

How to talk about homelessness with children

Thank you for taking on SleepOut at Home with your family! We hope that you enjoy your experience sleeping in your den, bathtubs, back gardens or any other adventurous locations...

We've put together this document to help you start a constructive conversation with your children about homelessness. We know this can be a tricky and complex topic to discuss, so we'd encourage you to be honest and open.

What is Homelessness?

In its most simple form – it is someone without a home. You may immediately think of people sleeping on the streets, but you can still be homeless if you have a roof over your head.

We can broadly categorise into two different types

1. Street homelessness – known as sleeping rough, when someone sleeps on the street. This is the most visible form of homelessness.
2. Hidden homelessness – such as sofa surfing or living in temporary accommodation. While this is less visible than sleeping rough, this is the reality for the majority of people experiencing homelessness.

How can it happen?

There is no single reason why someone can end up without a home. Personal circumstances and wider factors both play their part.

You can categorise the reasons into two types

1. Social causes – changes to housing costs, availability of housing and not enough homelessness provision (such as hostels etc) to keep up with demand.
2. Life events – leaving care, escaping domestic abuse, mental/physical health problems, drug or alcohol misuse

Once someone is experiencing homelessness – mental and physical health problems can be exacerbated so it's very important that people are supported as soon as possible.



Talking with children ages 2-6

- Provide a simple answer – some people are homeless because they don't have enough money to pay for a house
- Use people-first language – labelling people by their situation can perpetuate stigma so try to use phrases like 'people struggling with homelessness' rather than 'homeless people'
- Talk together about ways they can help. Taking part in tonight's SleepOut is a great help to the many young people that are homeless and they should feel really proud. If they want to do more, you can ask them to pick out some old clothes or toys that can go to charity
- Reassure them that there are solutions to help people struggling with homelessness. After acknowledging the sadness of the situation, let your child know that there are lots of people working hard to help people who don't have a home

Talking with children ages 7-12

- Start by asking them what they think homelessness means, to help encourage an interactive conversation
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- Use people-first language – labelling people by their situation can perpetuate stigma so try to use phrases like 'people struggling with homelessness' rather than 'homeless people'
- Discuss together what a person struggling with homelessness might be feeling to encourage empathy and understanding
- Prior to the conversation, think through what you might say to questions they ask. Common questions might include 1) why are some people homeless? 2) are we doing anything to help homeless people? 3) what should I do if I see a person experiencing homelessness?
- Don't be afraid to say you don't know. It's okay to not have all the answers. Reassure them that while it can be complicated, there are lots of people whose job it is to help people struggling with homelessness
- Talk together about ways they can help. Taking part in tonight's SleepOut is a great help to the many young people that are homeless, and they should feel really proud. If they want to do more you could discuss a bake sale at school, or a sponsored activity like a car wash.



Further resources

If you think your child could benefit from finding out more about homelessness, here are a list of great children's books that address this topic

Fly Away Home (Eve Bunting) ages 5-8

A Shelter in our Car (Monica Gunning) ages 6+

Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen (Dyanne Disalvo Ryan)

Maddi's Fridge (Lois Brandt) ages 4-8

A Chair for my Mother (Vera B Williams) ages 4-8

Those Shoes (Maribeth Boelts) ages 5-8

Tight Times (Barbara Shook Hazen) ages 4-9

Last Stop on Market Street (Matt de la Pena) ages 3-5

Still a Family (Brenda Reeves Sturgis) ages 4-8

Poverty & Hunger: Children in our World Series (Louise Spilsbury) ages 5-8

Lulu and the Hunger Monster (Erik Talkin) ages 5-9

On Our Streets: Our First Talk About Poverty (Dr. Jillian Roberts) ages 6-8

The Lunch Thief: A Story of Hunger, Homelessness & Friendship (Anne C. Bromley) ages 9-12

