

WHAT KEEPS CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE FROM SUCCEEDING IN SCHOOL?

Views of Early Adolescents
and the Adults in Their Lives

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Executive Summary

A large portion of the half million children in foster care nationwide perform poorly in school. They lag behind their non-foster peers academically and are more likely to have behavior and discipline problems. This study draws on interviews with foster children and adults to better understand how being in foster care affects a child's education on a day-to-day basis, and how the adults around these children can help them perform more successfully in school.

Vera researchers studied the educational experiences of 25 children in foster care who were participating in an experimental program designed to improve their achievement. We recorded extensive narratives from each child about the educational obstacles they face at the four Bronx middle schools they attend, and we interviewed 54 key adults in their lives (school staff, foster parents, and caseworkers) to learn what they regard as obstacles to the children's educational success.

We found that foster children face roadblocks that other economically disadvantaged children do not face, roadblocks that can affect their academic performance. The children had concerns about maintaining ties with their biological parents and caring for siblings that often distracted them from schoolwork. Mandated court appearances and doctors' appointments caused them to miss school frequently. Behavior problems—both aggression and withdrawing—which may be rooted in pre-placement trauma, kept them from focusing on school. And they often avoided social interactions with peers in order to keep their foster status hidden. Yet they blamed themselves—not foster care or the schools—for their poor academic achievement.

The adults in these foster children's lives often lacked a full picture of their educational needs. Foster parents were most concerned with the children's behavior; they rarely expressed concern with their foster children's poor grades, and most did not regularly help with homework. Caseworkers often were not aware of their academic progress, focusing instead on the frequent crises that characterize foster care. School staff usually had little knowledge of a child's foster care background and how bureaucratic demands of the system might explain missed tests or assignments. No one acknowledged primary responsibility for the educational progress of these children.

We conclude that establishing primary responsibility for educational matters in each case would be a useful reform, along with increased cooperation between the child welfare system and schools on several specific issues. Greater information sharing could help—in particular, giving caseworkers access to children's academic records and giving teachers and other school staff information about a child's foster situation. Foster parents could be encouraged and supported to take a more active role in promoting their children's academic success. Finally, school staff could benefit from basic training on how the child welfare system works, the specific demands it makes on children, and its consequences for a child's development.

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I. Introduction

There are an estimated 500,000 children in foster care in the United States.¹ Many have suffered trauma both before and after they were placed into care, and many have special medical, emotional, and social needs.² But of all the difficulties foster children experience, low academic achievement may have the most serious consequences for their futures.³

Nationwide, aggregate data suggest that foster children fare poorly in educational settings, often receiving low grades and ultimately not advancing to their full academic potential.⁴ Even when these children are placed in economically deprived urban schools where student performance is already below average, they still tend to rank lower than their peers. Studies comparing foster children with non-foster children show that they are more likely to have behavioral and discipline problems, more likely to experience gaps in their education because of school transfers, more likely to be in special education, more inclined to gravitate towards vocational classes, and less likely to be on a college preparatory track.⁵ Significantly fewer foster children expect even to graduate from high school. Yet once they are discharged and no longer in the care of the state, their future prospects will be in large part determined by their performance in school.

While all children can fail to complete homework assignments, disrupt class, and skip school, when foster children have these problems, foster-care related experiences may be playing a significant but hidden role.⁶ Children whose history includes abuse often act out aggressively or impulsively.⁷ Those who have been neglected often fail to thrive both

¹ Wendy W. Blome, "What Happens to Foster Kids: Educational Experiences of a Random Sample of Foster Care Youth and a Matched Group of Non-Foster Care Youth," *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 14, no. 1 (1997): 41-53; Alvin A. Rosenfeld, et al., "Foster Care: An Update," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 36, no. 4 (1997): 448-458.

² Rosenfeld, et al., 1997.

³ Sonia Jackson, "Educating Children in Residential and Foster Care," *Oxford Review of Education* 20, no. 3 (1994): 267-279; Jim Goddard, "Research Review: The Education of Looked After Children," *Child and Family Social Work* 5 (2000): 79-86; Blome, 1997.

⁴ Blome, 1997; Robert Goerge, Fred Wulczyn, and Allen Harden, "New Comparative Insights into States and Their Foster Children," *Public Welfare* (Summer 1996): 12-25; Anne M. Geroski and Lissa Knauss, "Addressing the Needs of Foster Children with a School Counseling Program," *ASCA Professional School Counseling* 3, no. 3 (2000): 152-161; Goddard, 2000; A.F. Heath, M.J. Colton, and J. Aldgate, "Failure to Escape: A Longitudinal Study of Foster Children's Educational Attainment," *British Journal of Social Work* 24 (1994): 241-260; Jackson, 1994; Lynn S. Noble, "The Face of Foster Care," *Educational Leadership* (April, 1997): 26-28.

⁵ Blome, 1997.

⁶ Rae R. Newton, Alan J. Litrownik, and John A. Landsverk, "Children and Youth in Foster Care: Disentangling the Relationship between Problem Behaviors and Number of Placements," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 24, no. 10 (2000): 1363-1374.

⁷ Geroski and Knauss, 2000.

physically and academically and also are at risk for delinquency.⁸ Research shows that children who have experienced abuse or neglect are more likely than others to fail in school and to be involved in the juvenile justice system. But research also has found that when neglected or abused children succeed in school, they are less likely to engage in violence or be incarcerated.⁹ In other words, success in school can help foster children overcome even very disadvantaged beginnings.¹⁰

Many aspects of foster care can affect educational outcomes. Foster care placement itself can have a traumatic effect on children, causing them to feel a sense of loss, fear, abandonment, isolation, helplessness, and confusion. Citing several studies, Geroski and Knauss suggest that the combination of pre-placement and placement trauma appears to detrimentally affect academic performance and school behavior.¹¹

Foster children are often sensitive about their situations and may feel embarrassed when confronted with questions from outsiders about their families. Since many experience multiple placements, each school transfer brings a whole new set of adjustments that may impede both academic progress and social relations.

Adolescence is a particularly difficult time for children in foster care. By the time they reach adolescence, many foster children have been in the system for years and have moved from placement to placement, deprived of stability and consistency in their homes. For adolescents in these circumstances, studies have found that “schools with well-defined schedules and discipline can be a resiliency factor.”¹²

In short, a large number of studies demonstrate the importance of helping foster children succeed in school, but they tell us relatively little about how to do that. To guide effective reform here, we need to know more about the educational experiences of these children. Unfortunately, little is known about how children experience this or any aspect of foster care. As one researcher recently noted:

[O]ne of the reasons that the foster care research is confusing and insufficient is because it glosses over the children’s perceptions. Much of the existing research on foster children’s experience is based on adults’ retrospective accounts, which are filtered by further years and memories.¹³

⁸ Barbara Lowenthal, “Effects of Maltreatment and Ways to Promote Children’s Resiliency,” *Childhood Education* 75, no. 4 (1999): 204-210.

⁹ P.S. Chamberlain and F.S. Mihalic, *Blueprints for Violence Prevention, Book Eight: Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care*, (Boulder, CO: Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, University of Colorado, 1998).

¹⁰ National Youth in Care Network, *Who Will Teach Me to Learn? Creating Positive School Experiences for Youth in Care* (2000).

¹¹ Anne M. Geroski and Lissa Knauss, “Addressing the Needs of Foster Children with a School Counseling Program,” *ASCA Professional School Counseling* 3, no. 3 (2000): 152-161.

¹² E.M. Heatherington, “Coping with Family Transitions: Winners, Losers, and Survivors,” *Child Development* 60 (1989): 1-14.

¹³ Jason B. Whiting, “The View From Down Here: Foster Children’s Stories,” *Child & Youth Care Forum* 29, no. 2 (2000): 83.

Additionally, many prior studies tend to generalize the foster care experience. Every child is different, with a unique background, and statistics rarely delineate these differences.

The stories of foster children reflect the wide range of experiences, beliefs, and situations in which they live. To gloss over differences or to lump foster children together into categories is not as helpful as it is to hear the depth and uniqueness of individual stories.¹⁴

This report aims to guide practical efforts at reform by presenting foster children's stories and perspectives and placing them at the core of the analysis. It is the children who are at the center of multiple social and administrative systems, and only their experiences can reflect how they interact with each system. We chose to focus on young adolescents because of the pivotal importance of experiences in middle school (grades 5 through 8). We also believed that children in this age-range would exhibit a degree of self-reflection and expressiveness absent in younger children, and therefore could describe and evaluate their foster care experiences more effectively. We spoke with foster children in middle school on six topics: *academics* (grades, homework help, school transfers); *attendance* (excessive absences, foster-care related absences, skipping classes); *relationships* (peers, school staff, caseworkers, foster and biological parents); *behavior* (fighting, violence, acting out); *meaning of foster care* (feelings about being in care, problems caused by foster care, positive and negative aspects of foster care); and, *communication patterns* (whom they turn to for help with problems, how often they talk to adults, who they feel is not available to them). By eliciting this information directly from the children, we hoped to create a clearer picture of the educational obstacles they face as adolescents in foster care.

There are a number of adults concerned with the education of foster children: biological and foster parents, child welfare professionals such as caseworkers, and the principals, assistant principals, guidance counselors, and teachers in the school system. Even when well-intentioned, these groups frequently have different approaches to dealing with the education of foster children, may differ in the emphasis they place on educational achievement, and often do not communicate effectively to carry out decisions regarding educational issues in a timely fashion.

We interviewed key adults in the lives of the children in our study, including school staff, foster parents, and caseworkers. We attempt to provide an understanding of the extent to which each adult is aware of the ways in which foster children experience school, the role each adult takes in promoting foster children's academic success, and what problems they face in meeting the educational needs of foster children. By

¹⁴ Ibid, 86.

comparing the responses of the adults and children, we compile a picture, from several different angles, of the obstacles foster children face. We then identify possible strategies that adults can use to help these children get the assistance they need to improve academic performance.

Some of the documented school experiences of foster children in the present study clearly support findings from previous research. By adding the perspective of children, however, our inductive design allows for an expanded understanding of the educational obstacles that already have been identified, as well as the identification of new ones.

The findings from this research can benefit both the education and child welfare systems by helping professionals in those fields to better understand the nature of the problems foster children face in school and to evaluate and improve their own approaches to them. Ultimately, we hope our research will lead to changes that help more foster children to succeed in school.

II. Methodology

This study is based on 79 interviews conducted with children in foster care and the adults responsible for their education. Researchers used open-ended questions to elicit narratives that mixed experiences, perceptions, and actions. We then analyzed these narratives, looking for patterns and themes that allowed us to assess the prevalence and relative importance of various topics within the participating groups and to make comparisons between them. By employing a qualitative approach, we did not try to find causal relationships between foster care and academic achievement per se, but instead attempted to understand the range of experiences that foster children have, including those that the adults in their lives identified as hindering academic success.

The research design sought data from middle-school children in foster care. We originally defined the adult groups with responsibility for their academic well-being as school staff, biological parents, foster parents, and caseworkers. At the outset we understood that not all children would have available representatives from each of these groups, and because of practical difficulties related to recruiting, we were not able to include the experiences of biological parents.

The research structure allowed us to compare and contrast data from each of the participant groups generally, as well as to evaluate the data from specific children and place it in a context provided by the adults in their lives. Caseworkers and foster parents had direct relationships with the children interviewed, and the school staff worked at the schools attended by the children in the study. School staff, which included grade team leaders (teachers responsible for managing the grade-level in which they teach), guidance counselors, assistant principals, and principals provided general opinions regarding the experiences of foster children at their schools; they may or may not have had direct contact with the children in the study. We did not ask school staff about individual children due to confidentiality issues; preliminary research indicated that many staff members were not aware of specific children's foster care status. Since we were not inquiring about individual children, we chose team leaders to represent the teachers' viewpoints rather than recruiting the teachers of the participating children.

Sample and Recruiting

The study sample consisted of 25 foster children from four large, urban middle schools in the Bronx borough of New York City. It also included 30 staff members representing various positions from those schools, 15 caseworkers, and nine foster parents. We selected participants through non-probability, purposive sampling techniques. Purposive

sampling relies on the identification of specific individuals and groups who are likely to possess the specialized knowledge sought in the research.¹⁵

Child participants were selected from a group of foster children enrolled in the Safe and Smart program during the year of the study. Safe and Smart was a three-year demonstration project run by the Vera Institute of Justice for New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS). The program placed child welfare workers—called “school specialists”—in Bronx middle schools to offer intensive support to foster children.

