



Helping Homeless Young Children Develop & Learn : Guide for Caregivers, Teachers, and Administrators

This is a guide for early childhood caregivers, teachers, and administrators who are working with young children who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. It provides information about the growing problem of family homelessness in this country. It also explains how you can support homeless young children and their families and provides valuable contact information and internet resources.



Family Homelessness in America

Families are the largest and fastest growing segment of the homeless population in the United States and the numbers are growing at an alarming rate. It is estimated that approximately 1.35 million children are homeless and of these over half are under the age of 6. The majority of homeless families are headed by single mothers.

Many factors contribute to the increase in family homelessness including low wages, lack of affordable housing, changes in public assistance, natural disasters, domestic violence, health issues and substance abuse. Lack of affordable housing is perhaps the greatest cause; as wages stagnate, housing costs escalate and low income families find it impossible to keep up with rent, food, utilities, childcare and other expenses. Many low income families are literally one crisis away from being homeless. Often times once a family loses housing, they get stuck in a cycle that they cannot escape; using all of their money for day-to-day survival, they are unable to save for a deposit and the rent required to obtain stable housing.

Teenage parents and their children often face homelessness due to tensions within the family. In some cases, the teen's parent is angered by the teen's pregnancy and forces the teen out of the home.

Not surprisingly, homelessness can have harmful effects on children impacting their development,

behavior, and physical and mental health. For example, homeless children experience significantly greater speech delays and immature gross motor skills than housed children. Homeless children are less likely to get routine healthcare and therefore often lack immunizations and suffer from poorer health. They are more likely to experience asthma, ear infections, and stomach problems than their housed peers.

Early childhood programs may offer the only consistent and safe environment for homeless young children. Such stability and support may provide young homeless children with the opportunity to develop and succeed.

Definition of Homeless

The Federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act's definition of homelessness includes:

- ◇ children who are sharing housing of others due to lack of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason;
- ◇ children living in motels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations;
- ◇ children living in emergency or transitional shelters;
- ◇ children abandoned in hospitals or awaiting foster care placement;
- ◇ children who have a primary night time residence that is a public or private place not designated for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
- ◇ children and youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings;
- ◇ and unaccompanied youth - a youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.

Infant Development & Learning

	Effects of Homelessness	Helpful Strategies & Activities
Motor Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Limited activity may cause delays in important milestones of sitting, crawling and walking. ◇ Confinement in infant seats and strollers slows normal muscle development. ◇ Lack of opportunities to practice holding, reaching for, and grasping objects may contribute to delays in fine motor development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Provide clean and safe floor space for infants and get on the floor with them. ◇ Encourage parents to spend “floor time” with infants. ◇ Provide room for crawling and furniture that encourages pulling up. ◇ Focus on fine motor development with grasping and nesting toys and playing pat-a-cake. ◇ Introduce simple books and encourage holding and turning pages.
Language & Cognitive Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Stressed parent may be less likely to read and interact with infant which may contribute to language delays. ◇ Infants may be frustrated because of inability to communicate. ◇ May encounter difficulty focusing, paying attention, and learning new routines. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Talk to infant describing what you are doing and what will happen next. ◇ Imitate infant’s sounds. ◇ Read simple books frequently. ◇ Play peek-a-boo and hiding games. ◇ Point out similarities and differences. ◇ Count and recite the alphabet. ◇ Model positive adult-infant interactions for parent.
Social – Emotional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Stressed parent may respond to infant inconsistently which may cause infant distress. ◇ Infants may have feeding and sleeping difficulties. ◇ Some homeless infants react to stress and transitions by becoming withdrawn while others become extremely fussy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Watch for cues and develop responses based on infant’s needs. ◇ Use reassuring words and tones. ◇ Use “feeling” words (sad, happy, mad) to identify infant’s mood. ◇ Talk about feelings. ◇ Create a calm environment. ◇ Use songs and routines at transition times.

Toddler Development & Learning

	Effects of Homelessness	Helpful Strategies & Activities
Motor Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Toddler may have limited opportunities for walking, running and climbing. ◇ Parents may curtail normal toddler exploration because of living situation. ◇ Toddler may be apprehensive to be active. ◇ Toddler may have limited opportunity use crayons and feed self and therefore fine motor skills may lag. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Provide space and opportunity for running, jumping, climbing and walking on tip-toes. ◇ Support fine motor development with simple puzzles, crayons, finger painting, and play dough. ◇ Offer music/movement activities. ◇ Offer toddlers opportunities to push toys, lift and carry, and throw and kick balls.
Language & Cognitive Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Because of the many stresses of being homeless, the toddler may have limited speech. ◇ Language and learning skills may be delayed. ◇ Toddler may move quickly from one activity to the next lacking focus. ◇ Vocabulary may be behind due to lack of conversation with parent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Talk to toddler about what you are doing; use words to describe actions, feelings and objects all around. ◇ Build on toddler’s words and simple sentences. ◇ Read with toddler one-on-one or in a small group. ◇ Play cause and effect games. ◇ Offer a variety of puzzles.

