



Do you have homeless children in your classroom?

David suddenly stopped coming to school. His teacher had observed him being hassled by other students and had tried to intervene. Attempts to call home revealed that David and his mother had been evicted from their apartment and were staying doubled up with relatives. He had valiantly attempted to conceal this fact from his peers, but when they discovered it, they taunted and ridiculed him. Finally, he could stand it no longer and refused to go to school.

Today homeless families are the fastest-growing population in the United States. Of the estimated three to four million homeless people, over 40% are families. A large percentage of the children of these families do not attend school. Their reasons vary. An itinerant lifestyle makes regular attendance difficult. Children who do attend tend to feel "different"; they are often teased by their peers.

How can you help homeless children in your classroom?

Homeless students may communicate their frustrations through withdrawing or acting aggressive. Having homeless students in the classroom can admittedly be challenging, necessitating ingenuity, creativity, and patience. Yet it is important to remember that the school can be a vitally important part of the homeless child's life, for it can present the child with a sense of stability. School experiences can actually enable children to cope with their homelessness.

Listed on the following pages are common reactions of children as they respond to some of the conditions of homelessness: the constant moving, the frequent change of schools, and the lack of access to basic resources. Also listed are some suggested helpful responses to those reactions. We hope that this information will be of use to you in helping homeless students in your classroom.

Opening Doors – Statewide Access to Education for Homeless Children and Youth

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As Children Face the Stress of Frequently Changing Schools...

Possible Reactions	Suggested Responses
May be unwilling to risk forming deep friendships	Assign buddies to new children; involve them in cooperative learning activities.
May use withdrawal and introversion as defenses.	Provide a consistent daily routine and clear expectations; present important information in various ways.
May experience depression.	Facilitate experiencing success, critical to self-esteem.
May fall behind in school; may be anxious or seemingly uncaring about homework.	Ensure necessary educational support services; plan assignments so children keep up without having to take very much "home"; give children a sturdy container to take work home in and to use as a writing surface.
May experience difficulties with the transition of leaving school.	Upon departure, give children time to clean out their personal space and say goodbye; give them a copy of their school records

As Children Face the Stress of Lacking Access to Basic Resources...

Possible Reactions	Suggested Responses
May be reluctant to go to school due to lack of clothing.	Find a resource for clean clothing and make them available to children in private.
May exhibit behaviors that indicate low self-esteem in response to comments and other behaviors of peers.	Keep children's living situation confidential; look for ways to celebrate birthdays without asking students to bring treats.
May suffer from frequent illness because of insufficient food or inappropriate diet. May hoard food.	Keep a few nutritious snacks available; make sure students and parents know about breakfast and lunch programs.
May suffer from a delay in language development because of a weakened condition or frequent ear infections.	Develop a process for referrals to appropriate community services.
May be absent on special occasions, embarrassed by lack of birthday treats, valentines, or Halloween costume.	Find a resource for "special occasion" supplies and make available to child in private ahead of time.

As Children Face the Stress of Constant Moving...	
Possible Reactions	Suggested Responses
May have no apparent sense of roots, personal space, or possessions.	Give the child something that belongs only to him or her; don't withdraw privileges if a child doesn't return school materials, such as library books, when due.
May be restless and leave projects half finished.	Separate tasks into meaningful parts that can be completed in a short time; contract with children to finish projects; provide as many opportunities as possible for physical activity; do not withhold recess or gym.
May cling to what they have and might be aggressive in trying to claim something for themselves.	Don't take away possessions as a disciplinary measure.
May fight for control at school.	Give children classroom jobs and appropriate choices; make children responsible for caring for personal space.
May be easily frustrated.	Teach children ways to express frustrations—talking to someone or to a recorder, voluntary "time-out," or removing themselves from a situation and doing something else.

It is important to remember that teachers cannot meet all of the needs of homeless children. However, a teacher's ability to remove just one stress factor can make a tremendous difference for a child. As one teacher expressed it:

"If I can give these children a stable, secure environment and a lot of TLC and understanding for just six hours a day, for however long they're with me, maybe - just maybe - they'll come through their chaos with a little more ease. After all, we all need that safe island in a storm. We all need to know there is someone who really cares."

Opening Doors: Statewide Access to Education for Homeless Children and Youth.

For more information about serving homeless children, please call us at (224) 366-8623.

You may also contact the Illinois State Board of Education by calling the Homeless Education Hotline at (800) 215-6379 or the state coordinator at (217) 782-2948. You may also find helpful information on our web site: <http://homelessed.net>

Adapted from Helping Homeless Children: What Teachers Need to Know, South Dakota Dept. of Education and Cultural Affairs.