
THE INVISIBLE CHILDREN IN OUR MIDST:

Homelessness in the Early Childhood Classroom

Four-year-old Ava and her mom, Ruth, have spent every night in a car since being evicted from their home two months ago. Ruth has never seen any pamphlets or signs that inform her of services for the homeless and doesn't know of any shelters in the area where she lives. The best option she's found is the truck stop where she parks her car at night. It's pretty safe, yet she always feels the need to be alert. So, Ruth is exhausted as she tries to give Ava a semblance of normal life. In the morning, before rushing off to work, Ruth drops Ava at the public preschool program she's been attending for a year. She makes sure that Ava is always clean, tidy and on time, so no one suspects a thing. And Ruth won't tell the preschool that Ava doesn't have a bed to sleep in or enough to eat. "If I do that," Ruth says, "they will think I am a bad mom."¹

Ruth knows their situation might be hurting Ava's growth and ability to learn. Still,

she doesn't know what to do since she's afraid for people to find out about her housing status. Homeless parents like Ruth often worry that teachers will judge them, report them to social services or have their children taken away—all legitimate concerns. Early childhood teachers, like many folks, can have negative attitudes toward homeless families and fail to see that they care about their kids. Educators might not understand why the children are fatigued, appear underfed or act out in challenging ways. And parents refuse to say why. So, homeless children remain under the radar, invisible to the teachers whose job is to provide them with education and care.²

THE HARD FACTS ABOUT HOMELESSNESS

Yet, now more than ever, our educators need to gain insight into the issues that homeless children face. The number of homeless children in the U.S. is large and likely to rise. In 2018, there were at least 1.5 million homeless children in public schools,

the largest number in more than a dozen years.³ And that was before COVID hit the economy hard. As of 2020, 10.9 million households in our nation spent 50 percent of their income on housing, which placed them in a risky position during a financial crisis like the pandemic.⁴ Any change in job status easily put them out on the street. And as of April 2020, 22 million Americans had filed for unemployment. This large number of jobless folks suggests that the wide-scale homeless problem is only likely to worsen in coming years and increase the inequities that already exist.⁵

The average homeless family is headed by a single mother, age 27 or younger, with two children under six. Families who are homeless are more likely to be people of color than to be white.

And Black children make up 53 percent of homeless children despite making up only 14 percent of all children. This overrepresentation of Black children without housing may arise because Black families are more likely to be poor and less likely to own a home than families of other races. In addition, Black families are at greater risk of eviction and paternal incarceration, factors that increase families' risk of poverty, put parents in precarious positions and can lead to trauma in their children's lives.⁶

Homeless children often live in chaotic and unsafe environments as they move from place to place. More than one quarter of homeless children have witnessed acts of violence within their own family, a

markedly higher rate than within the general population of children. More than a half of them worry about fires and guns. The adults in their life may seem to act in erratic ways. And the children often lack the secure tie with a parent that is crucial to a child's well-being and mental health.⁷

BEARING A HEAVY LOAD ALONE

It's hard for homeless parents to focus on their young while they're struggling to survive. Homeless moms often lack social supports and must tackle complex webs of red tape to find job training, employment, health care and education. The tremendous

amount of energy and time they devote to meeting basic needs can limit the inner resources they have to invest in their kids at a formative time in life. The roadblocks that homeless parents face can also hurt their mental health, leading

homeless moms to suffer from higher rates of substance abuse and major depression. These risk factors increase the chance that the mothers will neglect and abuse their children. The moms might also be less sensitive and responsive to their children's cues, weakening the parent-child bond.⁸

Either way, the moms often know that they're failing their kids, and it's a burden of guilt they carry alone. In a survey of Head Start parents, some of the moms talked about the trauma their children had been through and their fears of asking for outside

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help. “My child saw me beaten and I know it bothers him, but I can’t tell his teacher because I don’t want to lose him,” one of the moms explained. Another said, “My son sees scary things in the shelter and on the streets, and I don’t really know what to say to him. But I don’t think I can tell the school because they might take him away.” And the moms cling to their children despite feeling overwhelmed. “My mental health issues sometimes freak me out,” yet another mom revealed. “I know this isn’t good for my daughter. But I don’t know what to do about it. And I don’t know who to tell.”⁹

BONDS THAT BUILD RESILIENCE

One of the best people for the mom to talk to would be her child’s preschool teacher “We are usually the first connection that homeless families have to schools,” a California preschool director explained. “If we wait until kindergarten, it is too late to get needed services to children. There’s a lot we can do.”¹⁰ And as trained professionals in their field, early childhood teachers have learned about trauma and the lasting impact it makes on young minds. “We often witness behaviors or emotions that a child’s parents have not yet seen or cannot label,” said a New York City teacher who’d watched homeless preschoolers have meltdowns in her class. “This is when we have to identify what is happening so we can assist.” And homeless young learners do need help, the teacher explained, as they contend with frequent moves, traveling long distances at ungodly hours, frequent hunger and not having all the cool things their little peers do. “It’s a lot for a preschooler to undertake without the emotional support of caring

individuals such as teachers.”¹¹

The opportunity for homeless children to interact with adults besides mom and dad can cushion the impact of trauma, according to a recent study from North Carolina University in Raleigh. Drawing on interviews and surveys, the study found a strong link between the strength of the bonds that homeless children form with teachers and their degree of emotional health. “It is well established that children who are homeless are at higher risk for a wide variety of negative outcomes,” said Mary Haskett, a psychology professor and one of the authors of the study. “Still, there’s a lot of variability within this group. We wanted to learn more about what makes some children more resilient than others.”¹²