Toddler Development & Learning, continued

Social – Emotional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ A toddler experiencing homelessness may be slow to trust. ◇ Toddler may not feel comfortable exploring. ◇ Toddler may have difficulty sharing. ◇ Toddler may express him or herself in inappropriate ways. ◇ Toddler may develop low self - esteem, seem sad, or withdrawn. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Model using “feeling” words. ◇ Develop activities that encourage toddler’s independence. ◇ Try to tell toddler what they can do rather than what they can’t do. ◇ Provide books and pictures about feelings. ◇ Help teach the use of simple words like “mine” and “stop” to express him/herself.
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Preschooler Development & Learning

	Effects of Homelessness	Helpful Strategies & Activities
Motor Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Limited space and opportunity to practice motor skills may cause a delay in this area. ◇ Preschooler may avoid activities requiring fine motor coordination such as puzzles, drawing and painting. ◇ Preschooler may lack confidence that he/she can gain motor skills. ◇ Preschooler may be reluctant to try new activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Provide opportunities for active songs and rhymes that include gross motor activities. ◇ Support fine motor development with drawing, painting, cutting, pasting, finger paints, and puzzles. ◇ Allow children to develop fine motor skills in water play by providing eyedroppers, cups, spoons and ice. ◇ Practice throwing, catching and kicking balls of different sizes.
Language & Cognitive Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Preschoolers without homes may have speech delays due to a lack of verbal interactions. ◇ Preschooler may struggle with pre-reading skills. ◇ Due to limited early play opportunities, preschooler may lag in problem solving and thinking skills. ◇ Preschooler may have short attention spans and have difficulty sitting for even short activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Encourage preschooler to act out a book or familiar story. ◇ Label furniture and items in the room. ◇ Use puppets to share and act out stories. ◇ Use photo display to illustrate the steps in routines like cleaning up. ◇ Play memory and matching games. ◇ Encourage activities that promote dialogue.
Social – Emotional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Preschooler may seem mature for his/her age and may take on responsibility for parent and/or siblings. ◇ Preschooler may be sad, angry, or withdrawn. ◇ Preschooler may not understand appropriate boundaries with people they do not know. ◇ Preschooler may act aggressively. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Use songs and books that deal with feelings. ◇ Provide a stable and consistent atmosphere. ◇ Use books, story telling, and puppets to demonstrate problem solving and sharing feelings. ◇ Plan activities that lead to success. ◇ Avoid activities that may be upsetting to preschoolers without homes such as show & tell or drawing pictures of home.

Early Care and Education for Young Homeless Children

The purpose of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act is to ensure that homeless children and youth have equal access to the same free, appropriate public education, including a public preschool education, as provided to other children and youth. Homeless young children are underserved due the transient nature of homelessness and barriers to enrollment, which may be inadvertent, that children without homes often face , including:

- screenings required for enrollment
- waiting lists
- lack of birth certificates
- lack of transportation
- lack of immunization records

Early childhood programs should make every effort to address these barriers. Possible solutions include enrolling young children immediately while a parent or guardian is obtaining required documents, prioritizing homeless children to the top of the waiting list when there are no openings, and maintaining contact with the family.

Always ensure that homeless children and their parents are treated sensitively, with respect and privacy.



Need Help?

A helpful resource person for you and the parent is the **school district homeless liaison**. He or she can help even if the child(ren) are not old enough for elementary school. To find the school district liaison, call the school in your area and ask to be connected to the school district homeless liaison or for their phone number.

Helpful Websites

Illinois Homeless Education Program & Opening Doors

For Illinois specific information about the educational rights and needs of homeless children and youth and information about Illinois programs and liaisons please go to:

www.isbe.net/homeless &
www.homelessed.net

The National Center for Homeless Education

For material and information about the educational needs of homeless children and their families, go to:

www.serve.org/nche

The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth

For information about the educational rights and needs of homeless children and youth and the national homeless education annual conference:

www.naehcy.org



Quick Contacts

**Illinois State Board of Education
Homeless Education Hotline:
1-800-215-6379**

**Opening Doors Project
1-224-366-8623**

www.homelessed.net



The Opening Doors Project

Adult Learning Resource Center

2626 S. Clearbrook Dr, Arlington Heights, IL 60005
(224)366-8623

R.O.E. #26—Hancock/McDonough

130 S. Lafayette - Suite 200, Macomb, IL 61455
(309)837-4821

www.homelessed.net

The Illinois Homeless Education Program

Illinois State Board of Education

100 N. First Street, Springfield, IL 62777
(217)782-2948

Homeless Education Hotline: 1-800-215-6379
www.isbe.net/homeless

Sources:

Horizons for Homeless Children. (2005). *Supporting Children and Families Without Homes: How Can We Help? A Training and Resource Manual*. Dorchester, MA: Horizons for Homeless Children.

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Reed-Victor, E., Popp, P. & Myers, M. (2003). *Using the Best That We Know: Supporting Young Children Experiencing Homelessness. Information Brief No. 9*. Williamsburg, VA: Project HOPE –Virginia.

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The goal of this initiative is to disseminate information to Illinois schools and shelters as to the educational rights and needs of homeless children and youth.