The children's affiliation with Safe and Smart was helpful in several respects. It allowed us to verify their foster care status and to obtain a limited amount of background information on their individual cases. It also enabled researchers to approach children in an environment where they felt safe and to ask them about topics that many usually keep private. We obtained additional data, such as placement and transfer histories, from New York City's Child Care Review System (CCRS), a collection of administrative databases maintained by ACS.

Recruiting children from Safe and Smart also had its limitations. Specifically, since the children were participating in a unique support program, their most recent experiences may differ from those of middle school-aged foster children as a whole. The children's levels of participation in the program did vary, but in general, children in Safe and Smart probably were more open to speaking about their situations than other foster children; they had at least one supportive adult available to them in the school specialist, and many were introduced to foster care peers through the program.

When possible, school specialists first contacted the students and notified them of our wish to conduct interviews. At the time of the study, two Safe and Smart schools did not have an active school specialist. In those instances, school staff introduced us to children we identified through older Safe and Smart records. No children we contacted refused to be interviewed, but several identified students were not interviewed either because they had transferred to other schools, they were absent from school on all of the days we conducted interviews, or they had run away from their foster placements. Children were compensated for their participation with a \$20 gift certificate to a local clothing store.

Initially, we interviewed 20 children, but we later increased this number by five to help offset an apparent but unintended bias towards children whose most recent placements were relatively stable and long-term. Given the well-documented negative effects of instability in the literature, we chose the additional participants because they were newly enrolled students in the Safe and Smart program who had recently entered foster care and transferred schools as a result. We anticipated that these recent transitions would give us a clearer picture of transfer-related issues.

¹⁵ H.R. Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994).

All the children in our study were either African-American or Latino, with two-thirds being African-American (see Appendix, Table A). Their ages ranged from 10 to 15 with a median age of 12. There were almost twice as many boys as girls in the study. All were in grades five through eight with the majority in sixth grade. The seven oldest children (ages 14 and 15) were least likely to be in an appropriate grade for their age, since children in these age groups would normally be in ninth and tenth grade.

There was almost an equal split between children in foster boarding homes and those residing with biological relatives in kinship foster homes. The age when these children first entered care peaked between six and eight years old. The total number of years the children had been in care ranged from less than one year to 12 years; six of the children had been in care for more than nine years, which represents most of their lives.

Regarding placement stability, the majority of children in our sample had very few transfers. Five were still living in their first placement; nine had experienced two placements; and nine more children had three, four, or five placements. Two of the children had experienced eight or more placements. Nearly half of the sample had been in their current placements for a relatively long time—three to five years. Child interviews also suggested that many placement transfers occurred during the very early years of the foster children’s lives. These revelations prompted us to include the five additional children who had recently entered foster care and transferred schools.

The schools from which we drew our sample faced greater challenges than schools citywide in a number of key areas, the most notable being below average standardized test scores, a high number of students qualifying for free lunches (a rough gauge for student poverty), and low per-pupil expenditures. It is widely understood that such characteristics can present independent obstacles to academic progress for all children in a school.¹⁶

Through Safe and Smart we were also able to identify and recruit the caseworkers and foster parents of the children in the study and school staff from the four schools in which the children were currently enrolled. In total, we interviewed 54 adults including foster parents and guardians, principals, assistant principals, guidance counselors, grade team leaders, school specialists, and foster agency caseworkers (see Table 1, below). Foster parents received a \$20 check for their participation. No other adult group received compensation.

¹⁶ Stephen Haymes and Maria Vidal de Haymes, “Educational Experiences and Achievement of Children and Youth in the Care of the Department Receiving Educational Services from Chicago Public Schools,” Report from the Children and Family Research Center, School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (2000).

Table 1: Adult Participants

Participant groups		N =
Caseworkers		15
Foster Parents		9
School Staff	Principals	3
	Assistant Principals	8
	Guidance Counselors	10
	Grade Team Leaders	4
	School Specialists	5
<i>TOTAL</i>		54

Notably missing are the biological parents of foster children. While information from this group would have enhanced the study, we were unsuccessful in recruiting them. Almost half of the children had no contact with their biological parents. The only available contact information for the remaining biological parents was addresses contained in the CCRS database. Letters were sent to these addresses explaining the study in English, offering \$20 in compensation for participating, and providing the phone number and address of the research project’s director. Many of the letters were returned as undeliverable, and the others brought no responses. Searches for phone numbers via the Internet and through Safe and Smart’s school specialists yielded information for one parent. That parent was successfully recruited, but we ultimately declined to interview her given the lack of an adequate sample. Time and resource constraints did not permit further searches for additional contact information.

Caseworkers and foster parents also proved difficult to recruit. As a result, there is a less than one-to-one ratio between these groups and the participating foster children. While more than half of the pertinent caseworkers were interviewed, others did not return phone calls or simply declined to be interviewed, usually citing their busy schedules. We used multiple methods to contact foster parents including asking the Safe and Smart school specialists or the children’s caseworkers to make the initial contact. We interviewed foster parents for fewer than half of the participating students. Others could not be reached or declined requests for interviews.

The absence of biological parents from the study and the low numbers of caseworkers and foster parents interviewed limited comparisons between the data from specific children and that provided by the adults involved in their lives. We can only speculate about the types of information that biological parents might have provided, but it is likely that they could have added to our knowledge of why the children were placed into foster

care, their pre-placement school performance and behavior, the biological parent's current involvement with the child, and prospects for family reunification. While some degree of context was lost for all of the children in the study due to missing adult information, we were able to analyze data from all adult groups except biological parents and perform some cross-group comparisons.

Data Collection

We collected our data primarily through semi-structured, individual interviews, although we also conducted focus groups with some school staff members from whom we sought general, non-child-specific information. Interview instruments were designed for each participant group and consisted of open-ended questions with follow-up probes that could be spontaneously re-ordered by the researcher to fit the natural progression of a specific interview. Participants were allowed to speak freely and at length when answering questions. They also were encouraged to provide stories and examples and to raise new topics that they felt were relevant. We developed topics for our initial questions through a literature review, as well as from consultations with Safe and Smart staff and other individuals knowledgeable about the foster care system. Using an iterative process, researchers frequently reevaluated the interview questions and topics in light of new findings and interviewer experiences, making minor changes to the instruments as needed.¹⁷

In order to develop a rapport with the child, interviewers first asked the children to recount the events that occurred on the previous school day. Questions then focused on the child's relationships with peers, school staff, family, and adults before moving on to discussions about the child's academic performance, school attendance, and behavior; feelings about foster care, and communication patterns with different adult groups.¹⁸ The interviews ranged from roughly 40 minutes to an hour and were recorded on audio tape. All interviews took place at the children's schools during school hours, usually in the office of the school specialist, with only the child and one or two researchers present.

Since we conducted only one interview per child, interviewers did not have the opportunity to develop long-term, trusting relationships with the children. In this sense, children likely limited the information they divulged to us based on their own level of trust and their individual personalities. We did not strive to test the validity of children's statements, but we noted some discrepancies in the information given, as well as nonverbal clues like body language during the interviews that may have raised questions.

Formats for the adult interviews were wide-ranging. Nearly all school staff interviews took place at the participants' schools. Two focus groups were conducted with school guidance counselors and one with grade team leaders. All interviews with caseworkers

¹⁷ K.J. Harris, N.W. Jerome, and S.B. Fawcett, "Rapid Assessment Procedures: A Review and Critique." *Human Organization* 56 (1997): 375-378.

¹⁸ For a review of all finalized interview instruments and the topics covered, please contact the authors.

took place individually and in person, while all interviews with foster parents took place over the telephone.

Interviews with both school staff and caseworkers began with general questions about their work and responsibilities. For school staff, these included questions about their interactions with the general student population; for caseworkers, early questions inquired about the overall experiences of foster children on their caseloads. School staff interviews eventually narrowed to focus on the individual's awareness of, beliefs about, perceptions of, and interactions with foster children in school. The staff members were asked to provide stories about any experiences with individual foster children. Caseworkers were asked to discuss aspects of the school experiences, home life, and backgrounds of the particular children on their caseload who were participating in the research. Interviews with foster parents generally took 20 minutes and focused exclusively on the experiences of the participating foster child and his or her academic achievement, behavior, biological family, and foster home environment.

Analysis

For the analysis of the interview and focus group data, we relied on standard qualitative and ethnographic techniques. In accordance with this approach, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously, with the analysis revealing additional areas for exploration that were included in the ongoing interviews.¹⁹ Audio tapes from interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim and imported into the hypertext qualitative data analysis computer program called NUD*IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing). Researchers then read and coded each transcript using the NUD*IST program.

Unlike traditional hypothesis-testing, qualitative research of this type seeks to describe a situation "...using those criteria that [the] informants employ as they observe, interpret, and describe their own experiences during the course of life."²⁰ In this sense, the researcher acts more to "paraphrase" and place the data in context during analysis than to evaluate it and ascribe the findings to larger populations.²¹

After coding the transcript texts, researchers were able to combine the responses of different individuals and analyze subject categories, such as the unique problems posed by foster care, exposure to violence in school, or peer relations, in terms of how frequently they were mentioned by particular groups. Reports were generated from NUD*IST that automatically combined these different pieces of transcript text. From these, we were able to elaborate themes representative of the responses given by

¹⁹ Michael H. Agar, *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography* (New York: Academic Press, 1980).

²⁰ James P. Spradley and David W. McCurdy, *The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Societies* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1972).

²¹ Agar, 1980.

participating foster children and adults. NUD*IST also allowed us to compare the responses from different participant groups as well as to combine subgroups for comparison, such as considering the responses of children and school staff from the same school. Taken together, these analytic approaches yielded a portrait of the interaction between foster care and academic achievement.

III. How Foster Children Experience School

At the beginning of each of our interviews with foster children, we asked the students to recount the events of the previous school day. Very little from these initial accounts would indicate that the participants were any different from their peers. Only small clues revealed their status as foster children. For example, the person who ushered them off to school was referred to as “my aunt” or “the lady,” or their commutes to school were unusually long and complicated. Probing questions uncovered more, and slowly the role that foster care played took on greater prominence, reaching into almost every corner of the children’s lives.

At the heart of our research is the hypothesis that a child’s foster care status in some way affects his or her education. School is where children have to deal with their status while facing the difficulties of learning and interacting with peers. Of course, foster children do not experience school in one singular way, and the children we interviewed were not a homogenous group. Still, all shared common experiences.

We begin this section by examining how the children in the sample perform academically—looking at their grades and test scores—and how they perceive their own performance. We then use the children’s own words to explain what they believe keeps them from excelling. At the end of the chapter, we turn to the roles foster parents, school staff, caseworkers, and biological parents play in helping the children with school- and non-school-related problems. We allow the children to describe whom they go to for help and why. The result is a record of how the children in our study perceived and reacted to the influence of foster care in their lives and educations and the importance they assigned to the myriad issues that accompany it.

Academics

Children in foster care have low academic attainment and often perform well below the standards for their age groups. For the children in our sample, this is particularly evident. Table 2, below, shows the mean grade point average for 20 of the 25 children who participated in the study for the school year 2000-2001. We did not have 2001 grades for the other five children who transferred to the school or entered the Safe and Smart Program after the school year began.

Table 2: Mean Grade Point Averages for English, Math, and Overall GPA²²

	1 st Quarter	2 nd Quarter	3 rd Quarter	4 th Quarter	Final
English	68.4	68.2	69.1	69.9	69.1
Math	68.4	64.5	67.2	68.0	67.2
Overall	68.9	67.0	68.4	69.3	69.2

As indicated in the table, the average GPA for our study sample was very low, consistently hovering in the high 60s across all subjects and grading periods (which is equivalent to a D+ average). Only two children for whom we have grades earned a GPA of over 80 (B average). The majority were earning in the 60 range or below, with a smaller number of children in the 70s (C average). Average grades per marking period ranged from a low of 55 to a high of 88.4. The grades of individual students varied by subject, but these variations usually were within a ten-point range. Overall, students performed slightly worse in math than in other subjects. The parameters of the study did not allow us to compare our children’s grades with those of their non-foster peers.