So, she and her coauthor, Kate Norwalk, looked for answers by speaking to the parents and teachers of 314 young children who participated in a Head Start program. The researchers found that a high-quality child-teacher relationship was the factor that best predicted a child’s social and emotional health. “The emotional bond or connection and the lack of conflict in that relationship,” the study concluded, “is strongly associated with the child being resilient. Granted there is ample evidence that these relationships are important for all students, but this work suggests that they are especially important for housing-insecure students.”¹³

A SHOCKING REVELATION

Yet there are cultural norms in early childhood settings that can make it harder for homeless children to form these vital bonds. Preschools tend to value regular



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attendance and participation in school events, which might not always be possible for homeless families. And teachers might buy into stereotypes that portray homeless parents as lazy and brand young Black boys as “special needs” children when they don’t respond well to directions. “Everyone is labeling Black boys and the teachers keep asking me to sign the papers, but I don’t think they are helping him. They just want to blame him,” one Black Head Start mom complained. Another insisted, “My son ain’t a bad kid. He’s homeless.”¹⁴

Sure, early childhood teachers hear about the trauma homeless children can carry into classrooms, but it doesn’t seem completely real, as one Chicago teacher acknowledged. “It seems that some kids are witnessing abuse or they’re coming from a difficult family background or they’re missing a parent—good reasons why they might be

having social or behavioral trouble in the classroom. It all makes a lot of sense, but it’s like another reality,” she said. So, she found it “kind of shocking” when she actually wound up with homeless young children in her classroom. “You wonder why the student is acting in a difficult way until you get the background story on what’s going on and you’re like, ‘Okay, that’s why.’ Then you need to figure out how you can help this student.”¹⁵

That isn’t easy when you’re dealing with the behavior that homeless children can display. For example, take Tyrone, a 3-year-old child living in a shelter on Chicago’s impoverished South Side. His family includes his four-year-old sister, one-year-old brother and their mom. Tyrone’s language and motor skills are behind those of his peers. He has dramatic crying spells and responds erratically to his mom and other adults—

all behavior that likely stemmed from the repeated incidents of domestic violence that he has witnessed. For three-year-old John, the trigger may have been eviction from his home. After moving into a shelter, he resisted change at his preschool, responded to directions by throwing himself on the floor, kicked and hit the teachers and other children in his class.¹⁶

FRESH INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD

So how can teachers gain the empathy they need for children who constantly push the limits? One good way is by venturing into the field and visiting homeless shelters. That's what a group of college students did during a study of ECE majors that took place in a southern U.S. city. And as part of the study, the students wrote a one-page reflection on their experience in the shelters. In their responses, they described how the experience raised their level of empathy for homeless children in crisis situations.¹⁷

The trips to the shelters gave students fresh insights and increased their commitment to give homeless families the kind, patient care they need. "This trip motivated me to be even more impassioned and proactive about how I help students in crisis in my future classroom," one student explained. "Overall, the field trip provided me with an opportunity to become aware that poverty

and homelessness surround us, and it takes empathy and openness to understand those who may be in crisis," a second student wrote. And yet another student came to realize that "these children don't get to choose the situation they're in. Their parents don't have total say either, though I used to think ignorantly that being homeless was a choice and wondered why the parents didn't just get a job. But all along, the problem was so much deeper than that."¹⁸

Instead, homelessness can happen to anyone, as the ECE students came to see. And that's been especially so during the current pandemic. COVID has disrupted

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all aspects of life and brought long-term inequities to the forefront as more people lost jobs and a firm footing in life. Many homeless families also lack the ability to social distance. And they may not have adequate health care, which can lead to tremendous problems if a parent becomes ill. The mental

health issues that homeless children have long faced have only become worse. So now more than ever, teachers need to be trauma informed to help young homeless kids.

