

Success In School For Children and Youth In Care

Making the Provincial Protocol
Framework work for you....

Tips For Group Care Staff

Compared to the general student population, children and youth in care are less likely to graduate from high school, often do poorly on Provincial Achievement Tests, and may fall farther behind in school or drop out as they get older. Group care staff are uniquely positioned to support and advocate for the educational needs of children and youth in their care. Group homes use structure and routine to run effectively; these characteristics also promote educational success of children and youth. Group care staff can make a difference toward children and youth's success in school by encouraging and facilitating school attendance, identifying school as a priority, arranging help with school work, and partnering with school staff to ensure learning needs are met.

“ Youth in Care Say...”

■ *“Living in a group home is not how anyone expects to grow up. I don't want to let my friends know that I have to live in a group home and not with my family. Things are always changing and I feel like I shouldn't get too comfortable, or too attached. I'm a kid and this is my real life—so, everything's personal. Just keep that in mind.”*

■ *“I know you guys try hard to make it seem normal. But, seriously, no one had the rules or a schedule posted on the wall in any of my old homes. I know you have to be organized, but don't make it seem too institutional. You may not be able to provide me the family or childhood I want, but you can help to make sure I get a great education that will prepare me for my future.”*

■ *“It seems like there's a big focus in group care about my attitude and behaviour. Another thing that we should be talking about is my education—about going to school and succeeding in school. I'm going to make mistakes—I'm a kid! After all I've been through, I just want to be a normal kid and mess up every now and then without worrying about being moved again if I make a mistake. That's a lot of pressure.”*

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How Can I Support Educational Success for Young People in Care?

ELIMINATE BARRIERS TO ATTENDING SCHOOL :

■ Arrange transportation to school.

A clear, manageable transportation plan must be in place for the child or youth's travel to and from school. Ideally, he or she will walk, take the school bus or be driven to school. If public transit is the only option, try to minimize the number of transit changes and the length of commute time. If the young person needs help learning how to take public transit, you might need to go along a couple of times or practice riding the bus together on a non-school day.

■ Create a functional morning schedule that supports getting to school on time.

Ideally, the child or youth will set his or her alarm clock and be responsible for morning preparations. If necessary, provide wake-up calls and encourage the child or youth to get up. Arrange a morning routine that allows all the children or youth in the house to meet their needs for good hygiene, breakfast plans and clean clothes while also being on time for school. Remember that teaching time management and independent living skills shouldn't be at the expense of meeting the bus or getting to school on time.

■ Provide incentives when appropriate.

Use incentives to target difficulties in the morning routine, from getting up on time to practicing effective time management throughout the early morning and increasing school attendance. Provide verbal praise and encouragement as well as no-cost rewards such as additional recreational time.

■ Support consistent school attendance.

When students miss the bus or skip school, attempt to find alternative ways the student could travel to school to attend at least part of the day, rather than missing the whole day. In cases of a missed bus or skipped school and when they are not ill, the young person should be expected to spend the day on school work to complete homework, review and study to better understand their subjects so the behaviour is not reinforced by a "self-selected holiday."

■ Promote and model healthy lifestyles.

Healthy minds and bodies that are ready to learn are created, in part, by children and youth getting adequate rest, proper nutrition and physical activity.

ENCOURAGE CHILDREN AND YOUTH TO STAY AND SUCCEED IN SCHOOL :

■ Promote good study habits.

Designate a particular time and quiet place for the child or youth to study. Ensure the young people have the proper tools, including highlighters, pencils, calculator and dictionary. Eliminate as many distractions as possible.

■ Coordinate study time.

Set a specific time for homework within the group home so the children or youth are not tempted by the activities of others, such as watching TV, surfing the Internet or talking on the phone. If the youth need the Internet for research, monitor the online activities to help keep the child or youth on task.

■ Request tutoring when needed.

Make it a practice to request funds for tutoring services if a young person is struggling and the support needed for success is beyond the skills of the group home staff. In addition, identify academic strengths in the young people in your home and have them help each other in their strong subjects. School staff may also be able to identify peer tutors.

■ Support extra-curricular activities and the friendships they develop.

Help the child or youth in care to maintain positive personal connections through participation in extra-curricular activities. This may require additional transportation and scheduling arrangements for the group home, but should be seen as lifelines for the child or youth. Your help and these activities increase their motivation and commitment to school, as well as boost their self-esteem and promote development of lifelong personal interaction skills.

■ Pay attention to patterns.

Use collected documentation to note behaviour patterns to proactively anticipate and address problems at school with peers or teachers. Use the child or youth's past experiences to identify possible solutions to challenges. Offer to help the young person in care to negotiate or brainstorm solutions to recurring problems.

■ Confront truancy.

Work with the child or youth and the school to determine the reasons for reluctance or refusal to go to school. Help the child or youth address and overcome the issues rather than avoid the problem. The goal is to increase attendance. Be consistent. Work and communicate with the young person, caseworker, school staff and other group care staff members so everyone is clear about the plan and their roles in carrying it out.

MAKE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS A PRIORITY :

■ Identify a school liaison.

