UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

MARCUS, AGE 13

AUGUST 2025 EDITION

Photo by: Andrew Branch

LILY AND OMAR
PHOTOGRAPHED BY KAREN TEERLINK

UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION
CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES
In partnership with RAISE the FUTURE

ASSISTANCE FOR ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

Utah's Adoption Connection helps families adopting children from foster care (or those with Social Security eligibility) access vital adoption support.

Eligibility:

The child must be in state custody, cannot or should not be returned home, have had reasonable efforts to find other placements, and meet "special needs" criteria (age 5+, disability, or sibling group, and if under 5 at risk to develop). Privately or independently adopted children may qualify if receiving SSI prior to finalization of the adoption.

Medicaid:

Coverage starts with the Assistance Agreement and may be retroactive up to 90 days. It supplements private insurance and covers mental health care; usage depends on provider HMO networks. Medicaid is secondary when parent(s) have private insurance.

Non-Recurring Expense Reimbursement (up to $2,000):

Includes fees per child for adoption, legal/home study, medical/psych exams, placement supervision, and travel/lodging related to the adoption process.

Monthly Subsidy:

Negotiated based on the child's needs at the time of adoption and set subsidy levels—paid as a cash allowance to the family. Subsidy amounts can be adjusted as needs change, and families may appeal denials or reductions.

This assistance exists to reduce financial burdens for adoptive families bringing children with special needs into permanent homes, ensuring support throughout adoption finalization and adjustment. Visit https://www.utahadopt.org/support-resources/adoptive-family-resource-library/financial-assistance to learn more.

ON THE COVER: MARCUS

Marcus is a creative and imaginative seventh grader with a big heart and even bigger dreams! Whether he's building epic worlds in Minecraft or zooming around on his scooter or bike, Marcus is always on the move and full of energy.

Marcus is happiest when he's building things, from puzzles to train tracks, and he enjoys games like Fortnite that let his imagination run wild. He also shines when he's helping out with hands-on tasks like yard work; physical jobs are right up his alley.

If he could have any superpower, he'd pick super strength — a perfect match for his love of action and helping others. With his adventurous spirit and kind heart.

Marcus brings creativity and joy wherever he goes!

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How to Prepare Your Child with Special Needs for the Back-to-School Transition

BY: ANNA STEWART (EMPOWERINGPARENTS.COM)

"**There's a sale on school supplies**," I told my then 11-year-old son. "Let's go. You can pick out all your own binders and folders."

"**Mom, you are ruining summer**," he wailed. "I don't want to think about school. I hate school!"

This was not news to me. He struggled with ADHD and school demanded he be—and do—all the things that were so hard for him. They needed him to be organized, on-task, get work done and be nice about it.

Summer was both a relief and a challenge. He loved not being in school, but that meant he was with me most of the time. In some ways, I was ready for him to be back in school, have a routine and—let me be honest here—not be with me all day. But I knew we wouldn't get there without some planning, discussion and clear expectations.

When Your Child Has a "Bad Reputation" at School

An issue for many parents and kids is how to make this year better when last year was defined by misbehavior, hating school, and sleepless nights (for both of you).

My son had a bad reputation in school. He appeared defiant, refused to do work in class, rarely did homework, and was constantly moving and chattering. The teachers knew he was bright, which made it even worse for him, as they thought he should be able to control himself. But he wouldn't—and sometimes simply couldn't.

He was the "bad kid" in class. The teachers watched him closely and quickly got on his case, even if everyone else was engaged in the same disruptive activity. As a result, much of his limited energy for school was spent reducing the teachers' stress about having him in their class.

It took a multi-tiered approach to start the new school year off well. Over the years, I learned to focus on what I could control. There are some things, such as how a teacher relates to your child, that are really out of your control as a parent. But you can help your child reduce his or her anxiety and stress. You can cultivate potential allies at school, teach them some ways to control their behavior, and show them how to deal with conflict when it arises.

How to Set Your Child up for Success This Year

Setting your child up for success includes identifying what sets him off, like unexpected transitions, sensory triggers, work he perceives as being too hard (or sometimes too easy), desk mates that kick chairs, and needing to move around but not being allowed to do so. Also identify what keeps your child on track. This might include knowing the environment and people he interacts with daily, and making sure the school understands your child's diagnosis and/or learning needs.

Here's how you can get the information that you need to make this coming school year successful.

