

How Preschool Programs Can Help Children Who Are Homeless

Children experiencing homelessness may find participation in early education programs challenging. Each time a child must move to a new learning environment, due to their family's unstable housing or employment situation, they can lose between four to six months of academic progress. They may also have feelings of being "different" from other children and find it difficult to adjust to the new program setting.

An early childhood program may be the only place of stability in the child's life. Here are some strategies teachers and program staff can use to help children who are homeless adapt to the learning environment.

1. Stabilize the Child's Basic needs.

Physical Needs-Partner with the child's parents/guardians to help resolve food, clothing, shelter, medical care, basic hygiene, and transportation needs.

- If necessary, provide a way for the child to privately bathe and wash her/his hair.
- Keep nutritious snacks available. Children need to eat at least every three hours.
- If the child falls asleep in class, let her/him sleep. Sleep may be needed due to living in a car or a crowded emergency shelter.
- Don't expect a child with insecure housing to bring extra clothing, food, photographs, or treats to class.
- Be understanding if the child does not return classroom materials.

Emotional Needs-Children in homeless situations are often emotionally vulnerable.

- Allow personal items to be kept close at hand-any possession may be the child's only source of security.
- Provide 10-20 times the usual amount of reassurance.
- Allow the child to express fears and frustrations in appropriate ways such as in dramatic play, running, climbing, drawing, or pounding clay.
- Help the child find positive outlets for anger.

Social Needs-A sense of empowerment is critical to overcoming feelings of helplessness.

- Help the child take an active role by encouraging him/her to be a "helper" in class or assist another child.
- Don't assume s/he knows how to play with others. They may need guidance to be successful at interacting with other children.

2. Conduct appropriate educational assessments to determine the child's level of ability.

Developmentally appropriate assessment of skills can be made through observation and work-sampling. Talk with the child about previous educational experiences.

Confidentially share developmental information with others who work with the child. Make sure all assessments are respectful of the child's culture and language.

- 3. Allow new children to spend regular “one-on-one” time with a supportive adult.**
Help the child integrate into activities with other children. Make arrangements for the child to be able to talk with their supportive adult whenever s/he has a question or concern.
- 4. Pair a new child with a “buddy” in the first week.**
A buddy connects the child with a supportive peer. Their buddy can introduce them to other children and remind them of routines and schedules. Other welcoming activities include:
 - Lunch with different staff members and the child's buddy during the first week of class.
 - Playing “get acquainted” games and drawing an “About Me” picture.
 - Having a buddy give the child a tour of the building and introduce them to other faculty and staff.
- 5. Provide structure with consistent daily routines and clear, concise rules.**
Whenever possible, inform the child in advance about substitute teachers or changes in routines to foster a sense of safety and security. Use visual and verbal cues to indicate transitions throughout the day. Be clear about rules. Don't assume the child knows appropriate school behavior. Be patient but persistent in helping them become part of the learning community.
- 6. Facilitate successful experiences.**
Children who have not had a stable educational experience may have low self confidence and lack positive feelings about school. Discover the child's interests and preferences and look for ways to comfortably engage her/him in activities that are developmentally appropriate to ensure s/he has an opportunity to experience success. The feeling of mastery is critical to his/her self-image. Other suggestions include:
 - Provide choices whenever appropriate to counter the loss of control they may be experiencing.
 - Avoid discussions based on television programs. Children in temporary living situations may not have access to a television and, if they do, they may not have the ability to make television channel choices.
 - Avoid taking away outdoor/large motor activities as a disciplinary consequence. This may be the only time the child has the opportunity to run and play, especially in an adequate outdoor play area.
 - Give highly mobile children the opportunity to think of their experiences as positive. Encourage them to tell about the places they have traveled and people they have met.
 - Provide the child with the means to participate in field trips, classroom activities, and projects. Be understanding of her/his lack of access to resources.
- 7. Reach out to the child's parents/guardians.**
Make a special effort to involve family members in their child's educational program.

- Invite parents/guardians to a “get-acquainted” time. Provide opportunities for them to get to know the staff at your program as well as other families.
 - Provide a “welcome” letter or video for the family to introduce them to your program.
 - Make sure forms and other printed materials are provided in the family’s primary language, keeping in mind that they may not have the same literacy skills that other families have.
 - Talk with the parents/guardians about educational plans for the child. Offer suggestions for positive ways to spend time with their child such as playing together, telling stories, reading, and going for walks.
 - Provide transportation to and from where the family is living, especially for parent-teacher conferences and social events.
 - Provide a list of community resources and access to telephone and internet whenever possible.
- 8. Refer the family to appropriate persons or community agencies when additional professional consultation is recommended.**
- The child may have educational or emotional needs that require closer attention.
 - Inform the family about specialized services available from birth to three, early childhood special education, or medical consultants.
 - Parents may need transportation assistance, language translation, as well as someone to accompany them when they meet with professional(s) who will provide the services.
 - Whenever possible, offer specialized services in the child’s natural environment.
 - Make sure the parent/guardian authorizes any referral for specialized services.

Above all, don’t let the child “slip through the cracks”. Teachers and program staff may not be able to meet all of the needs of children who are experiencing homelessness, but one person’s ability to remove just one stress factor can make a tremendous difference.

Visit www.dpi.wi.gov/homeless or contact DPIHomeless@dpi.wi.gov for additional information on homeless preschool issues.