However, when we compare the percentage of children meeting state and citywide standards on the Citywide Reading and Math Tests in Spring 2000, foster children in general averaged much lower in reading (23.7% lower than the citywide average) and math (28.7% lower than the average).²³ Additionally, when the Safe and Smart program compared the test scores of Safe and Smart children to those of children in the same school district, they found that Safe and Smart children scored lower in both math and reading in the advanced and proficient categories. Interestingly, although the children in our study have a variety of foster backgrounds and different levels of support in their lives, they all are performing about equally in school, with only slight variation in grades.

When initially queried about their grades, most of the children told us they were doing well in school even though they often did not actually know their grades. Some children also overestimated their grades, perhaps because they did not trust us enough to reveal their true grades, or because they were really unaware of what their grades were. For example, some children told us they were getting marks in the 80s and 90s when their report cards clearly did not reflect this. Others truthfully told us their grades were in the 60s and 70s but still believed these grades constituted doing well in school. To some of these children, passing their classes and not having to go to summer school was good enough for them and, so they stated, for their families. Some children also told us they were doing well in school but then admitted they actually didn’t know their grades. Rick, for example, said that he was earning good grades and understood everything he was

²² Overall GPA includes grades for English, Math, Social Studies, and Science.

²³ Statistics provided by the Safe and Smart Program, Vera Institute of Justice.

being taught. When pressed, however, he admitted that he did not know his grades nor did he understand a math test that was given to him the previous day.

When we asked the children in our study to explain why they thought they were doing poorly in school, they rarely offered the explanations put forth in the research literature (even in their own terms). Children discussed being distracted by thoughts of home and being upset by having to meet a parent at court, for example. But none referred to their number of placements or registration delays due to a school transfer to explain their predicaments. Instead, most blamed themselves or traumatic events, such as being taken away from a biological parent, for their educational failings.

Many children cited their lack of studying and completing homework assignments as a main reason for their faltering grades. Robert told us that English was his favorite subject, yet he was doing poorly in it. When pressed for an explanation, he simply said, “English, I decided not to do it [the homework]. Maybe it’s because I know I am good in English and the teacher knows too.” Similarly, Jose told us:

. . . I don’t study a lot. I forget about the test. It’s tomorrow and sometimes the teacher be writing on the board and then she’ll . . . she said to remind that a test is tomorrow and I forgot. I have to pay attention more.

The children gave varying reports as to the quantity of homework they received each day and the amount of time they spent completing it. Most felt they received a great deal of homework. However, the time they reported working on homework assignments differed widely. Only six children told us that they spent an hour or more per day on homework. The others, who still felt they were assigned a lot of homework, reported spending much less time completing their assignments. Carlos told us he gets three or four homework assignments per night. When asked how long it takes him to complete them, he said, “sometimes five minutes or fifteen.” Others had similar homework patterns:

Well I do math in 15 minutes, like a half an hour. The others are easy. [Jennifer]

Math takes me about 15 minutes . . . Social studies I didn’t do, but it takes about 10 minutes to write a good paragraph, which I do not do because I do not do social studies homework . . . I do it in five seconds. I do it in class. [Christina]

Other children reported spending from 20 minutes to a half hour completing several homework assignments. The most interesting answer came from Mark. When asked how much time he spends doing homework every day, he answered, “a minute or two, or maybe an hour.” This suggests that at least some of the children had not given much thought to their homework practices and may have been guessing wildly in their assessments of the time it took to complete them.

In addition to study habits, children also cite their behavior as a main reason for doing poorly in school. Talking in class, acting out, and being disruptive were frequently mentioned:

I don't try too hard. I talk too much in class . . . I was very busy talking and I didn't do work and being bad. . . I didn't do homework and I was always talking. [Jennifer]

Why do you think you're failing? [interviewer]
Cause I'm not paying attention in class. [Carlos]
Why aren't you paying attention? [interviewer]
Yeah, I'm like distracting the class sometimes. [Carlos]

I've been goofing off. . . I'm fooling around in class. [Manuel]

I was messing up in class. They said that on the conduct sheet. [David]

Explaining Marked Declines or Improvements. Some children also experienced marked declines or improvements in grades over a short time span. When this change was apparent on their report cards, we asked the children why.

Those whose grades had recently suffered often referred to foster care issues as a significant reason. Eric, for example, said that his grades were good “until they took me from my mother.” Darcie believed her grades went down because she “kept worrying about things outside of school, like foster care and going to courts.” Shari also had a similar experience:

When I lived with my mom my grades were kind of good and bad at the same time. When I lived with the lady, I didn't really get scores because it was only two months. I didn't get a report card. . . . When I came here my grades went all the way down.

Conversely, those whose grades improved believed it was due to their own actions—that they were making a stronger effort to behave in class, study harder, and pay attention. Many cited a realization of how important getting good grades is to their future goals, and several children referred to the fact that they soon were going to enter high school where their grades would really begin to matter:

This school I've done the best. The others were really bad. This is the first year I'm not going to summer school. . . I guess I was just goofing and fooling around. . . . Knowing that I'm going to high school. I don't want to fool around any more. I have plans and people always tell me that I can do what I really want to do if I just work hard at it. I want to go to Julliard. I want to do good. [Manuel]

I used to be bad. But I changed now and now I'm good . . . I wanted to learn more to get a job. [Julio]

. . . being in the hall. Playing with my friends, goofing off. I won't do that no more. My goal is to pass summer school and go to high school to be a lawyer. [Shari]

Attendance Rates

Being in foster care also may influence school attendance, which can in turn have an impact on grades and test scores. Compared with their nonfoster peers, foster children have low attendance rates. However, some research has shown that children placed in kinship or foster boarding homes generally improve their attendance after placement.²⁴

While we did not have attendance records for the children in our study, we did ask them about their attendance. More than half of the children in our study told us they miss school because of frequent doctor's appointments. For example, Robert told us he believes he is failing classes due to these appointments:

I missed a few tests cause every two weeks they have to check my heart cause it skips a pump. . . . So I missed like three tests. So I am failing math and English. That's why.

Only one child from our sample reported that she was absent from school because of registration problems associated with a school transfer. She missed almost an entire month waiting for her records to arrive from her previous school. She claimed her grandmother had to miss work to go to the Board of Education to help straighten out the problem. Since missing that first month, her attendance has been regular.

Several children told us they missed school because they had to take care of younger siblings who were sick or who just needed someone to look after them. These incidents also occurred before the children were placed in foster care. (The issue of missing school to take care of family members is discussed in greater detail in the next section.)

Many of the children reported an improvement in attendance after being placed in care. Shari told us, "When I was with my mother, yeah [I missed school]. Not now, I'm coming to school 100 percent." Prior to being placed in kinship care, Christina told us she "hardly went" to school. Since being placed with her aunt, she attends school every day. When we asked her why, she replied,

²⁴ Dylan Conger and Alison Rebeck, *How Children's Foster Care Experiences Affect Their Education*. Vera Institute of Justice, 2001.

It changed because my aunt, she always says get up early. She wants us up by 6:30am. We are prepared and have clothes for us and school is five minutes away. It is a change because I'm also more interested in school.

Distractions and Thoughts of Home

The simple facts of foster care weigh heavily on children's minds, and this does not stop when they pass through school doors. Issues such as sadness about familial separation, concern for siblings and biological parents, difficulty adjusting to a new foster family and school, and worries about the unknown were common among the children we interviewed and, to varying degrees, affected their performance in school. In some cases, children described these foster care-related concerns as rising to the level of distraction, overwhelming their thoughts and inhibiting their concentration on school matters. At the same time, children frequently mentioned that their material circumstances, such as the amount of food and personal belongings that they received, were better in their foster homes.

Missing Home & Biological Parent Relationships. In their responses, children painted a picture of the struggles they endure, especially when they first enter care. For many, particularly those in non-kinship foster boarding homes, first and foremost is a sadness and yearning for better interactions with their biological families. When asked what was "bad" about being in foster care, 14-year-old Ellen stated, "No parents. Not being with your parents. No time to spend with your family. Having family outings with your family." Darcie, a 12-year-old who has been in and out of care since shortly after her birth, elaborated on these feelings and concerns:

It's very hard because you are disconnected from your mother and brothers and sisters. Say if you go to a different home, it would be hard because then you forget your brothers and sisters. If that person wouldn't adopt you and that person wants to adopt them, then you would feel bad. To tell you the truth, I don't really like foster care because I miss my mother a lot, even though I see her, I don't live with her. That's very hard.

Other children spoke about the trauma of having to deal with their biological parents in difficult settings, such as court appearances and agency visits:

Because I have to go to court and see my mom, who I love dearly also, but I would probably choose my aunt over her. It's hard because we have to see her face. I start crying and go to court. My mom comes almost every day after work or whatever. It's hard because she wants me to live with her and I don't want to. I chose my aunt over my mom. [I feel bad] because I see how it makes her feel. I know she loves me dearly and everything, I know that. I'm just attached to my aunt. [Joanne]

Family Worries and Sibling Responsibilities. One of the more common worries that children voiced was about the well-being of biological family members, both parents and siblings. Johnny, a 13-year-old, told us how it was difficult to deal with these worries and school simultaneously, claiming that they interfered with his ability to concentrate.

You have to worry about where your parents are and what they're doing. And you have to worry about your schoolwork at the same time. It is hard. . . . They told me that my mother is using drugs, and I knew it, and I worry about her. Is she is still using drugs? Does she have any problems?

Similar concerns about siblings often came up when the foster child took on a parent-like role with those siblings when placed in the same home. For some, this was a continuation of a role that they already played to compensate for a neglectful biological parent. Fifteen-year-old Shari's experience before foster care is a good example:

[I missed school because] I would either be taking care of my little brothers that were just born or I would have an asthma attack and have to go to the hospital. Usually I stayed home to take care of the kids or was just too tired to go. . . . [My biological mother] would be asleep and I would take care of the kids. I'd take these kids to school, come back and take care of the other kids, that's it. . . . My future would have been taking care of my little brothers and sisters, cooking for them. You know how it is as a seven-year-old cooking for brothers and sisters? It's kind of hard. . . . You know, I don't think I would have been in eighth grade if I was still with my mother. I'd still be in second grade at nineteen. I'm really, really bad in school. That's why my sister's smarter than me because I used to take her to school and I'd miss more days than she would miss.

Ellen had a similar experience, the difference being that she was in care, when her aunt, acting as her kinship foster caregiver, became ill:

. . . our great aunt died because she had cancer and she was smoking. I tried to help her but she didn't want to listen to me because I was a child. So I took the responsibility to this, I had to write in my report, so I am telling you something that has to do with school plus my life. . . . So, at the age of five I took over responsibility for cooking, for watching out for my brothers, my sisters, and everybody else. When no adults were around and she was sick. I helped do everything in my power and when she died it was the saddest day in my life. I cried and I cried but I got over it at the time. And at times I feel her.

Most accounts of children taking care of siblings while in foster care are less extreme than Shari's and Ellen's, but the basic feeling of responsibility still exists. Children reported that they helped their siblings get dressed, fed them, and took them to school.

They watched out for younger siblings while in school, especially by intervening in fights, and sometimes helped them with their schoolwork. Taken together, these amounted to additional burdens that foster children had to cope with while simultaneously attempting to focus on school. In a small handful of cases, children also reported having to miss school to take care of their siblings, either because their foster parent was away, or because the younger sibling's babysitter did not show up.

It is important to note that, generally, the children we interviewed did not consider having their siblings in the same foster placement a negative experience. Other research suggests that keeping siblings together in a placement ultimately helps to maintain family relationships and may lessen the likelihood of placement transfers.²⁵

Adjusting to New Situations and Anxiety About the Future. Added to the sadness that many foster children felt about their separation from biological family members, and their worry about these parents and siblings, was a sense of confusion about the status of their cases and worry about what would happen to them. These disruptive feelings pervaded many aspects of children's lives, and were fed by what the children perceived as misinformation or a lack of information from caseworkers about their cases and families. In most cases, children attributed problems to high turnover among caseworkers, as well as inattentiveness to their cases. Johnny stated:

I don't know, you have to go through a lot, and sometimes you have to switch social workers a lot. And it is really confusing. I get their names mixed up cause I switched a lot . . .