Collect Data

School teams gather data as part of their functional behavior analysis. And you should too. You can take notes on your child and then share the data with the teachers. Write down your child's triggers and what strategies work for her. Include time of day, current activity, preceding activity, and when she ate, exercised and slept. During the school year, add information about how homework goes. You may need this data to negotiate fewer (or alternative) homework assignments. Having specific and measurable data gives parents and students more control, because they have the facts of the situation, and aren't just relying on emotions. "He cries for two minutes before leaving the house in the morning" is much more informative than "He melts down all the time!"

Interpret Data

If your child is old enough, share some of this data with him. Teens can actually collect data on themselves, which is proving to be a powerful tool for changing behaviors. Talk about what behavior they think most interferes with their school and home lives and have your child come up with a short list of proposed solutions. For instance, if they can't get up for school and are chronically late and chronically grumpy (and you have data to show that it is three out of five days a week) then going to bed earlier or taking a limited nap after school are reasonable solutions. If their moods are worsened by missing a meal, then a protein shake instead of skipping breakfast is a reasonable solution. Have your child propose the potential solutions and support the reasonable ones.

Develop Goals

Children are usually not able to take the long-term view and see that learning their multiplication tables will help them achieve their future goals. It falls on us as parents to persistently and consistently link the school day to their future. I know I have misused this link in the past and used it to shame my son, and say things like "You won't ever make it if you can't do your homework." Not only is this not true, it's not helpful. Instead, I have learned to say things like, "Wow, I'm really impressed with the persistence you showed in completing your science project. That's a skill every adult should have."

Making the Transition to a New Grade or a New School

Making a good transition into a new school or a new grade can set a tone for the entire school year, especially for our sons and daughters who are easily triggered, get anxious or can't control their impulses.

When planning for a good transition, I've learned that you also need to pay attention to when you need to step back and let your child figure it out on her own, and when to hold the school responsible for their part of the equation.
There are three main areas you'll want to address: (1) the school environment (building, classroom, playground, bathrooms, and getting to school); (2) the people (the teachers, principal, staff, school nurse and counselors, peers, bus driver, etc.); and (3) individual needs (stressors, accommodations, IEP, 504 plans, behavior plans, communication, etc.).

The School Environment

Everyone feels more comfortable when they know their way around an environment. Kids returning to a familiar school have this part down. But kids going to a new school need some support to reduce their anxiety. This will hopefully help them get and stay on track. My daughter, who had significant learning disabilities, visited the high school several times during the spring and summer before her freshman year. We visited at times when the kids were gone but some staff was still around. I did a lot of talking out loud: "Mmm, I wonder where this hall leads?" I pointed out visual cues such as signs, banners, flags, and room numbers.

Tip: Visiting a new school with your child when school is still in session is overwhelming for most any kid, especially those who are feeling anxious. If possible, visit at the end of the school year after the kids are gone.

Tip: Walk around the whole school, focusing on the building and not on the staff. Learn where the bathrooms are (and use them), find where the doors to outside are located and where the library and gym and cafeteria are too. Make a map or take a video. When you think your child is learning their way around the school building and grounds, ask them to lead you around (kind of like a scavenger hunt).

Do this as many times as needed in order for your child to get comfortable with the building. Elementary-age kids might also play on the playground throughout the summer. You may meet other families, and your son or daughter will know how to climb the jungle gym.

The People

Getting a fresh start motivates kids to be on their best behavior, but that can be hard to do in a school where everyone already knows you. Use the before-school tour to start off positively. Check with the school to see when you might come by and introduce your child to their new teachers. Brainstorm with your child about what they might bring to their new teacher and the staff they know such as the principal, front office staff, and janitor.
Tip: For younger children, have them make or create something to bring to their new teacher on the before-school tour such as cookies, a drawing, or some flowers. Try to bring or do something that shows your child's strengths or skills. Keep it simple.

Keep the focus on having your child establish a relationship with the teacher. (Your job as a parent comes in the next section.) If it's a new school, use the tour visits to meet as many people as possible. Consider taking a picture of them so your child can practice remembering their names and roles.

Individual Needs

When school started, my son had his folders ready, but he needed a lot more in place for a successful year. He had a Section 504 plan, a part of the Americans with Disability Act which gave him the right to certain accommodations in order to give him equal access to school. He was fortunate to attend a school where the sixth grade team talked to the seventh grade team about which student needed what accommodations. I found this wasn't the same when he transitioned to high school, so I wrote up a one-page letter that described what his diagnosis was and the accommodations that he needed.

