

Homeless Children: Facts and Recommendations for Teachers

STEPS FOR HELPING HOMELESS CHILDREN SUCCEED

Step One: Become well versed in the issue.

Acknowledge the enormity of the problem.

- According to the most recent measures, the annual homeless population in the United States ranges from 2.3 to 3.5 million people.
- 39% of this population – between 900,000 and 1.4 million – are children.
- Nearly 20% of these children do not attend school, and 45% do not attend regularly.

Recognize the laws supporting homeless children and their education. Homeless children are protected under the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, which is part of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. This law states that homeless children are entitled to the same free and appropriate public education as are all other children. School districts are charged with erasing barriers to enrollment, decreasing absenteeism, and enacting measures to improve the academic success of homeless students.

Consider factors that contribute to homelessness and how they may affect children. The many causes of homelessness include: physical or sexual abuse; chronic poverty; unemployment; natural disasters; mental or physical illness; alcohol or drug abuse; and most notably, a lack of affordable housing.

Understand the risks homeless children face and the potential impact on education. For instance, homeless children are twice as likely to have learning disabilities and three times as likely to exhibit emotional or behavioral problems. They are also more apt to repeat a grade, score lower on achievement tests, read below grade level, and be placed in special education classes. Further, due to the stressors of homelessness, they experience depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem at a much greater rate than their peers. *(Keep in mind, however, this will not apply to all homeless children – some are extremely resilient and academically successful.)*

Learn to spot common signs of homelessness in students. These signs can provide explanations for behavior, helping to ensure an appropriate level of understanding and compassion while facilitating resolutions. They include:

- Complaints of hunger or a propensity to hoard food.
- Extreme fatigue that may cause a child to fall asleep in class.
- Poor hygiene and an unkempt appearance.
- Inappropriate seasonal clothing or repeated wearing of the same clothes.
- Few, if any, school supplies.
- Consistently poor preparation for school, such as missing/incomplete homework or an inability to complete special projects.
- Strong disinclination to part with personal possessions (e.g. putting a jacket in a cubby hole).
- Frequent tardiness or absenteeism.

- Lack of participation in after-school activities or field trips.
- Anxiety late in the day or a hesitation to leave school.
- Difficulty interacting with peers (intense shyness), forming relationships or trusting people.
- Yearning to be with parents.
- Desire for immediate gratification.
- Display of anger, embarrassment, reluctance, or confusion when asked to provide an address or telephone number.

Step Two: Take special measures in the classroom.

Create a welcome packet to give to all new students, which may contain classroom rules and procedures, school supplies, or a card from the class. Further, include information that a student can give to his or her parents.

Assign each new student a “buddy.” Since homeless children tend to continually switch schools, this system can help a student feel welcome – and adjust more quickly – while fostering a sense of “belonging” or security in his or her new environment.

Assess academic levels promptly and refer a student to tutoring or other services, if necessary. Contact the child’s previous school to help close any informational gaps or ascertain the appropriate level of placement.

Keep a number of extra items on hand, which may be given to the student privately.

- **School supplies or materials** for any project a student is required to complete.
- **Healthy snacks.** During a snack break, provide a snack if the child doesn’t bring one.
- **Toiletries.** Homeless children often lack appropriate personal hygiene items. Be certain poor hygiene is not a cause for separation from peers.

Give the student a clipboard, which can serve as a portable “desk” when he or she leaves school.

Maintain high expectations for a homeless student but temper them with an appropriate degree of understanding.

Modify assignments so a homeless student will be able to complete them. Also, keep your classroom policies flexible (e.g. allow the student to do homework or projects at school).

Allow the student to keep a small token of safety or comfort. For instance, this may be a picture of the student’s parents, which can help combat separation anxiety (common among homeless children).

Avoid taking away the student’s personal effects, especially as a disciplinary measure. This can compromise his or her sense of security, as homeless children have few belongings and often experience a loss of their possessions.

Allow the student to have a place of his or her own, such as a desk, cubby, or locker. Emphasize this personal space is a safe and private place to put belongings, work, etc. Many homeless children do not have any such space at “home,” and this is a simple but valuable step towards helping them feel settled at school.

Strive – as much as possible – to keep in contact with the child’s parents or guardians. Parents can offer insight into their child’s situation, which can help create new ways to approach a student’s education. This also helps parents remain connected to the school, possibly leading to a higher rate of student attendance and academic success. Further, remind parents to keep any educational records or IEPs to share with the next school their child attends.

Promote diversity and encourage community service projects. Include the topic of homelessness in discussions of culture or diversity. Help all students to erase negative connotations of homelessness and increase awareness of the problem. For instance, arrange for classes to become involved in community activities, such as volunteering at a local soup kitchen.

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