Darcie concurred by saying:

Different caseworkers. It's hard because some of them say different things. Like one will say the case is closed and then the next, later, someone will say that the case is open again and we can't go home. I don't really think that it is my mother's fault.

²⁵ Sylvie Drapeau, Marie Simard, Madeline Beaudry, and Cecile Charbonneau, "Siblings in Family Transitions." *Family Relations* 49, no. 1 (2000):

The children expressed uncertainty about their new situations, struggling to adapt while fearful of what might happen next. Twelve-year-old Robert described the feeling of being placed in foster care as difficult because, “. . . it is like being away from home in another person’s house, a strange person’s house.” As expected, the “strangeness” of their new foster parents eventually wore off for many of the children, but the degree of bonding that occurred between foster parent and foster child, and between foster children and their new siblings, ultimately varied.

The clearest evidence of this variation was a propensity for some children to refer to their foster parents using kinships terms, such as “mom” and “dad.” This was not true for other children, and several of the foster parents we interviewed also made it clear that they viewed their foster children differently from their biological children. Some foster parents went as far as threatening to return a foster child to the agency if he or she misbehaved. Feelings of impermanency in their new settings may be particularly damaging, as studies have shown that foster children who do not feel secure with their foster parents experience more psychological problems and achievement problems in school.²⁶

Previous research has shown that, even among children in long-term foster placements, most foster children were doubtful about the stability of their placements.²⁷ In our study, except for a few children who initiated their own transfers because they did not like a placement, children did not perceive their histories of multiple placements as an issue. More than half of the children had experienced between three and eight placements during their time in care, but most of these transfers occurred when the children were very young, and they reported that frequent home changes had not troubled them. But children did reveal fears about their safety in foster care and about the possibility of being moved. Shari offered her perception of what an eventual placement in a group home might entail:

My friend, her name is Brooke, she used to live in a group home and told me what happens. One time they raped a girl in there. Sometimes they would rape, kick, and do bad things. It's good in a way, you get away from the violence from your parents. In another way, it's bad that you don't know what's going to happen to you. You don't know if they'll put you to do bad stuff or do bad stuff to you.

Such fears were not unfounded. While no children reported being abused in their current placements, some did mention incidents of abuse or neglect at previous placements that prompted their removal. Christina explains what went wrong at her last placement:

²⁶ Robert F. Marcus, “The Attachments of Children in Foster Care,” *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs*, 117, no. 4 (1991): 365-394.

²⁷ J. Rowe, H. Cain, M. Hundleby, and A. Keane, *Long Term Foster Care* (London: Batsford, 1984).

That house was worse than any other house. It was so bad. She had kids that were hers and at the same time the school was bad and everything was bad. I didn't even go to school. I didn't go every day like I was supposed to. [My foster mother] didn't say anything. . . . No, I would wake up late or I didn't have any school supplies. My clothes were dirty.

Even children who did not experience similar conditions themselves were aware of the possibility. Manuel expressed such worries about being transferred to a new home:

There are some foster parents that really don't care about the foster kids that come to them. I'm fortunate and have a good foster parent that cares. It really depends on which foster parents you go to. There are a lot of bad ones and some good ones. [The bad ones] don't buy kids clothes or feed them.

Coinciding with the uncertainty over being moved to a new foster home is the prospect of transferring schools due to a placement change. Nine of the children we interviewed had transferred schools, either at the time of their initial placement or because of a later foster care transfer. Thirteen others had also transferred at least once, though many of the reasons were not directly related to foster care. The children frequently stated that they were "nervous" about having to switch schools again. Much of the nervousness was rooted in having to gain acceptance with new groups of peers, a process that was difficult and mentally and emotionally consuming when it occurred. Arguably, establishing these new social connections represented the most pressing initial concern that children perceived as they adjusted to their new school environments.

Peer Relationships and School Behavior

Children spend a substantial portion of their day in a school setting and are likely to interact with their peers and school staff more than they do with any other groups. Given the quantity of the time, and the weight placed on social relationships by children, these interactions compose much of the core of foster children's experiences in school. Peer and school staff interactions also can have far-reaching reverberations, possibly affecting a child's social and emotional development and impacting school performance.

The children we interviewed were candid about their relationships at school, demonstrating a range of experiences and emotions from happy to fearful and destructive. Nearly half of the children were not comfortable revealing their foster care status to other students, and some clearly limited their interactions with peers because of this aversion. The more troubled foster children became withdrawn from others, in either a shy or an aggressively defensive manner. Other children apparently had greater social interactions with peers but had problems controlling various aspects of their behavior in school.

Social Withdrawal & Foster Care Stigma. One of the most striking and clearly unique experiences of the participating foster children was their unease or reluctance to disclose their foster care status to peers. When asked how she would describe being in foster care to a friend, Christina hesitantly responded, “Um, how do they know first of all? . . . Well, they would have to be a really good friend for me to tell them.” Lonnie responded frankly, “I wouldn’t tell them because it’s none of their business.” Other responses included:

Why don’t you want them to know? [Interviewer]
I don’t know; that’s embarrassing. [Robert]

No, [it’s] secret. [Johnny]

I haven’t told them. No, ’cause it is like, ’cause some people talk too much, and it travels. [Kathy]

Do any kids know that you are in foster care? [Interviewer]
I hope not! [David]

The embarrassment that these children feel about their foster care status seems to be rooted in a few related issues. First, there is the idea that the label “foster child” carries a social stigma. Second, information made public about a child’s foster care status makes it more difficult for that child to maintain a sense of privacy about delicate matters. Children were often embarrassed about having to explain or being teased about their parents’ situations, which often included poverty, mental illness, a criminal background, or drug abuse. The range of reasoning behind foster children’s desire for secrecy is evident in the following comments:

’Cause I don’t want anyone, then they would like tell everybody and then I would feel bad, embarrassed, like you didn’t have a mother or father. [Carlos]

’Cause then they are going to say where’s your real mom, where she lives, what her name. They be asking a lot of questions. [Jose]

There are certain people that know because of a stupid fourth grade teacher. He told the class. Oh my god, I was devastated. [Ellen]

At the least, a child’s embarrassment about foster care status can complicate peer relations and create anxiety. At worst, foster children may cut themselves off from their peers at school, becoming socially isolated and withdrawn in an attempt to protect

themselves from further trauma.²⁸ A quarter of the children we interviewed fit this latter description, variously describing themselves as having one or no peer-aged friends at school and demonstrating aversion or animosity towards their classmates. Some of these children did bond with an adult at their schools, while some also sought out another foster child who became their best friend and confidant. Often these children were introduced to each other through the Safe and Smart program and expressed relief at finding another child in a similar situation. Robert's reasoning was typical among the children we interviewed from this group:

Do you have a best friend? [Interviewer]

No, just associates. [Robert]

What's the difference between an associate and a friend? [Interviewer]

Associate isn't a friend. A friend is somebody that is going to be there for you all the time, and an associate is like somebody you deal with where you are right now. [Robert]

Okay, so why don't you think they're friends? [Interviewer]

I don't know, 'cause I can't trust them with nothing. I can't trust them with telling them I'm in foster care or anything. I can't tell them anything, like secrets.

[Robert]

Carlos spoke about his best friend, who was also in foster care, and who is the only peer who knows of his foster status:

[I like Carmela] 'cause she's kind to me and she's friendly. She's not like the others that are mean and aggressive, she is kind. She used to be in foster care and she went back with her mother. [Carlos]

So, did you tell her or did she find out? [Interviewer]

I told her. [Carlos]

How was it telling her, did you feel okay telling her? [Interviewer]

Yeah, like she wouldn't tell anyone. [Carlos]

Did you make her promise not to tell anyone? [Interviewer]

Yeah. [Carlos]

Other children were generally shy with interviewers. When asked who he "hung out" with at school, Lonnie stated simply, "Nobody," and "Don't like friends." Jazmin was similarly taciturn, saying, "Nobody really. I stick to myself."

Acting Out and Fighting. At the other extreme, children often reported that they had trouble controlling their behavior in the classroom. Children cited controlling their own anger as major problem for which they sought help from the Safe and Smart school specialists. They were sometimes disruptive enough that they were asked to leave or were

²⁸ Kools, 1999.

suspended for fighting. Roughly half of the children mentioned infractions such as yelling out in class, answering back to the teacher, disobeying teachers, and talking to other students during lesson times. Others reported getting into fights. While it was difficult to gauge the severity of actions that did not lead to violence, some children reported that their problems extended beyond a single incident. For instance, Shari says:

Yeah, I've gotten a lot of phone calls (for) cutting and not listening to teachers. They be calling, "Shari, come back here," and I just leave. I don't want to be here. I have to visit my friends in the hallway.

Cumulatively, these kinds of disobedient and disrespectful behaviors may move emphasis away from education and towards disciplinary action. Indeed, some children clearly felt labeled as troublemakers, saw themselves as automatically being treated unfairly, and believed that many adults simply expected them to fall short. These opinions drift dangerously toward becoming self-fulfilling.

They put me on punishment and then they say, oh you got to stop doing this, 'cause I know you don't really be picking the fight but they gonna blame it on you because you always fighting. [Omar]

Sometimes kids in my class like to throw things at people. One time, this kid threw something at me. I asked who it was in the direction it came from. Then it threw something in that direction. It hit somebody. I didn't even know who threw it. But I got in trouble. . . . Like the many people that start fights with me. If I told that somebody hit me, they act like it's not a big deal, but if I hit somebody, it's a big deal. [Rick]

Sometimes disruptive and aggressive behaviors also turned violent. Twelve of the children in the group were suspended at least once, most specifically for fighting. Generally, fighting and violence were common parts of the school experience for the children in the study whether they participated in it themselves, observed it, or tried actively to avoid it. This situation is troubling, as recent studies have shown that exposure even to mild violence increases foster children's likelihood of experiencing emotional and psychological distress.²⁹ The vast majority of children said that fights were frequent in their schools and that they had seen at least one person seriously injured. Avoiding fights, or trying to intervene in them, was a daily struggle for a handful of the children we spoke to. Jose recounts:

²⁹ Bradley D. Stein, et al., "Violence Exposure Among School-Age Children in Foster Care: Relationship to Distress Symptoms," *Journal of the American Academy of Adolescent Psychiatry*, 40, no. 5 (2001): 588-594.

I don't like some kids, they big, they want to cheat me, and they want to hit me and fight with me. Here in school, there's a lot of black kids in here. I'm scared of them; that's why I always stay back with them. I always don't talk to them, every time they talk to me I don't listen. They like push me or like punch me one time, stuff like that.

No children said that they actively looked for fights, but others were drawn into altercations with varying degrees of ease. Manuel tells of one such instance:

One time. It was outside. This kid threw a basketball at me and hit me in the head. I fell down. I wasn't going to back away from that because I wasn't going to punk out and just walk away from it like that. It's like bad because then everyone is going to start picking on you. So I went over there and got in his face and said what is the matter with you. Then I pushed him and that's when we started fighting. That's it. Usually I walk away. I just don't like being hit. As long as I'm not hit.

Others had similar stories:

'Cause he was throwing paper and he kept hitting me in the face and I told him, I went up to him and said stop and then he tried to stab me with the pencil in my face and I blocked the pen and I started fighting with him. [Robert]

Me and my brother were in the same school. . . . My brother got into fights every day. Every time I would wait until he started to get beat up and that's when I would jump in. They [foster parents] tell us that if somebody hits us to tell the teacher. We do that, but the teacher doesn't do nothing, then we hit back. [Rick]

Children's accounts of defensive fights sometimes revealed deeper emotional and behavior problems. Carlos was particularly candid:

Kids bothering me and pushing me around, I would get really mad and just explode and go crazy. Yeah, I would like push them just push them and hit them. Sometimes 'cause it was not really their fault. It was my fault, because I'm bothering them and not letting them learn.

Counting the children who fall into the more prominent behavioral problem categories is exceedingly difficult. There was a good deal of overlap, such as withdrawn children who were either angrily anti-social or shy. In many cases, it was also difficult to judge how representative a certain event that a child described was of that child's overall behavior. Accounting for those complexities, we are confident in saying that the acting out and misbehavior problems described above were common among the children in the study. Children's reactions to the problems varied, however, with some maintaining a

positive outlook and a self-reflective mindset. Many were aware of the consequences for their actions, demonstrated personal morals, and seriously tried to avoid trouble. Others appeared to be caught in the moment, simply reacting to situations as they arose.