Tip: Keep the IEP or 504 at-a-glance brief, factual, and with a bullet list which includes the accommodations—then share your one-page document with the special education teacher or 504 coordinator and ask that they share it with all the teachers (including PE and electives).

You can also do this for students who have an IEP. One student I worked with actually carried a copy of the accommodation page in his IEP to be able to show his teachers. That way he didn't have to find the right words or worry that the teacher didn't believe him. It's a powerful way to give your tween or teen the skills to become a strong self-advocate.

Once children have some self-awareness about their diagnosis (typically fourth grade and up, but it varies from child to child), I believe they should know that they have an IEP, what it is and why they have it. I started by showing my daughter her IEP when she was in third grade. Each year, I explained more about it. I did not talk about special needs or her disability until the end of fifth grade. I knew that this language would be part of middle school, so I wanted her to be prepared.

Summer and other breaks are good times to talk about school in a casual way. Parents can talk about their own childhood summers and transitions back to school. Share what you did and did not like and invite your child to do the same. If there are concerns that feel overwhelming to your child, write up a plan that you can share with the new teachers.

Kids who struggle at school—for whatever reason—usually want to do well. They want to be liked and to do what they're asked. But they can't always make that happen, and as a parent you can't control what happens in school. IEPs, 504s and behavior plans are tools that your child's school uses to help him learn to control his behavior and actions so that he can learn. Using strategies at home and at school can strengthen your child's skills. Share with the school what works with your child at home, and ask your child's teachers what works at school so you can use it at home.

It took a while, but my son did learn how to manage his behavior and get his needs met while in class. He learned he could tap his foot on a wool cap to muffle the sound and he learned that some teachers were distracted by his fidgeting, so he sat in the back of the room so he could move and they could teach. He also learned to pause and take a few breaths or count to 10 when he got impatient or frustrated.

He wasn't always successful, but he tried his best. His study skills teacher noticed his efforts and engaged him in class. She helped him organize his backpack and locker and talked to the other teachers about the skills and strengths she could see in him. That year, when the bumps came—and they did—he had an ally, and his attitude shifted. For the first time in his life, he felt like he could be successful at school...and that changed everything.

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Utah Department of Health & Human Services

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What Foster Parents Want You to Know About Fostering

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What Foster Parents Want You to Know

Over the years, many experienced resource parents have shared their thoughts on fostering and what they've learned. Here are a few of the messages foster parents hear and how they want to (and sometimes are brave enough to) respond.

"Oh, you are a saint for doing this work."

Many folks try ascribing sainthood or some angelic holiness to foster parents. After all, only someone with a direct line to God could take in children who don't belong to them, right? Wrong! The public may be divided on their views about foster parents. But these folks have no delusions about themselves, their roles, or goals.

Resource parents see the need in their community and ask, "Why not me?" They don't necessarily have more patience (or less intelligence) than the rest of us. However, they are willing to open themselves up as a soft landing place for children going through the worst times.

In our observation, foster parents generally like children and are naturally flexible. They can accept a certain amount of chaos and unpredictability. That doesn't make them saints. They still get frustrated and cranky, just like you and I do. Resource parents worry about their kids; they may just have more kids to worry about than you do! They have good days and bad days like the rest of us. Despite this, foster parents still say, "I can make a difference for a child."

We must recognize how problematic it can be to view foster parents as saints. Doing so makes fostering out of reach for most of us. This country needs more foster parents, not less.

“But you do get that monthly paycheck!”

Another common misperception by the public is that foster parents do this work for the paycheck. Yes, they get a monthly subsidy that helps defray the expenses of adding a child to their family. However, most foster parents spend more on their children than they receive in that subsidy. Honestly, no foster parent in America is getting rich off that subsidy!

And for the record, foster parents want you to know that it’s particularly infuriating when someone questions them in front of the child(ren) about how much they receive. We might be preaching to the choir on this one, but can you imagine how it must feel to the child to hear those types of questions? They could all too easily get the message that you only welcomed them to your home to get a paycheck!

“I could never… I would get too attached.”

If I had a nickel for every time we’ve heard someone say, “I could never be a foster parent because I would get too attached,” I would be a wealthy woman. But seriously, attachment and connection are at the root of how foster care is supposed to work! Foster parents want you to know that you will get attached, it will hurt when the child leaves, and it all means you did it right.

