

Working With Homeless Young Children and Families

by Karin Elliott and Sarah Fujiwara

With the number of young homeless children and families in the United States increasing at a rapid rate, homeless families are the largest and fastest growing part of the homeless population. Approximately 1.35 million children experience homelessness each year in the United States, with more than half under the age of six. The majority of these families are headed by single mothers (The Better Homes Fund, 1999).

Thirty years ago child and family homelessness did not exist to the degree it does today. Two of the most significant reasons for the increase are the lack of affordable housing in our country coupled with poverty. Many families become homeless because they earn low wages and cannot keep up with expenses. Many families also lack a network or support system on which they can rely in a crisis. Families also become homeless as a result of domestic violence, physical and mental health issues, and substance abuse.

Many families who become homeless live doubled-up with friends or relatives before they move into shelters. Families often live in campgrounds, in cars, and in other situations that are unsafe for children. Often they move from one living situation to the next, exposing children to many transitions. Children experience the loss of homes, neighborhoods, relatives, friends, pets, and even favorite toys. Beyond the many material losses, these vulnerable children lose the feelings of safety, security, and stability in their lives.

How families struggle

Tasha is a single mother struggling to raise two young children, two and four years old. Tasha barely managed to pay rent for an apartment and cover expenses on her salary as an administrative assistant at a health care company. While she was fortunate to have her children enrolled in pa-

state subsidized child care center, paying even the small parent fees was a challenge. She fell behind in payments and eventually the center had to terminate her child care because of non-payment. Tasha was told she could not access state funded child care until she repaid what she owed the center, but she was unable to do this.

Tasha's situation spiraled out of control. She had no one to care for her children and missed several days of work. Missed days led to job loss. Unable to pay her rent, Tasha and her children lost their apartment. Tasha applied for state funded emergency family shelter, and has been in a shelter in Boston for nine months. She is hopeful that she will be able to access child care, find a job, and find permanent housing.

There are different types of shelters for families. Shelter systems vary from state to state. A family may apply to a public welfare state department for emergency shelter in some states or there may be a decentralized system where families may contact many shelters looking for space. Shelter types include:

- **congregate family shelters:** each family has one bedroom
- **domestic violence shelters:** located in confidential locations



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- **scattered site shelters:** often apartments rented by the sheltering agency for larger families
- **teen shelters:** provide specific services for pregnant and parenting teenagers
- **substance abuse and treatment shelters:** provide support for families with addiction

Shelters play an important role in providing a safe place for families to stay until they can find permanent housing. However, there are challenges to shelter life. Families have little privacy, must raise their children in a public setting, and adhere to many shelter rules. Shelter stays are becoming longer, growing from three to six months to over a year. Many families have nowhere else to go and experience stress that has a significant impact on family functioning, children's development, and sadly, the hope for a successful future.

What the research tells us

Research studies have shown that children experiencing homelessness face many challenges, including increased health problems, developmental delays, mental health challenges, increased anxiety and depression, behavioral problems, and lower educational achievement (The Better Homes Fund, 1999). Delays in motor, sensory, language/cognition, and social-emotional development are common. Homelessness also impacts the parent, most frequently the mother. Over one-third of homeless mothers have a chronic health problem, and almost 40 percent have been hospitalized for medical treatment (National Coalition for the Homeless, June 1999). Accessing health care, including mental health care is often difficult for homeless families. Many homeless families do not have routine health care, but rather use emergency rooms as their primary source of health care, which contributes to children's health problems.

Thanks to a recent emphasis on the importance of the early years and scientific brain research, the connection between early experiences, brain development, and later success in life has been proven. When young children are exposed to repeated stress, such as continued homelessness, this can negatively impact early brain development. Positive interactions and environments, as well as early interventions that promote positive social-emotional development, help children *bounce back*, and experience a solid foundation for positive growth and development (National Resource Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000).



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We know that quality, comprehensive early care and education helps support children's development. Horizons for Homeless Children (HHC), a non-profit agency in Massachusetts, operates two child care centers which provide a nurturing environment for the children, while offering families support and services to help them achieve economic self-sufficiency.

The National Center on Family Homelessness (NCFH) recently conducted an evaluation of Horizons for Homeless Children's Community Centers (CCC) to determine the impact of the HHC child care on children and mothers in the program. A control group consisting of families living in area shelters not served by CCCs was followed; some of the children attended other child care programs and others did not. The evaluation looked at the impact of HHC child care on the homeless children and parents who received specialized parent support and assistance as they transitioned into permanent housing compared to those not in the HHC program. The study took place over five years and included 100 families at baseline, 47 of whom were CCC families. The number of families at the evaluation follow-up was 54, with 25 from the CCC.