Adult Support Systems

The foster children in our study have a variety of adults they potentially could turn to for support, including biological and foster families, teachers and other school staff, and caseworkers. Most of the children were able to identify at least one adult they felt they could trust with problems or go to for help with homework or other school issues. Children in foster care may encounter problems with homework because, in addition to the fact that many of them do not have good study skills, they also never received homework help from their biological parents prior to being placed in foster care. As a result, they may not know how to ask their foster families for help.

Whether children sought help with homework or other types of problems, the chosen adult figure and the level of trust associated with them varied from child to child. No children told us that they would go to a caseworker for help with any problem. The children told us their caseworkers changed frequently, did not show up when they were supposed to, and gave them contradictory information about their situations.

Most children told us they would go to kinship parents or school staff if they had a problem. Whom children choose to go to may be related to the type of placement. Most of the children residing in kinship care indicated that they would turn to their foster parents if they had a problem. But few of the children in foster boarding homes reported the same thing. Those who would go first to their foster parents had been in their current placement for at least five years and indicated that their foster parents were very involved in their well-being. For example, Robert was having trouble with a bully at school. When he told his foster parents, they personally came to the school to resolve the issue. Joanne also feels close to her foster mother, disclosing:

I tell her everything, if I feel that something's not right at home or school. . . .
Every time I have a problem, all the time. If I don't, I'll probably think that I can solve it myself. If I had a really big problem, I'd go to her . . .

Very few of the children said they had no adults they could turn to in times of crisis. In these few cases it was often a matter of not feeling that they could trust anyone. Jennifer and Donny told us that they don't like to ask for help from anyone.

. . . when you are having a problem either at school or at home who do you like to go to for help? [Interviewer]
Nobody. 'Cause I don't trust nobody. [Jennifer]
Adults or other students? [Interviewer]
I don't trust nobody. [Jennifer]

Why, do you think? [Interviewer]
I don't know. [Jennifer]

If you ever had a problem, who would be the first person you would talk to?
[Interviewer]

Nobody. [Donny]

What's a serious problem that you've had before? [Interviewer]

I'd have to say the way I act when I get mad. . . . People try to start a fight with me. They start talking about my grandparents or someone in my family and I get angry. Sometimes when I get angry, I throw chairs. [Donny]

Who would you go to when you got really angry and needed some help?

[Interviewer]

Sometimes I don't go to people when I get angry. . . . I don't like to talk. [Donny]

Support from Foster Parents. Foster parents often play a major role in a child's ability to achieve educationally. Ideally, they would be actively involved in their foster child's schooling, attend meetings, help with homework, and support the child in other school-related issues such as participation in extracurricular activities and cultivating peer relationships.

The children in our study reported that their foster parents took varying degrees of interest in their progress in school. Most of the children reported that their foster parents asked the general question, "How was school today?" but do not ask more in-depth questions about school. Some parents were actively involved and helped foster children with their homework. Robert, for example, receives help from both his foster parents. "One of them, the lady, she helps me with reading like if I've got trouble with reading and spelling and stuff. She is real smart in that. Her husband is smart in math so if I got a problem with math he helps me with that." But Manuel's foster parents were much less involved. He revealed that they only ask him about school if he goes to them first. Otherwise, he told us, "They leave me alone."

The foster parents who tended to show more interest in the child's schooling were kinship relations. Children living with their grandmothers reported that these guardians took a great interest in their grades and lectured them about the importance of good grades and behaving in class. Ellen told us that her grandmother talks to her about school every day because "my grandma, she cares. That is why she talk about it to us." When Justin's grades declined, he told us his grandmother "made me study more than I used to." Additionally, Joanne said that her aunt is very involved with her teachers. "She has all my teacher's numbers and they have her cell phone number. So she keeps in touch with my schoolwork. . . . if she can come in [to school], she comes in and takes a day off work."

Given the kinship parents' strong interest in seeing their children do well in school, we were surprised when more children in foster boarding homes than in kinship care told us they would first go to their foster parents for help with schoolwork. Only one of the

nine children who received homework help was in a kinship placement. The children in kinship care told us they did not go to their foster parents for various reasons such as their grandmothers being “too old,” the family’s lack of education, or lack of proficiency in English. For example, Johnny told us that he asks his grandmother for help, but “she is in her 70s and stuff and she forgets all this stuff.”

I’ve had trouble, but the problem is that most of my family didn’t get a real good education, so they really don’t know that much. I can’t ask them for help because they don’t know. [Shari]

Support from School Staff. More than three-quarters of the children in our study revealed that they have cultivated a positive, trusting relationship with at least one member of the school staff. When we asked the children to tell us why they felt close to a particular person, they offered us a variety of reasons, such as the staff members being nice, not giving a lot of homework, or making themselves particularly available to the student. Foremost on the list were those staff members the student felt were respectful to them in some way or whom they felt they could trust.

Some of the children mentioned that the relationship they had with a teacher, principal, or other school staff member was one of the better relationships they had experienced. For these students, the school staff member was not just someone they had to interact with, but someone they wanted to spend time with and made a point of visiting every day. They relied on these adults not just for educational support but also for emotional support and friendship. For some children, these relationships were the most stabilizing they had experienced. For example, Joanne told us that her two favorite teachers “talk to me more than anybody else and they are more in touch with me than anyone else.” Others also held certain staff members in high esteem:

I’m close with the principal. She’s the best thing that’s happened to me right now. . . . she’s helped me a lot . . . she’s helped me with school stuff. I wanted to do a show and she helped me with that. . . . I feel like she’s an adult that’s a friend to me in this school. [Shari]

If it wasn’t for her [a teacher] I would have been as dumb as I was in the beginning of the school year. [Sighs] She is like a parent to me. . . . She wants the best for us. I seen it in her eyes when I first came there. . . . she’s a nice teacher. . . . When she took people for after school, that is when I really seen that she really cared about her class. That she really loves us. So since I seen that I started to work. I wanted to work. [Ellen].

The Safe and Smart school specialist at each school also played a positive role in the educational experience of the foster children. The Safe and Smart office was a place where many of these children could unwind and forget their worries. They received help

with homework, played games, confided in the school specialists about problems, and interacted with other children in foster care. Some came to the office when they were feeling angry or worried and used their time there to “de-stress” or vent their anger.

While many of the children were not comfortable disclosing their foster care status to their peers or other members of the school staff, the children in the Safe and Smart program did trust the specialists. Johnny explained that he felt close to the specialist because, “she’s friendly, a respectful way . . . I think she is respectful. Because she keeps things confidential and doesn’t tell everybody that I am a foster child and stuff.” Some children found the Safe and Smart office to be a sanctuary, a place where their problems would be understood:

It’s just fun. You sit down and don’t think about school for five minutes. It don’t matter. We just talk. We play games. . . [Manuel]

[The school specialist] knows how to settle things. He talks to me. He lets me know what’s good and bad. He lets me know what is good for me. [Julio]

More than half of the children in the study told us that the school specialist helped them with problems, the most prevalent being academics, anger management, help with social relationships, and problems with other school staff. Specific examples are:

Like if I am upset with a student or if somebody get me real heated and I am about to fight them, I will go to them first. . . . Like if I am going to have a fight, I try to let her talk me out of it before I do anything because I am not trying to get suspended. Or if it is like a home problem . . . then I’ll say something. [Ellen]

. . . Right now she’s helping me out with getting my social security. I don’t have it and right now she’s helping me a lot. She’s making it faster than anybody already has. I wouldn’t be able to work without having a social security. She helped me out. [Manuel]

Homework, class work. I came to him yesterday because my high school sent me homework already. I needed help with it. He’s going to help me with it. [Shari]

Biological Parents. Half the children in our study maintain some regular contact with at least one biological parent, either through personal visits or through telephone calls. The frequency of that contact varies for each child. Some children told us they see their mothers or fathers once a week. Others told us they visit with their biological parents every other week. Some children were less specific, telling us that they either saw them “often” or “sometimes.” A few expressed dismay that they used to see their birth parents, but they don’t anymore and were never told why. Ellen angrily told us that her mother visited her regularly until two years ago when “. . . my father wasn’t coming, and then

when my mother stopped coming, then my father would come. And now, nobody coming except my sister.” Similarly, Johnny said, “he [my father] used to pick us up on Saturdays, every Saturday. But he stopped coming. I don’t know why.”

Very few of the children indicated that they would go to a biological parent for help with problems in school or problems in general, and those children often mentioned another supportive adult as well. For example, they would go to a biological parent with a problem at home, such as with a sibling, but would more often turn to a school staff member for school problems. Only one child told us that his biological mother helps him with his homework.

Fortunately, most of the children in this study have adults they can turn to in times of crisis. They give great weight to school staff and kinship guardians as the adults they would turn to most often. Foster parents were next, while help from biological parents and caseworkers came last. Some of the children also had a wider support system that included other biological relatives such as cousins, siblings, aunts, and uncles, as well as friends and babysitters.

IV. Adult Perspectives on the School Experiences of Foster Children

Adults play multiple roles in the lives of foster children, and through their daily interactions they often form specific opinions about what those children are experiencing. The adults interviewed for this study—foster parents, school staff, and caseworkers—brought with them a variety of expertise and a range of personal knowledge of foster children. While some had clearly spoken at length about foster care issues before, others were formulating and publicly expressing their thoughts for the first time. Caseworkers were the only group asked both about their general experiences with foster children and about their experiences with one of the children who participated in the research. Questions for school staff concerned their general dealings with foster children, while we asked foster parents about their participating foster child. Although the interviews focused on school and academic achievement, the open structure of the questions allowed the adults to draw upon all of their sources of knowledge. This chapter describes the school experiences of foster children through the eyes of the adults who are most responsible for them. The names are pseudonyms.

School Staff

Of all adult groups, school staff may provide the strongest link between foster children and their formal educations. Arguably, only children's foster parents see them more during the typical day, and no other group has as its primary goal the children's academic achievement. Yet staff sometimes have the least awareness of a child's foster care status and of the circumstances surrounding a child's home life and family background, the Safe and Smart school specialists being a significant exception. Thus, when interviewed, most school staff drew upon the few instances they remembered in which they dealt with a child in foster care and compared these with generalizations from the rest of the student body. For many school staff members, there was a strong reluctance to view the experiences of foster children as being different from those of the general population. Those who did perceive unique academic or behavioral problems usually associated them with a vague notion of instability in the lives of foster children, or the lack of adequate adult involvement beyond the school.

In general, school staff members felt sympathetic towards the situation of foster children, yet many felt compelled to argue that the overall populations of their schools shared many similar characteristics, such as dysfunctional families, poverty, and abuse. These responses came from staff at all levels. We asked specifically if staff members thought foster children had different experiences from other kids in school:

It runs the whole gamut. I'd say that anything that happens to anyone else. In some children, it's just degrees of difference. The difference between being raised by a foster parent, a grandparent, an uncle and aunt sometimes just isn't that big

. . . because we have so many kids who are not in what you would call your traditional nuclear family. [Assistant Principal Kirsch]

In my case, I consider a teenager as a teenager. I don't make boundaries on them. The reality is that sometime we are caught in the middle. But anyway you have to treat them as a human being all the time. The children, they have different problems, yes, different accommodation, yes. But I have to treat them the same. [Grade Team Leader Sutton]

And I can say that the foster children here do fine. . . . I don't see any difference. I think you will have the same bell curve for them like anybody else. They do low, middle, high, you know, it's the same thing. I think that is testimony. I think they feel comfortable here. [Principal Franklin]

For many staff, this tendency to view foster children as not much different from other students appeared to be a sign of frustration over the sad state of large numbers of children at their schools. Others admitted that they simply didn't know many foster children and that they rarely stood out from other students. Researchers detected some defensiveness from school staff on this issue, particularly in comments suggesting that the act of identifying foster children alone might contribute to their being labeled, or that focusing on foster children discounted the troubles of other youth. It also appeared that some staff wanted to assure the researchers that everyone gets excellent treatment at their facilities. Regardless of the root of these attitudes, it was not clear how these general attitudes affected the way school staff approached the problems of individual foster children; many had clearly made personal connections with them, as the children described.

