

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING HOMELESS YOUTH

Students experiencing homelessness may find regular school attendance difficult. Yet school could be the only place of stability in a child's life, and teachers can play a critical role in the lives of students who are homeless. Children who continually change schools may also feel different and have adjustment difficulties. If you have students in your class who you think may be experiencing homelessness, here are some strategies for providing support:

Create a welcoming environment and build trust with all students. Find time for weekly check-ins with students to assess needs, offer encouragement, and recognize accomplishments. Assign new students a job or have them become involved in extra-curricular activities. Pair a new student with a "buddy" in the classroom on the first day of school; these personal relationships can make a child feel welcomed and comfortable.

Provide structure and adhere to a consistent daily routine and clear, concise rules. Don't assume the child knows the classroom's behavior expectations, regardless of the student's age. Be patient and persistent in trying to help a child adjust to a new environment. Provide structure and adhere to a consistent daily routine and clear, concise rules. Also, plan assignments so children can keep up without having to take work home; sometimes children experiencing homelessness can find it difficult to do work outside of school.

Help to identify and support students experiencing homelessness. Students may be uncomfortable telling people at school about their homelessness and asking for help. Be attentive to the stigma of homelessness, and avoid using the word "homeless." Ask questions to better understand a student's housing situation. If appropriate, refer the child to the school guidance counselor who can help refer the child and their family to supportive housing services.

Take a trauma-informed approach. The experience of and events leading up to homelessness can expose students to violence, abuse, hunger, trafficking, and other traumatic experiences. Allow students to hold on to personal possessions in class, keeping in mind that any possession may be the child's only one. Provide well-defined transition procedures from one activity to another and give choices when appropriate to counter the loss of control experienced in their lives.

Stabilize basic needs and support full participation. Make healthy snacks and hygiene supplies available. Ensure enrollment in the free meal program. Ensure that the student has every opportunity to participate in school activities: Contact a homeless liaison or guidance counselor to find out how to provide school/project supplies, cover field trip fees, purchase uniforms, and meet other needs. Give students a clipboard to use as a “desk” when they leave school.

Ensure that classroom policies and procedures set students up for success. Many students who have not had a stable school experience have low self-esteem and lack positive feelings about school. Provide lots of reassurance to children in transition. Make sure to have extra school supplies and books on hand (but provide these “special occasion” supplies in private). Don’t withdraw privileges if a new student doesn’t return school materials or come to class prepared, and don’t take away possessions as a disciplinary measure. Also, if a student repeatedly falls asleep in class, understand that they may be exhausted from living in a car or shelter.

Reach out to parents/caregivers. Because parents may not have regular access to a phone, create a communication plan. Send the family a welcome letter and/or invite them to visit the classroom. Ask if younger siblings need supportive services. Make sure parents know their family’s rights.

Tips found at School House Connection and Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

RELEVANT YOUTH COMMUNICATION STORIES AND RESOURCES

"Growing Up Homeless" by Daren Braithwaite

Daren writes about moving in and out of homelessness for most of her teen life. She struggles to keep up her grades amid an unstable, chaotic life in shelters. This story comes with a [lesson plan](#) to use with youth.

"Living in Shelter" by Amya Shaw

During the five years that Amya lived in four shelters, she relied on reading and writing to soothe her and help her survive the extreme insecurity of homelessness. Amya recently shared her story on the [Miseducation Podcast](#), which features teen voices focused on shedding light on inequality and racial segregation in NYC public schools.