Statistically significant findings indicated that the children who were enrolled in the CCC showed greater improvement in their vocabulary, receptive language skills, and early academic skills when compared to children in a comparison group. When asked about their perceptions of the CCC impact on their children, the majority of mothers indicated that the CCC helped their child be more confident, and ready for school, and helped identify and work on areas of need. The CCC mothers in the study indicated that they experienced higher levels of self-esteem at follow-up, were more focused

on financial independence, felt more motivated to be self sufficient, were more likely to be working on a GED or other form of education, had developed a support network, and were more likely to be employed than those in the comparison group. In addition, CCC families experienced a higher degree of housing stability and were more likely to obtain subsidized housing.

Turning research into strategies: What can we do?

In order to use research findings that demonstrate the importance of positive early learning experiences, we need to turn this information into everyday knowledge and practice. Certain strategies are helpful when thinking about creating positive experiences for homeless children, particularly in the child care setting.

At HHC teachers work on creating *supportive environments* for children. The emphasis is on creating a setting that promotes stability, consistency, structure, and safety. Many homeless children have not had these elements in their lives; and by providing these, the stressful situation of experiencing homelessness can be somewhat alleviated. Examples of ways in which to achieve a supportive environment are to create a calm setting with classroom colors, artwork, and activities. Thinking about how the classroom is organized can help, as will placing a reading/quiet time corner out of the way of the classroom entrance or the dramatic play area. Structure and routine are important to consider. The experience of predictable routines and activities will help children feel that they

are more in control of their surroundings. Something as simple as involving children in decisions about new pictures on the walls or rearranging classroom items will help them feel involved and supported. Many homeless children have had unsafe experiences; anything that you can do to assure them that you are the *adult* and will keep them safe in the classroom setting is important.

As the result of a shelter referral, Tasha was able to enroll her children in the Community Children's Center at HHC. Now that her children are in care, she found a new job and is working towards permanent housing.

HHC touches the lives of over 1,500 homeless children each week by providing early education at its two child care centers, and through its Playspace Programs, which provide children in shelters with safe, supportive, and educational places to play. The Playspaces are staffed by volunteers, known as PALs (Playspace Activity Leaders) who commit to two hours a week for a minimum of six months. This program has expanded statewide in Massachusetts. Currently 800 PALs are active each week in family shelters across Massachusetts. HHC is also dedicated to sharing its knowledge about child and family homelessness through training, advocacy, policy change, and through partnering with other organizations to help solve the problem.

Take action!

HHC took action in the spring of 2005 by holding the Young Children Without Homes National Conference in Boston, Massachusetts. The conference brought together 550 participants from over 40 states to focus on the importance of quality early care and education in the lives of young homeless children birth to six. Integral to the conference was the message that scientific research shows how trauma, including homelessness, can impact a child's development. This message must be shared with providers, policymakers, and legislators in order to improve outcomes for young homeless children.

All of us can take action towards alleviating impacts of and ending child and family homelessness. Those in direct service can provide positive classroom experiences and promote supportive environments. We can all share information about child and family homelessness with providers, legislators, policymakers, administrators, and others working with children and families.



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Strategies

- **Raise awareness:** Share information about child and family homelessness. As the problem grows, so must our ability to communicate with others about the facts, statistics, and impacts. Preparing brief fact sheets is one way to share information.
- **Improve access to quality child care and other services:** Collaborate with other providers on ways to help young homeless children and families access services such as child care, Head Start, Early Intervention, and more. Sharing information about available resources through referrals and networking is a good idea.
- **Partner:** Join in with other programs to make the best use of resources and provide important services. We can't all know everything about resources, but we can be prepared to hand out brochures from other programs or share contact numbers.
- **Talk to your legislators:** staying in touch with your legislators and staying on top of how legislation and policies impact homeless families is key. Make sure that your elected official has visited your program to understand firsthand how homelessness impacts children's lives. Making regular calls and visits to your legislators will let them know that you are an interested and educated constituent. Scheduling events, such as child care lobby days or legislative breakfasts makes the point even stronger: you and your agency will advocate for children and families who are homeless.

References

The Better Homes Fund. (1999). *Homeless Children: America's New Outcasts*. Newton, MA: The Better Homes Fund.

National Coalition for the Homeless. (June 1999). Fact Sheet #7.

National Resource Council and Institute of Medicine (2000). *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development. Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips (eds.). Board on Children, Youth and Families, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.



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Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers

by Kay Albrecht

Making a Difference: Elliott proposes that taking action about homelessness is every early childhood educator's responsibility. Explore strategies for taking action with teachers and families. Identify ways that make sense for your program and pursue them.

Thinking About Homelessness with Children: Ann Pelo's article "Supporting Young Children as Activists — Anti-bias Project Work" (*Exchange*, March/April 2002) poses ways to explore difficult topics such as homelessness when children ask questions or show interest in such topics. Copy this terrific article and explore the training ideas included.

For more information about Horizons for Homeless Children please visit our web site at www.horizonsforhomelesschildren.org or contact Sarah Fujiwara at sfujiwara@horizonsforhomelesschildren.org or call (617) 287-1900.