Personal interactions between school staff and foster children were largely centered around negative disciplinary and academic incidents or times when staff felt they needed to reach out to a child they saw as troubled. Drawing on these encounters, staff recounted a substantial number of behavior and academic problems presented by foster children, leading some to conclude that the problems might be linked to foster care. Specifically, staff noted academic deficiencies, health issues, reclusiveness, embarrassment, self-esteem issues, and lack of trust. Staff most easily recognized external forms of behavior problems such as acting out in class and fighting, and several believed that foster children had learned to be manipulative from their experiences in the system, especially if they came from group homes:

I find that students that come from group homes tend to be older, tougher, and very difficult to reach. They are manipulative. They have come a long way through the system. They know how to bypass the system when necessary. They learn other behaviors from the children they live with which is a finishing school for whatever behaviors I have observed, and I find them very difficult to deal

with. They are not stable emotionally. They are manipulative. Their notions of what is honorable or not; what is permissible, what is not; what is moral, what is not, are askew. [Assistant Principal Parsons]

School staff were split over the specifics of why foster children presented so many problems, and while a few claimed that the children were frustrated over their own school performance, most pinpointed foster children's lack of stability and criticized other adults in their lives for not taking greater responsibility. While "stability" meant different things to different people, most were referring to placement transfers and had a generalized notion of the problems that they caused:

I've had a number of kids that were unhappy in the foster homes they were in. From time to time I've had foster parents saying that this isn't working out, I've got to do something, or he's tried leaving, so on and so forth. Those are the worst cases, kids bouncing around from place to place. They are rootless and they after a while lose their souls. [Assistant Principal Kirsch]

In my experience with foster children, when they are maladjusted in terms of their behaviors, there is a lot of movement. . . I think probably the tumult in their lives, lack of stability in their lives. I think that is a pretty big deal. It is a wonder how some survive. It is a tribute to them. [Assistant Principal Parsons]

In other cases, instability was caused by a child's lack of adjustment to placement or a lack of information, situations that often worked their way into the school and directly to the school specialists:

Oh, I have a young man who is currently in the sixth grade, very intelligent young man, very intelligent but he doesn't do well. For him being in foster care is very hard for him. He has a lot, he requires a lot of attention and he's not doing well in the foster home. There's a lot of foster children in the home and six of them there. . . . He is in a special academy for kids with behavioral problems. And everybody wants attention so he doesn't get it. [School Specialist Jones]

If you are a child and you can remember your mom, you are old enough to remember your mom and remember things she said, and remember things in your house, and then one day your life is different and you are not with her anymore. No one ever told you why, no one ever told what is going on with her. I mean that can really mess you up. How can you even, how can you even deal, how can you even focus in school or anywhere else if this has happened to you? That's traumatic. [School Specialist Smalls]

While school staff most readily spoke about instability as the cause of foster children's problems in school, their harshest criticisms were leveled at foster parents, and

to some extent caseworkers and other child welfare workers. School staff routinely said that they believed certain foster parents were motivated by monetary gain and that the ineptitude of other foster parents was at the base of many foster children's problems, as well as the reason why those problems were rarely solved. The perceived problems with foster parents included having too many children in their care, not taking responsibility for children's behavior problems, dressing students poorly, not taking academics and homework seriously, and not providing a structured environment. Assistant principals at the four schools usually dealt with the most severe behavior problems, and two related the following opinions:

Yeah, problems where there is lack of cooperation at home or no cooperation at home. There could be no one really to call on to assist in the process of assisting the students. Those problems are obviously more difficult. [Assistant Principal Kirsch]

As an individual, I notice that whenever we have those great behavioral problems, the behavior is coming from the home. It is not just generated here. The child has a problem in the home. . . . The kids are out of control at home and they come here and they are also out of control. Or the parents are not able to deal with the children themselves. Or it is just a lot that in the parents' eye, whatever the child is doing is okay. It might be okay at home, it is not okay here. . . . You know, you can always talk out or hit somebody at home, hit your brother and sister, but it is a different ballgame when you are sitting next to Johnny at school. [Assistant Principal Pearl]

More than one school specialist concurred. School specialist Farrell discussed the problems she had getting a foster parent to respond to an educational issue:

I have one student who is considered to be in a regular education program who was identified as needing to be in a special education program due to his behavioral problems and emotional needs. And the problem I had was the foster parent did not bring the child to have his medical exam and also . . . the agency requested that he have a psychological evaluation so that we could place him in a more appropriate school setting. And the foster parent did not do that. Consequently I needed to go to the agency in person and advocate that they take a more direct role, which they did.

School staff often ran into these problems when they contacted foster parents and caseworkers to try to resolve situations at school. Commonly, foster parents were unresponsive, or it was unclear who had responsibility for helping in matters with a particular child. Many school staff members said they did what they could to help, but that there was only so much that they could do in their positions and in a school setting.

Foster Parents

The quality of the foster home environment may be one of the most important variables in encouraging foster children to succeed academically. Additionally, teachers have reported that students with more involved foster parents performed better academically.³⁰ Studies, however, have shown that foster parents usually are not actively involved in their foster child's schoolwork.³¹

The sample of foster parents who agreed to participate in this study was small. While it is hard to make generalizations based on this sample size, the parents we interviewed offered some useful insights about the issues they and their children faced in school and in the foster care system.

Most of the foster parents did not believe that their children had any special problems at school due to their foster care status. They all indicated that their children are doing well socially and have many friends. According to the foster parents, the children are not embarrassed or stigmatized by being in foster care. Carlos' foster parent, for example, believed that since he had been in foster care so long, he "doesn't think of himself as a foster child." Other parents also believed that their children felt it was not a big deal.

This is, how do you say, a Spanish-black neighborhood and we don't pay attention to things like that. With our culture, where you are black or you are Spanish, it doesn't matter where you live. Or they say, 'well who you live with?' 'my foster mother.' So you know . . . it is a normal thing. It is not a disgrace that you are in foster care. [foster parent of Richie]

All the foster parents we spoke with initially told us that that their children were well behaved at home. Most said they had no problems with the child at all, except for a "little attitude" once in a while. However, behavioral issues were a big concern at school. Almost all the foster parents reported that their children had been in trouble at school, for fighting, disrupting class, and not doing work. For example:

In school he did [have problems]. He would fight and he wouldn't respond to his teachers. [foster parent of Julio]

But with his behavior, his teacher calls me and I have to go to school. That's the problem. It's his behavior mainly. He is very dominant. [foster parent of Carlos]

She started hanging out with some bad friends who wouldn't go to school. They didn't do their work and she almost got left back. [foster parent of Shari]

³⁰ Conger and Rebeck, 2001.

³¹ Blome, 1997; Nicola Coulling, "Definitions of Successful Education for the 'Looked After' Child: A Multi-Agency Perspective," *Support for Learning* 15, no.1 (2000): 30-35; Conger and Rebeck, 2001; Francis, 2000.

Most of the foster parents reported that their children do not actively talk to them about school. Joanne's foster parent told us, "She hardly ever talks about that. She hardly ever tells me anything about school or her friends." When we asked her why she thought Joanne didn't talk about school, she replied, "Well, I think it's because she doesn't have any problems, I imagine."

Other foster parents were more active in discussing school with the child. If the children were not forthcoming on their own, the foster parents asked. For example, Manuel's foster father said, "But he won't tell me what he is learning [in school]. You know, Manuel is a quiet guy. You have to ask him. If you don't just pry and just ask him, he won't [tell us about school]."

When children did discuss school problems with their foster parents, it was rarely about academics or asking for help with homework. In almost all cases, foster parents indicated that their children mostly expressed problems they were having either with teachers or with one of their peers.

At times he would tell me if another kid was bothering him. [foster parent of Julio]

He had a problem with a young man in school. They had a fight somewhat, and Robert was the aggressor. The kid was playing with him and he got mad and punched up a kid and whatever. [foster parent of Robert]

He doesn't like class. The kids bother him. They talk too loud. He always complains about the teacher. That she scolds him and screams at him. [foster parent of Carlos]

Most of the contact the foster parents had with school was initiated by a staff member, primarily in response to a behavioral issue. Rarely did any of the parents contact the school of their own volition. When contacted by the school, however, all the parents said that they made an effort to visit the school and get involved in resolving the problem. Most also said that they attended parent-teacher meetings on a regular basis and visited the school on report card day.

As had the children, foster parents reported that most school absences were due to doctor's appointments. Several of the children have medical conditions that require frequent doctor visits, and parents complained that the school is not understanding enough in these cases. Manuel's foster father said, "I got a letter from this Board of Education once saying they want to know why he was out these two days and any time he stay out, it is a doctor's appointment. Otherwise he don't stay out." Richie's foster parent has canceled appointments so that he can go to school:

He has to be at school. Today he was supposed to be at the doctor and I flatly refused to take him. He has to be at the doctor tomorrow. I might not take him tomorrow either because then he has to go on Friday again. You know and then the school is calling me and jumping on me, why isn't he in school, you know.

The issue foster parents seemed least involved with was academics. When we queried them about their children's grades, several told us that their children were doing well in all their classes. As the previous chapter indicated, most were not succeeding academically and carried low grade point averages. Some foster parents may define good grades in terms of merely passing classes. For example, Carlos' foster parent told us he was doing well "because he gets 70s and 75s." Only two of the parents expressed disappointment in grades and became involved in helping the children improve.

He's got the attitude that I'm passing, but we won't accept just passing when we know he can do a lot better. . . . I tell him, no that is not acceptable . . . This semester he is doing quite well. [foster parent of Manuel]

. . . I really got on him. He failed English and math and I believe technology the last marking period. So I jumped on him about that, and I think the lady at school jumped on him. She is helping him. . . . He can use my computer too. I am not very computer literate, but I can turn it on and get in there for him, and I have helped him. [foster parent of Robert]

School transfers and delays in registration are often cited in the literature as reasons why foster children are not succeeding in school. However, if a school transfer was necessary, the foster parents in this study often waited until the beginning of a new school year in order not to disrupt the child's education. Only one of the nine foster parents we spoke to mentioned trouble with the school registration process, but it is important to remember that this small number of parents may not represent a cross-section of experiences. In the case that cropped up in our interviews, the parent was not told the correct school district. It took several days to straighten out the information and the child was delayed a week.

Additionally, most of the parents reported that if the child did transfer schools, he or she adjusted well to the transfer. Donny's parent told us, "It was easy. He didn't have any problem." Only one foster parent reported any difficulty on the part of the child regarding transferring schools. Shari and Christina's foster mother told us:

It was very difficult. They cried and suffered a lot. They didn't want to adapt to a new school. They didn't know what was going to happen in this school. So it made them nervous . . . I had to wake them up in the morning. They didn't want to get up or get dressed. Not so much Shari, but Christina. She would not get dressed and she'd scream that she didn't want to go to school.

Almost all the foster parents had contact with the Safe and Smart program at the child's school. Overall, they had positive comments about the program and felt that the Safe and Smart school specialists were extremely dedicated to helping the children. The foster parents often used the Safe and Smart specialist as a liaison with other school staff and relied on them to help them solve problems:

I met [the school specialist]. She is a nice lady. . . . I have had quite a few conversations with her. . . . He [foster child] loves to be around her. . . . They are very helpful. Anytime I had a problem I would call [the specialist] and she would check it out for me. . . . You know, about the teachers. I would call and ask her about the teachers. What does she think. Do I need to come? [foster parent of Manuel]

[The school specialist] calls me. I visit her whenever there is report card time. And she just calls me to see how I am doing, how Stacy is doing. You know, because she meets with Stacy too. . . . I tell her the problem and she just tries to fix it with Stacy. [foster parent of Stacy]

Well I just met her. They changed people. She is going to try and see if she can help Donny get into an after-school study program and before-school study program. [foster parent of Donny]

In contrast to the children's accounts, the majority of foster parents indicated that they had good relationships with their children's caseworkers. They described them as being helpful and available when needed. Most had caseworker visits at least once or twice a month, but these interactions were rarely, if ever, about school issues. They primarily were concerned with home issues such as behavior in the household, requesting therapy sessions, or negotiating a "special needs" rate for the parent.

