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## How Teachers Can Help Students Who Are Homeless

Students experiencing homelessness may find regular school attendance difficult. Yet school may be the only place of stability in a child's life. Every time children change schools, they may lose between four to six months of academic progress. Children who continually change schools may feel different and have adjustment difficulties. Below are strategies teachers and school staff can use to help new students adjust more easily into their new school settings.

1. **Stabilize the child's basic needs.**

Have food, clothing, shelter, medical care, basic hygiene, and transportation needs resolved. Provide a community resource list to the family or youth. If necessary, find a place for students to shower. Keep nutritious snacks available. Don't ask students with insecure housing to bring food items or treats to school.

2. **Administer a brief educational assessment to the child to determine their level of academic ability.**

A brief assessment in reading, math, and writing will avoid teaching above or below a student's ability while previous school records are obtained. Do an oral interview to find out the child's school history and share this information with other teachers.

3. **Find time each week for new students to "check-in" with their teacher.**

Assign an adult to check-in daily with new children during the first month of school. Have an adult watch new students during recess for the first few weeks since play time may be difficult for new students. Assign new students a "job" or have them become involved in extra-curricular activities.

4. **Pair a new student with a "buddy" in the classroom on the first day of school.**

Having a buddy will keep new students in contact with someone who knows their way around the school. A buddy can also make sure new students have all their books and supplies to do work at home at the end of the day. Other welcoming activities include:

- Lunch with different staff members and the student's buddy during the first week of school;
- Play get acquainted games, or have the student fill out an "All About Me" sheet; and
- Have a current student give the new student a tour of the building, and introduce him/her to faculty.

5. **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 the child adjust to the new environment. Learn the unwritten rules of the poverty, middle class, and wealthy classes.

*(Dr. Ruby Payne, A Framework for Understanding Poverty).*

6. **Facilitate successful experiences for new students.**

Many students who have not had a stable school experience have low self-esteem and lack positive feelings about school. Provide 10 to 20 times the normal amount of reassurance to children in transition.

7. **Plan assignments so children can keep up without having to take work home.**

Schedule the school day to allow teachers to help with school assignments before the end of the day.

- Provide school supplies and books. Provide “special occasion” supplies in private;
- Don’t withdraw privileges if a new student doesn’t return school materials;
- Don’t take possessions away as a disciplinary measure; and
- If a new student falls asleep in class, let her/him sleep. It may be needed rest from living in a car or shelter.

8. **If tutoring is required, be proactive in obtaining it through school or community programs.**

9. **If counseling is necessary, refer the child to the school counselor or outside community agency.**

The child may have many and varied emotional needs that require attention.

10. **Reach out to parents.**

Send a “welcome” letter or videotape home to the parents. Create a special invitation inviting parents to a getting acquainted time. Provide transportation to home and school conferences. Above all, don’t let the student “slip through the cracks” of the system.

**Teachers must remember that they cannot possibly meet all the needs of a child who is homeless. However, if they can remove just one frustration, it can make a tremendous difference for that child.**

## **Ways Teachers Can Help Students Who Are Homeless**

Having students who are homeless 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 student’s life, for it can present the student with a sense of stability. Teachers play a major role. Listed are some of the common frustrations experienced by students who are homeless and their teachers.

### **Frustrations:**

<p><b>For Students</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ashamed of where they live (especially if at a shelter).</li><li>• Teased by other students about homelessness, hygiene, and inabilities.</li><li>• Misunderstood by parents.</li><li>• Difficulty adjusting to new school, magnified by situation.</li><li>• No place to do homework (or quiet place for themselves).</li><li>• Developmental delay augments feelings of failure.</li></ul>	<p><b>For Teachers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Students may have lived in many places, attending different schools with different teaching methods.</li><li>• No school records.</li><li>• Need to assess educational needs without prior records.</li><li>• Need to do a quick assessment of student as formal measures are too time consuming.</li><li>• Knowledge that the student may move soon.</li><li>• Other students may react negatively.</li><li>• Students may have difficulty trusting.</li><li>• Inability to contact parents in an emergency.</li><li>• Parents often emotionally unavailable.</li><li>• Homework completion can be difficult.</li></ul>
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### **Suggestions for Teachers Helping Students Who Are Homeless**

- Make the child feel welcome.
- Make the new student a file that includes things to send home to parents (i.e., school rules, classroom rules, lunchroom rules, class schedule, and a list of special classes).
- Provide well-defined transition procedures from one activity to another.
- Plan ahead whenever possible, inform students ahead of time about substitute teachers and changes in activities. This will foster a sense of safety and security.
- Coordinate any educational plan with the school counselor.
- Expect and unobtrusively monitor regressions.
- Offer encouragement and understanding and recognize the child's talents and accomplishments. Give students the opportunity to see some of their experiences as positive (e.g., places they have traveled).
- Allow personal possessions and keep in mind that any possession may be the child's only one.
- Give choices when appropriate to counter the loss of control experienced in their lives.
- Don't penalize students who are homeless for being late before finding out if they have reliable transportation and an alarm clock.
- Assign projects that can be broken into small components to ensure students have at least some success. The experience of mastery is critical to their self-image.
- Maintain the child's privacy and discuss homework situations away from other classmates. Give the student a clipboard to take home as a portable desk to work on.

- Avoid TV assignments (students living in shelters may not be able to make the channel choices for their group).
- Show sensitivity when asking children to bring food, photographs, favorite toys, or other items from home. Children who are homeless are often embarrassed to admit that they do not have these things.
- Avoid taking away recess/gym class as a disciplinary consequence. (This may be the only time students who are homeless have space to run.) Children are often without an adequate play area at shelters or in the streets.
- Don't assume younger students know how to play. They may have to be taught how to do so.
- Help the child participate in field trips, school activities, and class projects through understanding of her/his living environment and access to resources. Arrange school picture fees so children who are homeless may have pictures too.
- Ensure that children in homeless situations have easy access to assistance in case of personal difficulties (i.e., counselors). Allow students to express fears and frustrations and allow opportunities to do so in other ways in addition to verbalizing (i.e., drawing). Help children find positive outlets for anger.
- Help children take an active role in their life. A sense of empowerment is critical to overcoming helplessness (i.e., make child a helper in class, have the child tutor a younger child, promote activities they are good at).
- Offer parent suggestions for spending time with their children, helping with school work, etc.

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