Please also be cautious when proclaiming that you “could never because you’d get too attached.” You may not intend to, but you may convey to little listening ears that the only reason this foster parent can foster is that they are callous, insensitive people who don’t love these children. Nothing could be farther from the truth; no child deserves to hear that.

Resource parents want you to know that loving well, even though your heart might get broken, must come from the deep conviction that every child deserves a home where they are treasured, no matter how long it lasts.

“These kids don’t seem very grateful.”

Nor should they be!

Please don’t expect foster kids to be grateful to be in their homes. Most kids would give anything to be back home with their parents, regardless of why they were removed. And resource parents are okay with that. They know that kids being removed from their parents is traumatic, even when it’s for good reasons. Trauma is hard for these kids, and expecting gratitude is a step too far.

PARENTING A CHILD EXPOSED TO TRAUMA

“Aren’t their parents (addicts, junkies, abusers, fill in the blank...)?”

When a foster parent hears this, they will get their hackles up. And rightly so! They may gently (or not so gently?) remind you that the goal of the foster care system is to heal the birth family so that the children can go home. Reunification is not always possible, but until that goal changes, that is the work that foster parents do in their homes.

Speaking ill of the kids’ parent(s) – especially in front of them! – will not serve anyone. And it may get you shut down quickly. You aren’t helping this foster parent by pointing out something they already face daily, and in fact, you could be hurting the healing work they’ve been doing with a child when you speak out in front of the children.

“Most of these kids will never go back home.”

Please don’t assume you know how foster care plays out, statistically or in lived experience. Whether these children become legally free for adoption or not, foster parents are working with the plans set by the state and county where they serve.

They may not yet know if their foster kids will become free for adoption or if they want to consider adopting. Choosing to adopt a foster child often has many more layers to the conversation than they may be willing to share with you. Again, it’s critical not to talk about these issues in front of their kids.

The reality is that about 50% of foster kids do eventually reunify with their parents, and about 25% get adopted by a non-family member, usually their foster parent.

“Oh, they must be so excited to join your family!”

On a similar note, please don’t assume the kids will be thrilled if their foster family does move toward adoption. When the system closes the door on the idea of reunification, even when it is an unsafe environment, it brings up a lot of complex and challenging feelings for foster kids. Adoption may not be the wholly exciting thing you think it is for this child. And it’s likely that the foster parents are keyed into that and feel the same mixed emotions their kids are feeling.

We get by with a little help from our friends."

Resource parents are not superhuman. They have bad days. They feel inadequate and are not always up to helping their kids heal. When they are struggling, it does no one any good to remind them that they chose this path or that they can "always send them back!"
Yes, the truth is that they can request that a child be placed with another family, but we don't know any foster parents who make that decision lightly.
Sometimes, they need a hug from a friend and a listening ear that can keep it all confidential. Consider holding your judgment and unsolicited advice. Instead, drop off a meal, offer to do their laundry, or organize a yard clean-up for them.

PRACTICAL HELP FOR THE FOSTER & KINSHIP FAMILIES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Consider Fostering

So, the next time you encounter one of these crazy folks with a carload of kids in the school pickup line or herding their gang through Costco, take a moment to think about what they are doing and why. Remember what they want you to know. Give some thought to whether you could join their ranks. They are more like you than you think.

If you are considering fostering, please join our online community. The experienced resource parents there will be happy to support you and help you learn what fostering looks like for their family.

Check out Creating a Family's podcasts — ranked #2 in Foster Care, Adoption, and Child Welfare, and #12 in Parenting podcasts! Subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts.

A Back-to-School Checklist for Your Adoptive, Foster, or Kinship Family

This article reprinted with permission from Creating a Family (CreatingaFamily.org).

Quicker than you imagine, you will be fully immersed in back-to-school preparations with your adopted, foster, or kinship kids. We know! Mentioning the "s-c-h-o-o-l" word can make you cringe this early in the summer. But while your kids are waging water fights in the yard and roasting marshmallows for s'mores, you can consider what you must do to prepare them well for the academic year. We've got a back-to-school checklist to help you think through the issues your adopted, foster, or kinship kids might encounter this year.

"Before anything else, preparation is the key to success." ~ notoriously successful student, Alexander Graham Bell

There are Added Layers to Consider

In most respects, the beginning of a new school year for adopted, foster, or kinship kids is no different than for biological kids. You buy the same school supplies and search for sneakers that 1) fit their feet and 2) fit the cool factor. You will take the obligatory "First Day of School" pictures and send your precious kiddos off with a kiss and a prayer. However, raising adopted, foster, or kinship kids can add a few layers of complication to your child's school experience.

