

2009 Audio Cast Series

Part 1: Providing a Safe Haven to Expectant Families and Infants, Toddlers and Their Families in Your Program

The Definition of Homelessness

Under the new Head Start reauthorization, homeless children are *categorically eligible* for Head Start, Early Head Start and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs (42 U.S.C. 9840(a)(1)(B)). No documentation of income is required for families who are verified to be living in a “homeless” situation. The definition of homelessness in reauthorization echoes the definition in the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which governs public schools. Under that definition, “homeless children and youth” **lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence**, including those who are:

- Sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason;
- Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, camping grounds due to lack of adequate alternative accommodations;
- Living in emergency or transitional shelters;
- Awaiting foster care placement (not defined in law; state and local interpretations vary);
- Living in a public or private place not designed for humans to live;
- Living in cars, parks, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
- Migratory children living in above circumstances.

Adapted from *the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2001 – Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act – Sec 725.*



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Causes of Homelessness

As you work with individual families, build relationships with them that allow them to tell you their stories. Learning what led individual families to homelessness offers meaningful clues about how you can provide meaningful support. Families lose their housing or live in substandard housing for many different reasons, including:

- Poverty
 - Loss of employment
 - Health problems
 - Domestic violence
 - Lack of affordable housing
 - Natural and other disasters
- Abuse/neglect/abandonment (particularly for pregnant and parenting teens)
 - Fear about complaining about housing conditions (worry about deportment; lack of faith in the system, etc.)
 - Substance abuse
 - Mental illness



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Impact of Homelessness on Infants and Toddlers

Young children experiencing homelessness are often impacted in three ways. First, they carry personal history of any trauma or events that led to homelessness. Traumatic events, such as domestic violence or the loss of a home due to a natural event, can severely impact children (Rice and Groves 2005). Secondly, the care families provide for children can be compromised by their own responses to trauma, or by mental illness, physical illness and/or substance abuse. Mothers experiencing homelessness are much more likely to be depressed, have post traumatic stress disorder, and experience substance abuse (National Center on Homelessness 2008). Finally, homelessness itself is traumatic. Families lose control over their environments and their own sense of personal power. Children in substandard, insecure, and/or inconsistent environments are impacted physically and psychologically. In serving children experiencing homelessness, you might see:

- **Developmental delays, in one or more areas:** Children in homeless situations often do not have the same opportunities to use their muscles, play, hear and use language, explore, and develop new skills.
- **Chronic or acute health problems:** Children experiencing homelessness are less likely to get regular health care (including prenatal care) and/or immunizations. They are also more vulnerable to common illnesses.
- **Mental health concerns:** Children experiencing homelessness may demonstrate intense separation and/or stranger anxiety, short attention span, flat affect, clinginess, aggression, difficulty with transitions, difficulty with self-calming, and/or hoarding behaviors.
- **Disrupted or stressed attachment with parents or caregivers:** For a variety of reasons, parents and others experiencing homelessness may not yet have had an opportunity to build strong attachments with their babies.
- **Difficulty with play:** Children in homeless situations may have less experience with play and/or have social-emotional issues that complicate their ability to play with peers or adults.
- **Eating difficulties:** Children experiencing homelessness are often hungry. At the same time, children who have been traumatized often show eating difficulties. These difficulties can include hoarding food, chronic hunger, extreme overeating (gorging), or even a lack of appetite.
- **Sleep difficulties:** Often, children living in homeless situations and crowded housing do not experience the sense of calm and security at bedtime that helps them enter the restorative sleep that all children need. These children may be chronically tired, have difficulty falling asleep, anxiety about sleep, exhibit a need for a close, familiar adult at sleep times, and/or have interrupted sleep patterns. They may sleep fitfully, call out or yell in their sleep, or wake up upset and anxious.

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Principles for Working with Families Experiencing Homelessness and Their Young Children

1. Watch your language.

Many families in these difficult situations, despite their eligibility under the law, would not describe themselves as “homeless.” To gather information from families, ask about their living situations. Avoid using the term “homeless” to describe what you hear.

2. Learn each story.

Remember that every family – and child – has a different story. While there are some common causes and factors that affect families with young children experiencing homelessness, talk with each family about their specific circumstances and how you can help.

3. Remember the basics.

Both children and adults need to have their basic needs met first. Develop relationships with community providers (and individual staff at those programs) that offer shelter, food, medical care, rental assistance and clothing. As families tell you which of the basics they need, be prepared to respond by connecting them with someone you – and they – can trust to help. Don't forget to follow up with both the family and the community contact.

4. Learn the ways that young children are affected.

Young children can be deeply affected by homelessness and its causes. Learn about how trauma impacts young children, and how they might express anxiety, fear, worry and/or grief. Understanding the causes of the behaviors that you see in young children can help you support them in nurturing and meaningful ways.

5. Treat families with respect.

Families experiencing homelessness are often involved in multiple systems, and are not always treated respectfully by service providers. Begin by recognizing a family's strengths and competencies. Acknowledge that they are facing tremendous challenges and are making the best choices they can. Earn their trust and treat them with dignity, confidentiality, and sensitivity. In your work, focus on what families do well and celebrate their successes.



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Principles for Working with Families Experiencing Homelessness and Their Young Children (cont'd.)

6. Offer a sense of ownership and control.

Families in these chaotic situations can feel a complete loss of control. Give families and children options and choices. In conversations with families, ask them to work with you in prioritizing their needs and goals. Develop Family Partnership Agreements that reflect and address their concerns. In their physical environments, work with them to establish even a small area of personal space.