SELF-CARE AND SELF-REGULATION

Teachers who are trauma-informed strive to understand the children they work with and how children communicate through their behavior. They acknowledge the different types of trauma that children might be going

through. They work hard to connect with the children and show them that adults can be caring and supportive. They engage in systematic self-care to sustain their strength to meet the extra demands of children with histories of trauma. They're committed to ongoing reflection and learning new strategies for supporting children who've been through trauma. They know how to help children avoid the extreme behaviors that traumatized homeless children can display.¹⁹ And educators who are looking for ways to help children learn self-regulation skills can get ideas from the Council for Professional Recognition:

- Play games like Simon Says in reverse. This requires children to think and not do something, which helps build self-regulation.
- Provide activities that require children to follow through. Activities such as cooking, using recipe cards or organized sports require children to follow directions.
- Read aloud books that promote self-regulation, such as *The Magic Beads* by Susan Nielson-Frenlund, *Silver Shoes* by Caroline Binch and *It's Hard to Be Five: Learning How to Work My Control Panel* by Jamie Lee Curtis, all books filled with characters who model tactics for effective self-regulation.
- Plan stress-reducing activities and exercises that will harness children's energy, attention and focus. Drawing, painting and using the sand or water table help children relax.
- Introduce relaxation techniques like yoga. The calming results of yoga make it a natural partner in teaching self-regulation. Begin with 10- to 15-minute sessions. Each exercise need only last 30 seconds to one minute. You can add more time

as children get used to the poses and develop the ability to stay focused.²⁰

Activities like these matter as much as academic learning for homeless children, according to the director of a child care program that's associated with a shelter. "Our programs are based on social-emotional learning," she explained. "ABCs and 123s don't really matter if you can't stop punching your friend in the face. So, there are a lot of things we do to support self-regulation. We bring in a counselor once a week to run a group called 'Window on the World,' which is an arts curriculum. We discuss what it means to be a friend, encourage children to talk about their feelings and suggest words to express them. We also do parent groups, and that's really made an impact on parents who are struggling. Sometimes they haven't had strong role models, and they have had a hard run. So, we're trying to give them tools to have healthy relationships with their children."²¹

MEETING THE MOMS

Despite stereotypes, homeless parents do have their children's best interests at heart. They also value their children's education, according to a group of ECE students in the western part of the U.S. As part of their college coursework, the students went to a homeless shelter, where they had very positive interactions with the moms. "The mothers really seemed to care about their children and love them," a student named Audra said. They also had the same hopes for their children as middle-class moms, according to Bethany, a student who assisted with a parenting class. "I thought it was great to see the relationship

that one child had with his mother and how they worked closely together. You could tell that she took pride in the abilities of her son and wants him to succeed,” Bethany said. And watching the clever little boy with his mom made Bethany rethink her belief that all homeless children have developmental delays.²²

Another eye-opening insight for the students was that a substantial number of homeless children attended the local public school. Yet they were invisible to teachers, as Audra realized when she was assigned to a first-grade classroom in an urban school. She asked the first-grade teacher if there were any homeless children in the class and the teacher drew a blank. But it turned out there actually were two homeless students in the class, as the teacher told Audra after a few weeks of investigation.²³

And this points to the need for teachers to know the community around them and learn more about children’s lives outside of school. It also helps for ECE teachers, as we have seen, to do field work where they meet the many homeless parents and children whose lives are filled with crises. Real-life experiences like this help rising teachers gain the key insight they really need when a homeless child is acting up: The child is not giving you a hard time. They’re having a hard time.²⁴

HURTS AND HUGS

When working with homeless children like this, early childhood teachers need to keep their cool and look for the hidden causes of the children’s behavior. That’s what an educator named Tracy did when she

worked with a five-year-old boy who couldn’t ever seem to calm down and get engaged in the class. “We tried to talk to his mom, but she was really closed off, so we weren’t getting much information from her,” as Tracy recalled. Then she made a breakthrough after Alex had a really bad day, throwing things off shelves, cursing at the teachers and hitting the other kids. “I had to take some deep breaths,” Tracy recalled, “as I told him that ‘it is okay to feel angry, but you are not allowed to hurt other people.’ Then I focused on what his behavior was saying and what he wanted from me right now. I asked Alex, ‘Do you need a hug?’ And he looked up, grabbed me and hugged me for five minutes. As I held him tight, I knew what he needed was this reassurance that he was cared for and safe.”²⁵

Tracy was right, as she learned when she finally convinced Alex’s mom to open up. “I told her things are escalating with Alex and I don’t understand what is happening,” Tracy recalled. “I know you are a very private person, but I really want to help your child and I don’t know what to do”—calm, caring words that finally gained the mom’s trust. “She started crying,” Tracy said, “and told me that while she was pregnant and during the first three years of Alex’s life, there had been bad domestic violence in her home. Now she and Alex were at a shelter and safe but didn’t know where they would go when their 90 days there were up.”²⁶

No wonder Alex clung to Tracy, an anchor of calm in his chaotic world. Though he was only a little boy, he had already been through lots of trauma—and he’s far from unique. There are invisible homeless children like him in our midst. They live in our communities and come to our early childhood classrooms nationwide—where their plight

often stays unseen. Yet their tears and trying behavior betray the tragedies they've been through—and should lead to concern for what's going on in their lives outside school. These children need teachers with the empathy and the insight to bring their hidden problems into plain view.

Like many others in the child care field, she knows that one of the ways for our nation to build back better is by investing in our young. So, educators must meet, mobilize—and make their voices heard.

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