Here's what we mean:

- Maybe your family is transracial, multi-generational, mixed race, or your child's race/ethnicity is different than yours. You worry about how they will handle questions about your "conspicuous" family.

- Your children might have a large, extended birth family that is actively involved in your family's life. You wonder if their teachers need a cheat sheet card to know who is who.

- Your adopted, foster, or kinship child carries significant emotional scars and behaviors from their challenging life experiences before joining your family. How do you figure out what – if anything – to share with the school?

- Johnny has learning differences and disabilities caused by prenatal alcohol or drug exposure. You are concerned about his ability to succeed in school, academically and socially.

- You may be concerned that Suzy is slightly fuzzy about your family's definitions of privacy and secrecy. She tends to overshare information that she may later regret telling her peers.

These concerns, and many others like them, can set you up for fear and uncertainty about the school year. They can also impact your partnership with the teachers. You aren't alone – many adoptive, foster, and kinship families are concerned all summer long about the coming school year!

- Will the school think I'm a hover mother?
- What if he doesn't make any friends in the new school?
- Is she ready for the transition from elementary to middle school?
- Do the teachers know enough about trauma and its impacts on learning?

However, it will help if you find ways to manage your concerns. You can start by educating yourself about your child's needs. It might help to join a support group for parents of kids with learning challenges. You can support your child's routines at school by establishing academic practice over summer break. There are fun apps to help them stay sharp, and they might not even notice how "school-y" they are!

You don't want to put the responsibility for a great start to the school year solely on your child's shoulders. Nor do you want to overshare with their teachers right out of the gate. Instead, it's wise to prepare now for some of the common potential problems that come with your child's "additional layers." As the school year gets rolling, you will get a better handle on what else the teachers need from you.

A Quick Checklist to Prepare for Back-to-School

Here is a practical list you can work through to prepare your adopted, foster, or kinship kids and their teachers for a great start to the school year.

- If your child is likely to stand out from their peers at school (because of their race, ethnicity, or other conspicuous differences, etc.), try to prepare them to answer questions from other children. Talk with them in age-appropriate ways about why your family doesn't "match."Be clear about why they are new to the school district this year. Role-playing and "canned responses" are also great tools to prepare them.

- Share the information about your child's history or current circumstances that will help teachers and administrators to appropriately meet the child's needs in the classroom. It is usually optional to share intensely personal details with the school.

- When your child is transferring to a new building or school district upon joining your family, consider reading through the transcripts and records from their previous school. With electronic transferring of records, you might have to ask for hard copies. Look for learning challenges documented in those files. What learning services did the child receive at their other school? Speak with the caseworker (if applicable) about how to start those services anew. Does the child need to be evaluated, re-evaluated for, or released from educational services?

- If you are concerned about specific behaviors you've observed in your child, consider talking with the school counselor and the teacher. Try to start these conversations early in the school year. Brainstorm ways to help your child. Ask for local resources that might support your family, and request consistent, open lines of communication between home and school.

- If your child freely shares details about their story (for example, "I'm in foster care because Mom is in prison."), consider whether they are oversharing details they may regret later. Talk about the difference between privacy and secrecy during these remaining weeks of summer break with your child. Again, role-playing and practicing scripts together can be helpful in this situation.

- Once you've established contact with the new teacher, ask about upcoming school assignments that might be problematic for the child. This might be because you don't have access to the information. Or the content may be painful for your child, and they are not ready to process the memories attached to that information. Some examples of these projects include creating a family tree, bringing baby pictures, or sharing firsts (first steps, first word, etc.).

- For foster and kinship families, consider what legal documents you need to enroll the child in your local school. In a related vein, teach your kids what emergency contacts you will list as safe for the school and the child to contact. What contact information for birth parents is (or is not) appropriate to share with the school? When raising children outside the umbrella of formal social services or child welfare (as in a kinship care situation), these questions might not apply to you. However, it's still valuable to consider the protections and plans you should put in place for communication between home and school.

Take it One Step at a Time.

These checklist items might feel overwhelming, especially if you are new to fostering or kinship care or putting a child in school for the first time. Please don't be anxious about it! Instead, talk with other adoptive and foster parents or kinship caregivers in your community. And contact your local school staff as early as possible. Even if your child has been in this building or school district for a while, carefully walking through these steps can prepare you and your child for the best possible start to the coming school year.

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