer parent training to caregivers in effective behavior improvement and tutoring methods to support school success for foster students. Table 1 provides an overview of recommendations for support services when working with students in foster care.

Conclusion

Students in foster care may face many challenges that their peers who are not in foster care typically do not, and likely require a range of additional supports in school to help propel them toward success (Rebelez, 2013). As such, services should be tailored to meet the needs of individual students or groups of students based on presenting problems or challenges. Students in foster care have shown characteristics of resiliency, however, and the negative perceptions and low expectations from school staff must shift toward support and encouragement for these students to promote resilience and success in school (Gilligan, 2007). The challenge for schools is to provide a global range of supports for students in foster care, while simultaneously avoiding stigmatization and singling out students. Schools should be prepared to serve students in foster care by recognizing their differing needs, rapidly and appropriately responding to those needs, and by being flexible

Table 1
Recommendations for Support Services

Recommendations for Support Services	
Recommendations	Potential Outcomes
Social Skills Supports	
Therapeutic social skills groups Individual counseling Problem solving Conflict resolution Anger management Social and emotional learning	Enhance social skills deficits; prevent social skills deficits; improvements in academic competence; SEL—students learn to recognize and manage their emotions, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors. Increase student emotional well-being.
Mental Health Services	
Trauma-focused cognitive behavior therapy (TF-CBT) The incredible years, parent–child interaction therapy (PCIT) Cognitive behavior therapy for depression	Programs specifically address symptoms, behavior, and functioning. Programs can be adapted for school setting, but all have resulted in increased efficacy when caregivers are actively involved.
Behavior Management	
Explicitly stated expectations Positive behavioral supports Behavior management Self-management Natural consequences Structured and predictable environment Individual attention	Increase appropriate behavior in school; enhance the potential for supporting a sense of trust and security in students.
Extracurricular Activities	Positive social interactions; engagement in school community; decreased time and motivation for problem behaviors.
Home–School Collaboration	
Communicate with caseworker and foster family Parent training Communicate academic expectations Students complete sample assignments Tutoring/targeted instruction Credit recovery Letterbox	Determine legal restrictions around sharing information with biological parents; quickly match curricula to student's instructional level; recover incomplete credits due to school change; provide students with academic materials and resources; improve academic outcomes; targeted instruction.

in the ways that they meet student needs. Such implications may include schools forming plans to accommodate for students who may transfer midyear, by providing copies of notices and newsletters that can be sent to foster parents, explaining school and classroom procedures, and showing students around the school (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014).

The more that schools can work with caregivers and child welfare agencies to assure school stability, promote regular attendance, and provide preventative supports for behavior problems and high-quality special education services, the more positive school experiences will be for students in foster care. Positive school experiences also have the power to counterbalance negative outcomes for this vulnerable population of students (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014).

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