Only Donny's foster parent met with a caseworker on a school-related issue. The parent felt that Donny was not in the right grade and asked the caseworker to go to the school with her to help straighten out the matter. In this case, the parent believed that the problem was resolved because the caseworker took the time to come with her to the school.

While most of the foster parents we interviewed were extremely involved in behavioral issues, both in school and in the home, fewer were fully aware of the child's academic status, and foster parents were rarely involved in helping with homework. Only a few foster parents took a creative and interactive approach to helping their children improve grades and test scores.

Caseworker Perspectives

The caseworkers we interviewed were employed by private agencies under contract with New York City's Administration for Children's Services and had monitoring and decision-making responsibilities for each of the children on their caseloads. Caseworkers were privy to the histories of each of their children and demonstrated a breadth of knowledge that was clearly attributable to their experiences with multiple aspects of children's lives over time. Although our small sample size limited our ability to make broad generalizations, the caseworkers that we interviewed seemed to know a great deal about the pitfalls foster children face as they try to pursue an education. However, while all caseworkers cited the educational progress of the children on their caseloads as important to them, their involvement in the subject was largely limited to dealing with behavioral problems in school.

Trauma and Poor Academic Performance. There was no consensus among caseworkers regarding the experiences of foster children or why they often perform poorly in school. On the broadest level, caseworkers recognized that placement in and adjustment to foster care were traumatic events for children and could easily overshadow academics.

Just to focus on [school] is very, very difficult because there are so many other, you know, things going on in their lives being in foster care. They can be moved the next day and then they go to school and then they are out there in another home. So they are thinking about the reality that they are in a new home and they . . . don't want to move around, and then they take that to school . . . and they really can't focus much. So they have all those issues, and, you know, just basically thinking, why should I waste time doing this when I have all these other problems . . . [Ms. Dale]

In addition, many of the caseworkers portrayed the general foster care experience as consisting of a series of traumas—false promises by biological parents, unrealistic hopes, school transfers, and teasing and isolation at school because of foster care status. Ms. Cohen gives an example of how a seemingly routine event can be amplified into a traumatic moment for a foster child:

Very basic example of getting a consent form signed to go on a field trip. Another kid brings it home and mom signs it and brings it back. Well, it is not as easy and just bringing that slip of paper home raises issues like why are you not my mom, why are you my guardian, and a host of emotional issues that a kid who is not in foster care doesn't face.

Surprisingly, caseworkers also shared a belief that many children are negatively affected by teachers biased against foster children. Ms. Green was one of several who held this view, stating:

I have like kids who definitely have like done things wrong, but nothing, you know, another child wouldn't have gotten in trouble for, but because this kid is in foster care, we get called in immediately, and like come and deal with this. Come and pick this kid up. Come and do this. Come and do that. So I mean some staff do discriminate . . .

In many cases, foster children's experiences were compounded by pre-existing problems. Caseworkers documented stories of children's emotional and learning disabilities that were undiagnosed and neglected at a young age, leaving the child in a constant struggle to catch up to classmates. With inadequate corrections, these deficiencies sometimes manifested themselves in classroom behavioral problems in later years, again taking the focus away from the child's academic performance. Caseworkers often placed fault for such situations on others, primarily foster parents for poor parenting skills, biological parents for not signing the proper consent forms for testing or special programs, and the schools for being poorly run and bureaucratic. Only one caseworker suggested that caseworker turnover was a problem, and acknowledged that various agency appointments sometimes kept children out of school.

Varying Caseworker Involvement. Underlying these opinions was the nature of caseworker contact with individual children. While all caseworkers had similar mandates regarding how they dealt with a child's case, unique aspects of individual cases dictated variations in the frequency and intensity of caseworker involvement. For example, children demonstrating chronic behavioral problems and those undergoing major life changes requiring complex planning, such as adoption, were reportedly seen more often than children doing well in stable placements. At the very least, caseworkers noted that they were required to visit schools twice annually on behalf of each child and also to hold regular monthly planning meetings with the child and his or her family.

Beyond the required school visits and behavioral crisis interventions, caseworkers were not uniform in their perceived duties regarding education. Nearly all reported that they offered help to foster parents with registration, monitored children's grades through report cards, and evaluated children's problems and ordered testing or located tutoring. But in many cases the amount of time and effort devoted to these areas was minimal and unpredictable, and education seemed less of a priority than other aspects of a child's case. Ms. Cohen was particularly frank about this:

Usually we contact the school in case of a problem initially, when a case will first come to us, if it is a re-placement, if they are starting at a new school, if there are

special education needs. Honestly, it is not the first priority, if they are staying in the same school, to contact school personnel. We would certainly try and make contacts throughout the school year to get an update on their progress, to get copies of their report cards.

Ms. Mathers felt that it was the responsibility of other adults to keep her informed about educational issues:

Well, as the caseworker, I am supposed to be notified of any changes in their academic or behavior at school.

Ms. Lest had a contrasting approach:

We have to be aware of what the child is doing during the day. They spend most of their time in school, and we contact teachers to get it, you know, a general idea of what a child is like and how the child's behavior is going, because they have the most contact with the children.

Some caseworkers took initiatives on behalf of their children's educations, while others did not seem to intervene or were not even aware of problems unless an issue arose that demanded their involvement. In these latter situations, caseworkers often stressed that education was primarily a foster parent responsibility, and that they themselves should only be available to help with serious problems.

Usually it is the foster parent contact primarily [for school issues] and rightly so because they are taking the place of the parent and particularly if the caseworker has a huge caseload. So it is, you are really dependent upon good foster parents. But usually, if like I said, if someone stuck some kid with a pencil, then sometimes the worker would go with the foster parent to a case conference. Is there a pattern there? Should he be seen by the agency psychiatrist, to get, you know, re-evaluated in terms of medication? [Mr. Bryant]

Knowledge of the School Experience. The level of caseworker knowledge of the general educational well-being of foster children proved similarly uneven. Nowhere is this clearer than in their responses to questions about school registration and grades. As mentioned previously, all caseworkers stated that they were available to assist foster parents if they experienced problems registering their children in school. What did caseworkers think this experience was like for foster parents?

Pretty easy. I think the schools, once they learn that a child is in foster care, they do act pretty quickly in getting the children in school. [Ms. Best]

I think it is a pretty big problem because each school will tell you something different. Like some schools will say we need this and some schools say we need these records and like I guess like legally they don't need any school records, they need an immunization record to get the kid in school. But they'll try and tell you they need everything else. [Ms. Green]

While problems with registration and transfers could conceivably delay or disrupt a child's education temporarily, keeping track of students' grades and test scores is a long-term process and arguably one of the best indicators of their educational progress. Ideally, caseworkers receive academic updates via children's report cards, usually requested from the foster parents, and through their biannual in-school meeting with the child's teacher. Many admitted, however, that a number of parents were not reliable in getting report cards to them and that schools were no more helpful.

It works for most of the foster parents that I have that have school-aged kids. If the foster parents aren't as involved, or aren't cooperative about that process, usually it is very, very difficult to get the report card. The school is less cooperative I think than the foster parents are. [Ms. Cohen]

I mean it is if you are at the school and you're like, "I want it right now," they give it to you, and if you call off times and then it takes them forever to send it to you. . . . And then we have, of course, some kids, when they fill out their applications, when they are registering for school, they don't put down that they are foster children with our agencies so they are like who are you, we can't give you this information. [Ms. Green]

One caseworker estimated that she could not obtain report cards for one-third of the children on her caseload. For many others, report cards trickled in over the school year, or went directly to the educational specialist at the agency for evaluation, bypassing the caseworker. Such delays, combined with the recalcitrance of school staff and heavy caseworker workloads, made it almost inevitable that a number of foster children's grades were not monitored closely throughout the year. This largely appeared to be a problem of two government systems not communicating rather than a problem with individual caseworkers. In these cases, caseworkers frequently cited the help of the Safe and Smart school specialists in keeping track of children's general educational progress, as well as in obtaining children's report cards.

The variation of caseworkers' involvement in educational issues makes it difficult to gauge their overall perceptions of the school experiences of foster children. Most seemed keenly aware of the psychological, social, and emotional upheaval that foster children endured and speculated about its probable impact on academic performance. They were also more informed than any other group about children's developmental delays and advocated for treatment and special programs. Yet generalized knowledge about the

academic performance of foster children was lacking, and knowledge about the performance of specific children seemed limited to situations where information was easily obtained, where the child also exhibited behavioral problems, or where a child's performance was so poor it was reaching crisis levels. Low grades alone generally were not a pressing issue.

V. Discussion

The interviews reported in the previous chapters provide us with a detailed record of the experiences of foster children in school, the way these experiences interrelate with the foster care and educational systems, and the perceptions from adults as to why so many foster children perform so poorly academically. In certain instances, these interviews yielded new issues raised by children but overlooked by adults, while at the same time providing adult insight into why some of these problems exist and how they could be alleviated.

Children's Perspectives

We have inferred from the children's perspectives that they do have unique problems that flow directly from their foster care status and distinguish them from other disadvantaged children in school.

Some problems, such as mandated court appearances and doctor's appointments that cause them to miss school, longer commutes, registration and transfer problems, and being teased or singled out because of their family situations, are clearly linked to their status as children in foster care.

Other problems may appear similar to those of children not in foster care but have different root causes. Some foster children in our study, for example, said they were distracted and unable to focus on schoolwork because they were worried about the well-being of their biological families or anxious about the stability of their own placements. Likewise, many foster children who appeared shy or withdrawn were not displaying personality traits but instead were desperately attempting to hide their foster care status from their peers. Similarly, it is conceivable that many instances of children fighting or acting out may have a source in placement trauma or self-esteem issues.

In describing their experiences in school, foster children spoke at length about their grades, behavior, and social interactions with both peers and family and the academic and emotional ramifications that those entailed.

In terms of educational achievement, children discussed how homework and grades took a backseat to such concerns as maintaining ties with their biological parents, being accepted by their peers, and caring for siblings. They reported that they spent little time on schoolwork and studying for tests; some demonstrated only a vague knowledge of their grades and academic progress. Although some realized the importance of academic achievement and were making strides in improving their performance, others were making little effort and appeared unenthusiastic. Many were reluctant to seek help from adults when they were having trouble with school assignments and were satisfied to receive passing grades and avoid summer school.

One of the more surprising findings was that children often blamed themselves for poor academic performance. Many were their own harshest critics, often stating that

classroom misbehavior, inattention, and lack of discipline doing schoolwork were the primary factors behind their low grades. Several possibilities exist for why children blamed themselves for declining grades. They simply may have been embarrassed about discussing their grades, and blaming themselves was the fastest way to change the topic. Since foster children are often considered to lack the potential to succeed, perhaps some were just repeating what they had heard from adults in their lives. A more troubling possibility is that the foster children may have been expressing an ingrained guilt about being the central cause of the problems in their lives.

While young adolescents in general are testing their independence and the limits set by those around them, we learned that the trauma of foster care can contribute to undue behavioral problems stemming from issues such as low self-esteem, instability, or a sense of abandonment by their biological families. For the children in our study, the foster care experience manifested itself in both the classroom and home through such behaviors as aggression and impulsivity, withdrawing from class, an inability to concentrate on schoolwork, and poor peer relations. Some foster children may misbehave in class as a way of getting the attention or control they lack in other areas of their lives.

Foster children in our study often referred to their behavior as one explanation for why they were performing poorly in school. They freely admitted to acting out in class, talking back to teachers, ignoring teachers' requests, or acting violently towards other students. While the children recognized that their behavior affected their grades, they did not ultimately take responsibility for the causes of their poor behavior. When questioned on why certain incidents occurred, many were quick to point the finger at others. Those who were involved in fights, for example, often indicated that they had reacted in self-defense or were responding to bullying. Teachers who were considered unfair or disrespectful often became the targets of poor behavior. Students described walking out of class without permission or becoming unruly in the classroom.

Being in foster care also affected the social relationships of some children in our sample, where their "foster" status manifested in low self-esteem and what Kools refers to as a *stigmatized self identity*.³² This sometimes resulted in the children developing strategies to keep their foster care status hidden, most often by withdrawing from social interactions with peers. Some children in our study exhibited so much anxiety that their foster care status would be exposed that they told us they had no friends in school or only made friends with other children in foster care.