A staff member should be identified for each child or youth to be responsible for making the school connection, helping the young person advocate for their educational needs, and following up with the school as required and when expected. While each child or youth has a key worker, every staff member should be kept updated as to the child or youth's relationship with the school.

■ Make connections with school staff.

Attend school registration, meet the teachers, arrange for a tour of the school for you and the young person and attend parent/teacher conferences. Introduce yourself as one of the young person's caregivers and ensure the school has your contact information. Return phone calls promptly.

■ Follow-up and identify responsibilities.

Develop a clear system of communication with the school. Make it clear who the school should contact at the group home, and identify who the group home's primary contact is at the school. Note upcoming meetings and conferences and follow through by attending.

■ Use online school communication tools when available.

On a regular basis, use online tools, if available, to view the child or youth's assignments, grades and attendance. Encourage the young person to maintain a personal agenda with exam and assignment due dates. Contact the teachers or school with any questions or concerns. Reward and praise the child or youth for a job well done.

■ Attend core team meetings.

It is essential for group home staff to attend and participate in core team meetings to support the child or youth's success. This is a key role and responsibility.

■ Inform youth of Advancing Futures Bursary Program.

Caseworkers have information about this bursary that is specifically for youth in care. Ask the school about other bursary or scholarship opportunities and assist with the application processes.



TAKE ON SUPPORTIVE ROLES IN CARING SETTINGS :

■ Ensure staff attend and contribute to parent/teacher conferences and core team meetings.

As the day to day caregivers, group home staff have important contributions to make to these collaborative discussions as well as to support the child or youth at the meetings and with following through with the plans afterward.

■ Employ staff with unique interests and diverse educational backgrounds.

A richer environment for the child or youth is created by hiring diverse staff members. Use unique staff strengths and life experiences to engage young people in education. Share your own educational journey, including your hopes and aspirations and your successes, as well as any setbacks you may have experienced and how you overcame them.

■ Emphasize the personal relationship.

Children and youth want to be around people who are genuinely caring and interested in them. Be professional, but be present. Be encouraging! Even though it's your job, you are their caretaker. Support the child or youth with his or her homework and take an interest in what he or she is learning or passionate about.

■ Educational success is behavioural success.

Group home documentation requirements may emphasize the child or youth's behaviours and focus on progress on independent living goals. Keep in mind that educational success contributes to success in other areas.

■ Create space for internal staff discussion and documentation that supports education.

Use staff meetings and documentation to review and discuss the educational needs of the child. Staff should update each other on the child or youth's educational progress and goals.

■ Set high but achievable educational expectations.

Maximize educational possibilities for the children and youth in your care.

■ Stay positive.

Sometimes in group care the focus may be on behaviour challenges and treatment planning. Continue to step outside the box and remember you are also the caregiver and the young person's advocate. Focus on the strengths and emphasize successes and what is going right for the young person.

■ Create a home atmosphere.

Foster an atmosphere in the group home that is as caring and safe as possible. Staff should be available and approachable. Minimize the institutional feel and foster a sense of family. Schedule fun time, especially on the weekends. Help the children and youth build healthy and balanced lives. Encourage spirituality and a connection to cultural background, where applicable.

■ Celebrate achievements.

As much as possible, celebrate accomplishments such as good attendance, improved test scores or a role in the school play. Make it a group home celebration.

WORK WITH TEACHERS AND SCHOOL STAFF:

- Provide teachers with information about the young person's strengths, interests, challenges, personality and behavioural or emotional needs.
- Provide the school with the young person's primary contact at the group home and identify what information needs to be shared immediately.
- Create and implement a communication plan with the school about attendance and grades.
- Being respectful of confidentiality, help the school staff understand the complex issues the young person is facing.

WORK WITH CASEWORKERS:

- Inform the caseworker about behavioural needs that may pose a risk to the young person or others.
- Inform the caseworker about the young person's educational status, including their need for funds for school fees, tutoring, field trips and fees for extracurricular activities.
- Identify the best way to keep in touch with one another.
- Keep the caseworker updated about the young person's contact with their birth family.

MESSAGES FROM THE GROUP CARE STAFF TO OTHER CORE TEAM MEMBERS

I am an important part of the team because I supervise and mentor the young person every day. Even when I'm not there, a team of staff fully supports the children and youth in our group home. We all work together to help them achieve stability in a variety of areas in their lives. In addition, we provide support while they deal with family circumstances. We're a great resource of information about the children and youth in our care, and we are the go-to person for questions about homework and other day-to-day school events. I'm tracking the young person's school attendance and progress. I support their relationships with other residents, friends and the birth family. I have developed a service plan and work with the children and youth on a variety of stability goals.

When working with me, please remember that I may not always be on duty. You can leave me a message and I'll get back to you as soon as possible. If you need to speak to someone immediately, please remember that I'm part of a larger team and that there is someone at the group home at all times for the children and youth in our care. We'll do our best to get you the information you need or to problem-solve with you. If I don't have the information, I can gather it from our staff quickly. We are actively involved in the youth's life and know about their strengths, challenges, personality and interests. We all provide services to the young people in our care, and want them to succeed in their educational and life goals.