



Mental Health and School

Content excerpts from San Francisco CASA, www.sfcasa.org

Many youth in foster care or other out of home care have special needs when it comes to the support and development of their mental health. A CASA, while not a mental health provider, can be key in advocated for resources to meet those needs.

Mental health is a vastly unmet need for students in foster care. For many youth with mental health disorders or disabilities, their challenges are written off, or allowed to slip through the cracks, until they manifest in behavior that may lead to a suspension or expulsion.

Youth in foster care face a wide array of mental health challenges, including depression, eating disorders, and substance use disorders. Even if your student is receiving support for a mental health disorder outside of school, it can easily creep into their academic life in the form of mood swings, erratic behavior, missed class, difficulty socializing, and more. There are many resources in the school, however, that you can help your youth access. Here are some ways to help you and your youth navigate potential mental health challenges and the impact they could have on the youth's educational success.

Red Flags

If your youth has not been diagnosed with a mental health challenge or if they are currently being treated for one, you can keep an eye out for warning signs that something may not be right. Some of these signals include:

- Excessive sleeping or lack of sleep
- Decrease self-esteem
- Decline in academic performance
- Abnormal eating patterns
- Personality shifts such as increased anger or sensitivity
- Changes in behavior such as defensiveness, aloofness, or isolation



- Increased difficulty in contacting or spending time with your youth

If you notice one of these red flags, bring it up with your youth in a safe and supportive way. Ask how they're feeling, if something has been happening in their personal life, or if they feel supported by their school and community. If your youth avoids the questions, don't push, but try to find other angles through which you could get them to open up. You can also check in with their social worker, teachers, therapists and caregivers.

Supporting Mental Health at School

Check in regularly with some of the key people on your student's education team. With your child's confidentiality in mind, keep up on the school personnel's perception of how your youth is progressing so that challenges can be discussed and appropriately handled in a timely manner. People to check in with include:

- Teacher
- School nurse
- School counselor/psychologist
- Principal or assistant principal
- IEP team (if applicable)

While these people all deal with a large number of students and may not always be as responsive as you'd like, you can still hold them accountable. As a CASA, you can expect:

- To have your questions answered
- To be updated on changes in your youth's situation
- To be considered a member of the team and treated as such
- To have information you provide be kept confidential

Please keep in mind that as a CASA, you are privy to certain information that can and should be kept confidential, such as the circumstances that led to your youth's placement in foster care, or medical and psychiatric diagnoses. If your youth has an IEP, many assessments may have been provided by the school and medical, and mental health



diagnoses may already be on record. Be sure to always check in with your Advocate Supervisor to discuss the appropriateness of disclosure of any confidential information even if you feel it would benefit your youth.

Most schools have a several resources available to support foster youth with mental health challenges. These could include a school nurse, health and gym classes, a counselor, or a social worker. Your youth should be able to access these resources as needed with no extra cost to them or their caregivers. Ask your school's administration for information about your options

Proactive Steps

One of the most disruptive challenges of having and treating a mental health disorder is the tendency to miss class or display disruptive behavior.

If your youth experiences disciplinary action because of a behavior caused by their mental health disorder, such as lashing out, disruptive behavior in class, or starting a fight with a classmate, they are entitled to receive consideration through an IEP.

The best way to stay aware of the challenges your youth may face in school, and to stay ahead to prevent them, is to remain informed. Here are some questions you can ask the educational team to make sure your information is up to date, and you can prepare for future potential issues:

- How and how often will I be updated about my youth's academic standing (re: classes, coursework, emotional disruption, etc.)?
- Who do I call with new information about my youth?
- Will the school nurse or counselor be involved in the planning and information sharing?
- What medical forms do you need?
- Who is responsible for keeping track of medical records?



- How do I ensure my young person receives the medicine they need during school hours?

If there is a disagreement with the school, bring it up as quickly as possible. Seek help from the student's social worker and any other resources available to support you. You also have the option to reach out at the district level if you cannot resolve the issue.

Mental health has the potential to undermine your youth's academic experience but with active involvement, you can help keep your youth's academic performance on track.