Unlike adults, children do not see themselves interacting with "systems" such as the child welfare or educational systems. However, they consistently interacted with adults from both, and, therefore, their perceptions are valuable in assessing how the two systems function on issues that directly affect foster children in school. In dealing with the child welfare system, they indicated that the role of the caseworker was unclear to them. The

³² Kools, 1999

children cited the frequent turnover of caseworkers and rarely made the effort to build relationships with them or to turn to them for help. Furthermore, some children told us they were not given updates on the status of their biological families, which led to anxiety that followed them to school. While some children spoke of supportive relationships with individual teachers or the Safe and Smart school specialist, most reported that teachers and administrators often did not understand the bureaucratic processes that are an inevitable part of foster care. Children had trouble explaining foster-care related appointments and sometimes were not allowed to make up missed schoolwork. A few children reported delays in registering for school because the school administration was not structured to easily accommodate foster children. They also reported that teachers were sometimes insensitive in revealing their foster care status to other students.

Adult Perspectives

The adults responsible for the well-being of foster children, including their educational achievement, did not generally understand the school experience in the same way as the children we interviewed. Although our sample of adults was small, we found some consensus among each of the adult groups concerned with educational outcomes of foster children—foster parents, caseworkers, and school personnel—with each viewing foster children from a different perspective, and each usually lacking a complete picture of the child’s placement and academic histories. Members of the various adult groups frequently suggested that responsibility for monitoring academics should reside with someone other than themselves. As a result, foster children encountered little resistance to their practical devaluation of academics.

Foster parents were most concerned with the children’s behavior, both at home and in school; most parents we interviewed spoke with the school in order to resolve behavior issues. Caseworkers, who demonstrated an in-depth knowledge of the children’s history, nonetheless generally preferred that other adults take responsibility for all but crisis situations at school. And school staff, most directly involved in the education of foster children, often had little knowledge of a child’s background and, therefore, little understanding of how previous experiences might influence behavior in classroom settings. Nor did they believe that the practical and emotional demands of foster care create unique roadblocks to academic achievement that other economically disadvantaged children do not face. (There were exceptions: the Safe and Smart school specialists and some individual teachers were supportive adults in the lives of some of the foster children in our study.)

Academics. The crisis-driven nature of the foster care system appeared to be the primary reason why academics were relegated to a lower priority by many of the adults and children who contributed to our research. Consistently, problems arose that both children

and adults perceived as requiring more immediate attention than academics, which were often in a poor but non-crisis state.

Foster parents rarely expressed criticism of their children's grades and, like the students, seemed satisfied if they passed their subjects. The parents also agreed with the children's assessment that they did not regularly help the children with homework or verify that they were preparing for tests. Our interviews suggested that some foster parents, particularly older kinship care-givers, could provide little academic help to their children beyond encouragement because of their own unfamiliarity with English or school subject matter. Our findings suggested that academic achievement was of concern to caseworkers, but it was one of many problems and usually not the most urgent. Caseworkers knew of severe deficiencies in children's academic backgrounds but varied significantly in their awareness of children's day-to-day academic progress. Several caseworkers we spoke with seemed exasperated by their workloads, and settling major placement and child protection issues occupied much of their time.

School staff were most aware that foster children were performing poorly, yet they were unaware when the demands of the foster care system (medical or therapy appointments, court appearances, etc.) caused children to miss tests or other important school assignments. Even when they wanted to help, some staff informed us, they were not in a position to take such initiatives as having the children enrolled in tutoring programs or tested for placement in special education. Their interactions with other adults in the children's lives often focused on addressing behavioral problems rather than academic performance.

Behavior and Placing Blame. While children were quick to blame themselves for many of their educational deficiencies, only a handful of adults whom we interviewed seemed to share this view.

The school staff and a few of the small number of foster parents who were interviewed cited misbehavior in school, lack of focus, or lack of self-discipline as a basis for poor academic performance. Though many of these individuals recognized that these problems might be rooted in larger and more complicated issues in the children's lives, they struggled with how to confront those larger problems on an everyday basis. Most school staff and foster parents were not counselors and, therefore, perhaps not trained to deal with the larger issues, yet they were the most directly responsible for encouraging children, setting rules, and maintaining discipline. Many foster parents approached this as other parents would, by lecturing children not to be bad. Some school staff members did blame the children, describing them in negative terms such as "manipulative." In contrast, none of the caseworkers we interviewed appeared to blame the children outright.

We found no consensus among the adult groups as to the actual causes of misbehavior. As a consequence, little coordinated action by social service agencies and schools is taken to address this issue.

Social Relationships. The children and foster parents we interviewed had very different perspectives on social relationships. Children told us how embarrassment over their foster care status made it difficult to develop peer relationships at school and led them to withdraw from potential friendships. Yet their foster parents did not generally recognize these difficulties. Few told us that their children were stigmatized or embarrassed by their foster care status. Almost all reported that their children had many friends and no problems socializing with others. One parent, for example, insisted that her neighborhood was very accepting of all kinds of living situations and thought her child was very open about his foster care status. When we talked to the child, however, he told us that he didn't want anybody to know because he was embarrassed. Neither of the other adult groups raised peer relationships as an important issue with the exception of one school staff member who thought a student's shyness and depression might be related to foster care.

Strategies for Academic Improvement for Foster Children

One of the characteristics that all the foster children share is the number of adults accountable for their well-being. Ideally, responsibility for the children's academic progress would be shared by foster parents, biological parents (if they are still in their children's lives), and those in the child welfare and educational systems. Our study suggests that improved coordination among these responsible parties may help them to alleviate some of the problems raised by the children and potentially have a positive effect on academic outcomes, but this may prove too difficult without also defining primary responsibility.

It is unclear who has primary responsibility for the child's academic progress. For example, some caseworkers we spoke with rarely became involved in the children's education and usually did not make contact with the schools beyond the required yearly visits. They emphasized that their primary concern was child protection services rather than education. Members of the school staff, perhaps due to confidentiality issues, were unaware of foster children's case histories. If they had such information, they might be able to better address individual academic and behavioral problems that arise in school.

One result of this limited communication and exchange of information was the frustration expressed in our interviews by both foster children and foster parents at what they felt was the schools' lack of understanding of the foster care system. When children had to miss school for therapy sessions, doctor's appointments, or court appearances as mandated by the system, both children and parents reported instances of the children not being allowed to make up tests or homework assignments. Improved communication between the two systems could result in the scheduling of court appointments or doctor's visits at times when they did not coincide with tests or other major school assignments. Or, if that cannot always be avoided, teachers may be instructed by school administration

to be more flexible about allowing students to make up missed work. Our findings suggest that, beyond improved communication, teachers and other school staff could benefit from some basic training on the structure and function of the child welfare system. Additionally, coordination of school transfers could help foster children adjust to a new school environment and curriculum with less disruption.

One barrier to cooperation is the tendency not to share information about the children across the systems. For reasons of confidentiality, school staff are often not given the complete case backgrounds on the foster children in their schools. In some cases, children are not identified as being in foster care. This may be deliberate, preventing teachers from lowering their expectations or inadvertently revealing the children's status, but this research suggests that other protections ought to be explored so that teachers can gain access to at least some pertinent details that might help them understand the roots of certain behavioral and academic difficulties.³³ At the same time, caseworkers should have easier access to the child's educational record. If a child is in danger of failing courses, caseworkers could be informed without having to rely solely on the foster parents to provide them with report cards and other educational information. Making more adults aware of a child's academic standing might improve the chances that one of them would intervene to avert failure.

Foster parents could be encouraged to serve as more effective intermediaries between the child welfare and educational systems. The small sample of foster parents in our study may not be representative of the larger class, but they tended to keep these relationships separate, turning to caseworkers for assistance with issues at home and to school staff for help with school-related problems. They told us of fruitful relationships with caseworkers, but their relationships with school staff were generally less consistent and revolved more frequently around behavioral issues than academics. Accordingly, when a child exhibited problems at school, the school contacted the foster parent, rather than the caseworker.

Within our study sample, the Safe and Smart school specialists demonstrated what might be achieved by any trained adult with primary responsibility for a child's education. The specialists acted as liaisons between the educational and child welfare systems. As child welfare workers located in the school, they had access to the children's case histories, allowing them to advocate effectively on the children's behalf. There was a consensus among all those we interviewed that the Safe and Smart specialists provided a valued source of support for the foster children, foster parents, and even caseworkers and school staff.

The school specialists often picked up where the other adult support systems left off. They helped children solve both personal and school problems; they helped with homework when the children were not receiving adequate help at home, and intervened

³³ Conger and Rebeck, 2001; Jackson, 1994

with caseworkers when a child was having difficulty adjusting to new home or school environment. Since school specialists were available to spend more time with the students than other staff members, they had the opportunity to build up the sense of trust, rapport, and stability that many of the foster children lacked in relationships with other adults.

School specialists also maintained regular contact with foster parents and caseworkers to keep abreast of the children's progress while they were away from the school environment. They were in a good position to recognize when foster-care related issues manifested in the school environment. And with access to both the child's educational records and foster care histories, they were primed to help increase collaboration among the schools, caseworkers, and foster families.

While it may be possible in some places to create permanent roles for school specialists within the foster care system, in others, including New York, this may not be practical. Even then, however, designating someone to play this role in each child's life would be desirable. Such a person should ensure effective and timely two-way communication between caseworkers and school staff and should be readily identifiable by school staff, foster children, caseworkers, and parents as someone they can turn to for educational information and support. Additionally, foster parents could be encouraged to take a more active role in their children's educational progress. The importance of education could be stressed at the time of placement. School staff and caseworkers could help foster families determine how best to assist the child at home and become more involved with the child's academics needs, perhaps by showing parents effective ways to check homework or help their child study for tests. If they are not consistently attending school conferences, foster parents should still be kept informed of the child's grades and schoolwork and should be made aware of any aid, such as tutoring or other forms of educational assistance, that is available to them and their children.

Lastly, some children entering care may benefit from additional counseling that focuses specifically on bolstering their self-esteem and preparing them to deal with their foster care status in relation to peers. This may be particularly important if the suggestion in our research proves commonplace, that many adults are not aware of the social stigma that children in their care attach to foster care.

Our research is necessarily only suggestive, and there are many more questions that could be addressed by further research on this topic. A longitudinal study could be undertaken to determine what characteristics of foster children increase their chances of performing poorly in school, or to examine how school performance changes over time. Further, a comparison of academic performance of children in different types of care, such as kinship, foster boarding, or group homes, could be conducted to see how particular placements affect education. While our study focused specifically on middle school children in New York City, a study of this nature could be conducted with elementary and high school students and in other cities or regions of the country.

Nevertheless, the children in foster care today need attention now. We hope that the themes and suggestions that emerge from our research can guide renewed efforts to improve the academic performance of children in care. The challenge is to ease the unique burdens that foster children face in school while at the same time to enable the adults in both the foster care and educational systems to more effectively serve the needs of the children.

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Appendix

Table A: Child Demographics

	Study Population (N=25)	
	Number	%
Gender		
Male	16	64%
Female	9	36%
Ethnicity		
African-American	17	68%
Hispanic	8	32%
Age		
10	1	4%
11	6	24%
12	7	28%
13	4	16%
14	4	16%
15	3	12%
Mean Age in Years	12	
Grade in School		
5 th Grade	4	16%
6 th Grade	8	32%
7 th Grade	6	24%
8 th Grade	7	28%

Table B: Foster Care Placement Demographics

	Study Population (N=25)	
	Number	%
Age at First Placement		
0-2 years old	4	16%
3-5 years old	7	28%
6-8 years old	8	32%
9-11 years old	2	8%
10-14 years old	4	16%
Total Number of Years in Care		
0-2 years	5	20%
3-5 years	9	36%
6-8 years	5	20%
9-11 years	4	16%
12 years and over	2	8%
Total Number of Placements		
1	5	20%
2	9	36%
3	3	12%
4	3	12%
5	3	12%
8	1	4%
10	1	4%
Number of Years at Current Placement		
0-2 years	9	36%
3-5 years	12	48%
6-8 years	3	12%
Discharged from care ³⁴	1	4%
Type of Current Placement		
Foster Home	13	52%
Kinship Care	12	48%

³⁴ One child in the study had just been placed on a trial discharge a few days prior to our interview.