



Talking to Your Children Who Are Experiencing Homelessness

Homelessness can be tough to discuss with children because it can lead to conversations about many other complex topics, but it is possible. How we talk to children about homelessness depends on their age and how they best learn, as well as the discussion context (home with family or caregivers; or at school with teachers). The materials below may be of assistance when talking to children about their experiences with homelessness.

Quick Facts

- On a single night in January 2018, roughly 553,000 people in America were experiencing homelessness. About two-thirds (65%) were staying in sheltered locations and about one-third (35%) were in unsheltered locations such as the street.
 - More than 180,000 people in 56,000 families with children experienced homelessness.
 - Just over 20,000 people were in families with children in which the head of household was under the age of 25.
 - More than 36,000 people under the age of 25 were unaccompanied youth—that is, homeless on their own rather than as part of a family— and most (89%) were between the ages of 18 and 24.
 - Nearly 89,000 individuals experiencing homelessness had chronic patterns of homelessness. Two-thirds of individuals experiencing chronic homelessness were staying outdoors, in abandoned buildings, or other locations not suitable for human habitation rather than staying in shelters, reflecting the high degree of vulnerability of this population.
- African-Americans are overrepresented among the homeless population compared to the overall U.S. population.
 - African-Americans account for 40% of all people experiencing homelessness, and 51% of people experiencing homelessness as members of families with children.

Sense of Home

Home is much more than a physical space—it's a feeling of love, security, and connectedness. This feeling of home can move with you wherever families go together. Even things that seem simple, such as having the same pillowcase to sleep on each night, or hanging the same air freshener in the room, can make a big difference. Routines can be a stabilizing constant that children can count on and look forward to, and parents can integrate them into many different moments throughout the day. Try doing the same

stretching and breathing exercises together every morning. Stretch tall, touch your toes, then take three deep breaths. During nights you can try cuddling and singing the same lullaby together each night.

Special Comfort

While shelters have different policies on limiting the number of belongings families bring, stuffed animals and blankets can build a sense of security and help children feel soothed during tough, unstable times. If children don't already have a comfort item, if possible, provide them with one. If they can, parents might consider giving children a piece of their clothing (as the smell and feel may remind children of them), to help them feel safe when they're apart. Favorite things, like a photo of a loved one, can also be comfort items. Children might sleep with the items.



Answering the Tough Questions

Children will have difficult questions and each parent will have to decide how much information to share, and how to adjust their answers based on children's ages. It is best to keep the answers simple and remind them that it isn't their fault and reassure them that everything will be okay. Some example questions would be:

Why don't we have our own home anymore? (Keep your answer as simple as possible, depending on your situation).

-We needed to be somewhere that was safe for us. I lost my job and didn't have enough money to pay our rent, so we had to leave. The storm ruined our apartment building.

-This is a result of other terrible things that have happened, and no one deserves to be without a permanent place to live.

Why do we keep moving around? Why can't we stay in one place?

- We have a place to stay, but it's not our own place.

- Different people are helping at different times.

- We are in between homes.

When will we have a home? (Depending on what you know, consider how to share information while keeping in mind it might change)

-The people who are helping us think that it could happen in [one week, one month, in the summer, and so on]. We hope that is true, but it could change.

-I just don't know for sure, but I hope it will be soon. What I do know is that we're a strong and brave family, we will get through this, and I will always take care of you.

Is it my fault?

-Never. It's a grown-up problem.

-Because I'm the grown-up I'm trying to figure it out; I'm asking for help. I'm working hard to make things better for our family, and other people are trying to help, too.

And you can't say the following things too many times!

-You are safe.

-You're not alone.

-You are a learner, and no one can take that away from you. You are important and valuable.

-This is a temporary situation. You will get through it.

-We are going to go on to something better. This is like one page in the book of our family (or your life). It is not the whole story.

Overall, speaking about homelessness is difficult enough; but with open communication between the parent and child, you can eliminate the possibility of confusion and self-doubt. Continue talking openly and honestly with your children and realize this is just a phase in your life; and will not be your way of life forever.

RESOURCES:

Talking to Children about Homelessness, who are Experiencing Homelessness:

<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/family-homelessness/?activity=talking-about-it-for-children-experiencing-homelessness-provider>

Ensuring Full Participation in Extracurricular Activities for Students Experiencing Homelessness:

https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/extra_curr.pdf

Early Care & Education for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness: <http://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Early-Care-and-Education-for-Young-Children-Experiencing-Homelessness.pdf>

Local Homeless Education Liaisons: Important Information for New Local Liaisons: <https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/new-liaisons.pdf>

Best Practices in Homeless Education: <https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/assessment.pdf>

School Help for Children with Disabilities: Information for Parents: https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/idea_parents.pdf