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What Back to School Means for South Florida's Foster Children

The Unique Challenges Foster Care Children & Parents Face

Miami, Florida -- August 25, 2014 -- Back-to-school can be an exciting and stressful time for parents and children alike. During this time of the year, it is also important to reflect upon the 3,000 foster children living in South Florida and the special needs they face during this transitional period. Back-to-school is an especially trying period for foster families and children. Here, we are lifting the veil on some of the unique challenges they face to provide insight into this important part of our community.

1. Foster Children Spend Long Stretches Out of School

Many foster children are pulled out of school for long stretches by their biological parents before they are turned over to the foster care system. Consequently, some foster children are starting the school year at a clear disadvantage. In many cases, these foster children need to be held back until they catch up academically, which can exacerbate the emotional transition of being with a new foster family and losing ties to family, friends, and familiar communities.

2. Mental Health Challenges Unique to Foster Kids – From a “War Zone” to the Classroom

Almost all foster care children have experienced severe trauma before they come into the foster care system. According to a 2010 national study, “Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in Children and Adolescents Referred for Child Welfare Investigation” by Kolko et. al., **19.2% of all foster children experience PTSD - a rate higher than U.S. war veterans**. Trauma experienced includes such things as being exposed to violence (the assault and/or murder of parent), being attacked with a weapon, physical abuse, exposure to shootings, and sexual assault.

3. Transportation Disadvantages Unique to Foster Families

The child welfare system in South Florida favors keeping children in their “home” school whenever possible – this is the school that they were attending before entering the foster care system. This poses significant transportation challenges when foster parents accept children into their homes whose home school is located very far away. As foster parents tackle the administrative challenges of moving the children to a new school, which can take months, they often have to drive long distances to bring their foster children to school. For foster parents with full time jobs, this logistical hurdle can be very challenging.

4. Losing Their Support Systems -- Foster Children Entering New Schools

For those foster children who do get relocated to a new school, although there may be transportation advantages, they suffer emotionally from losing a support system of friends and teachers who were familiar and created stability in one area of their lives.

5. Generally Perform Below Their Peers, Academically

Numerous studies have confirmed that foster children perform significantly worse in school than do children in the general population. Of the more than ½ million foster children in America today, fewer than half will graduate high school and only 1.8% will complete a bachelor's degree (compared to 30% of the general population). The educational deficits of foster children are reflected in higher rates of being held back; lower scores on standardized tests; and higher absenteeism, tardiness, truancy and dropout rates. The poor academic performance of these children affects their lives after foster care and contributes to higher than average rates of homelessness, criminality, drug abuse, and unemployment among foster care "graduates."

6. A Patient, Loving Foster Parent Can Make A Profound Difference In A Foster Child's Life!

Despite the considerable challenges noted above, when loving foster parents take a foster child into their home and provide nurturance, attention and appropriate limits, most of these children improve and often flourish.

“Back-to-school is a wonderful time to recognize the challenges foster children face, as well as understanding the importance of a stable foster home to children in need,” explained Dr. Oren Wunderman, Executive Director of the Family Resource Center. “The beginning of the school year is a time of renewal for children, and a chance to make a fresh start.”

About Family Resource Center

Family Resource Center of South Florida, Inc., a non-profit organization, was founded in 1978 by a group of concerned community leaders. FRC's mission is the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect through the strengthening of families. The agency provides integrated care for children in the foster care system, parent education classes, mental health services, substance abuse counseling, and adoptions.

FRC has been recognized by *Florida Trend* magazine as one of the top 100 BEST PLACES TO WORK in both 2010 and 2011. Business Leader Magazine also recognized the agency as one of the Top 20 Small Businesses in South Florida for both 2010 and 2011. Most recently, FRC was named 2014 Non-Profit of the Year by South Florida Business Journal.

About the Executive Director, Dr. Oren Wunderman

Oren Wunderman, Ph.D., has worked in non-profit child welfare agencies or mental health centers for most of the last thirty years. He is licensed as a Psychologist, Marriage and Family Therapist, and Mental Health Counselor. He earned his Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degrees from the University of Miami. He has taken coursework in non-profit management from the Harvard University School of Business and the Florida International University School of Business. For the past 15 years, he has been a yearly guest lecturer in the subjects of Child Abuse and Forensic Psychology at the University of Miami, Departments

of Counseling and Clinical Psychology, Miami Children's Hospital and several local Community Mental Health Centers.

Dr. Wunderman has been with FRC for the past 19 years, 14 of which he has served as the Executive Director. During his tenure, Dr. Wunderman has enabled FRC to triple in size while expanding the complexity and scope of services. He extols to the staff the values of Transformational Leadership, whose cornerstone beliefs are: (1) Treat the clients respectfully, always caring for them as though they were loved members of your family, and (2) Always preserve a fundamental humility and awe about the vital services provided to troubled clients.