7. Support primary relationships.

Parents and guardians are always important, but in homeless situations, those parents or guardians may be the only constant for young children. Consider how you can use the time you have with children and families to strengthen those parent/guardian–child relationships.

8. Offer structure and routine.

The lives of young children experiencing homelessness can be chaotic. Ensure that your program will be as predictable as possible – for both children and families.

9. Think short term.

Families experiencing homelessness tend to move often – and sometimes without warning. As you plan services, consider that you may have only a short time with families. Think of ways you can make the most of that time with a family, and ease their transition to other providers.

10. Remember the value of each day.

Service providers can easily feel overwhelmed in the face of intense family needs. Remember that, for young children, each day is important. Focus on small moments and little successes.

11. Take care of yourself.

As you help families and children meet their needs, remember your needs too. Monitor your responses and your own anxiety level. Rely on your team. Make the most of opportunities to talk with supervisors, colleagues, and/or your program's mental health specialist.



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Separation Anxiety for Parents

What is Separation Anxiety?

- ✓ Separation from parents is an important part of growing up. As a parent, know that your child needs to be able to deal with separations and the anxiety associated with them.
- ✓ Sometimes, children, realizing that their parents are leaving, are afraid that their parents are leaving them forever. They may not truly understand that you are leaving and returning for them.
- ✓ Ask yourself: *How would you feel if your child just disappeared?* Your child's feelings are similar.



What Can You Do To Help Your Child Separate?

- ✓ When preparing to leave your child, plan extra time. Let your child get comfortable and gain some familiarity with the new surroundings.
- ✓ A toy, blanket, or familiar object may help your child feel more at ease, and help him or her to remember that you are coming back.
- ✓ Make farewells warm, but brief. Leave the child with a trusted caretaker and always say goodbye. **DO NOT SNEAK OUT!** Tell your child that you are leaving, give a kiss and a hug, and let them know that you are coming back.
- ✓ When you come back, show lots of love and affection toward your child. Remember that children may react to your return in different ways. Some cry, become angry, or run from you. Remember, your return has just reminded them that you were gone. They missed you! Remind them that you will always come back to get them.
- ✓ Playing games such as “peek-a-boo”, crawling through a tunnel, and “jack-in-the-box” when you are together can also be helpful. It gives your child playful practice at leaving and returning.
- ✓ Goodbye routines are helpful for children. They give them a sense of predictability and can help them feel safe when they have to say good-bye to you. Try to develop a routine (put coat in cubby, enter classroom for play, etc.) and/or rituals (i.e. special goodbye kisses or hugs) for these times.

Reprinted with permission from: Wells, Amina; Carole Norris-Shortle; & Kim Cosgrove. *Separation Anxiety*. Kennedy Krieger Institute, Center for Infant Study, PACT's Therapeutic Nursery: Baltimore, MD, 2009.



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Peek-A-Boo

The benefits of playing peek-a-boo:

- Supports social and emotional development
- Develops understanding of “object permanence,” the idea that objects and people still exist even when you can’t see them
- Encourages problem-solving skills
- Provides practice with visual and tactile discrimination

0-3 Months

Hide your face, and then reveal it, saying “peek-a-boo!” Remember to keep your face close to the baby’s face, and watch the baby’s response and cues. Look for a happy reaction around 3 months.

3-6 Months

Instead of hiding yourself, hide your baby. Put a blanket over him and pretend to look for him, asking, “Where are you?” As you lift up the blanket to reveal the baby say, “Peek-a-boo, I see you!”

6-12 Months

- ✓ Be more specific about the object in hiding by using the baby’s name in the game. Say, “Where is Andie?” or when the parent or caregiver is doing the hiding, ask, “Where is mommy/daddy/caregiver’s name?”
- ✓ Hide the baby’s favorite toy and ask, “Where is the bear?” Ask the baby to point to the object. Either you or the baby can reveal the toy.

1-2 Years

- ✓ Play mirror peek-a-boo. Sit in front of a mirror. Put your face in front of and then away from the mirror, saying “peek-a-boo” when you see a reflection of yourself. Ask the child to follow.
- ✓ Practice verbal skills. Hide an animal under the blanket and make the appropriate animal noise. Ask the child to guess what animal is hiding under the blanket.

2-3 Years

- ✓ Use objects of various textures (soft or hard) and shapes, hide them under the blanket, and ask the child to reach under the blanket to describe the object and guess what it is.
- ✓ Play “don’t disturb the penguin!” Show the child you’re hiding a sleeping penguin behind the blanket. Ask the child to sneak up on the penguin quietly. Say “Shhh, the penguin is sleeping, don’t wake him up!” Does the child tiptoe quietly? If so, reveal a sleeping penguin. If the child is loud, reveal the penguin, saying, “Oh! He’s awake!”

After 3 Years

The game of peek-a-boo evolves into a more sophisticated game of hide-and-seek. This requires more cognitive and problem-solving abilities.

Sources:

<http://www.scholastic.com/earlylearner/timetogether/bandt/peekaboo.htm>

<http://underfives.co.uk/peekaboo.html>

Adapted from: Lu, Chonyang; Carole Norris-Shortle; & Kim Cosgrove. *Peek-A-Boo Through the Ages*. Kennedy Krieger Institute, Center for Infant Study, PACT’s Therapeutic Nursery: Baltimore, MD, 2009.

