

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN WHO ARE HOMELESS

An increasing number of families with young children have lost their jobs and even their homes due to socio-economic conditions brought about by the recent recession. The number of identified homeless children and youth increased nearly 10 percent over the last three years. Wisconsin schools reported 10,955 students who were homeless during the 2008-2009 school year.¹ Early childhood professionals in schools, child care, Head Start, and other programs that serve young children and their families, can play a vital role in supporting families who are now struggling with poverty and homelessness.

Family Circumstances

Each homeless or highly mobile situation is unique. While most families are homeless due to a lack of affordable housing, there are other factors that can contribute to a family becoming homeless or having to move frequently. The personalities of each child and family member, their personal history, their ethnic backgrounds, and the neighborhood where they live all impact how children and other family members respond to their living situation.

Therefore, the first step in determining what resources are needed for a child or family is to learn as much as possible about their particular situation. Not only will this initial assessment assist you in making appropriate decisions about how to best help the child, but it can also become the foundation for an ongoing relationship with the child and the family. A child's success in any learning environment depends on a relationship of mutual trust, and open and honest communication.

Indicators of Need

Being homeless is often a very complex situation for both the child and the family. Classroom teachers, family support staff, case workers, and others providing support must be alert to indicators of need, but also be cautious about making assumptions or pre-judging the situation when inquiring about the family's living situation and assessing their needs. The list of indicators below can assist in identifying possible needs.

MOBILITY INDICATORS

- * History of attending multiple early education programs
- * Lack of birth records
- * Hesitancy about what address to use
- * Frequent absences
- * Inability or difficulty when contacting the parents or relatives
- * Avoidance of field trips
- * Concern for safety of belongings

ECONOMIC INDICATORS

- * Wearing the same clothes on consecutive days
- * No extra clothing or personal items
- * Poor hygiene
- * Inappropriate clothing based on weather
- * Malnutrition/chronic hunger

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SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL INDICATORS

- * Difficulty or avoidance in making friends
- * Poor self-esteem
- * Extreme shyness
- * "Old" beyond years
- * Fear of abandonment
- * Difficulty trusting people
- * Immediate gratification of needs
- * Concern for safety
- * Unexplained aggression
- * Protective of parents
- * Clinging behavior
- * Anxiety when leaving the program each day

PHYSICAL INDICATORS

- * Poor health (such as persistent sores or skin rashes)
- * Unattended medical needs
- * Respiratory problems such as asthma
- * Extreme fatigue (falls asleep frequently)

EDUCATIONAL INDICATORS

- * Extremely short attention span
- * Unexplained developmental delays
- * Lack of language proficiency

Every child and family's situation is unique. Children who have a more permanent residence may also have some of the indicators listed above. However, children of families who are highly mobile and homeless typically have multiple indicators and their needs are often more intense than "housed" children. Intensity of needs can be impacted by any of the factors listed below.

1. Situational or Generational Homelessness

Some families may have a history of being homeless over multiple generations. Children from chronically homeless situations face increased barriers to their academic success. "On average, children are homeless ten months at a time, or an entire school year."⁵

2. Physical and Mental Health

Children in homeless situations often have a higher incidence of health related problems. In some cases the parent(s), as well as the child, may have problems with physical and/or mental health.

"Nationwide, over one-quarter of all children (26 percent) and one-third of children under age five (33 percent) became ill more often during episodes of homelessness."

"Roughly half of school-aged children (47 percent) and twenty-six percent (26 percent) of children under age five suffer emotionally from depression, anxiety, or aggression after becoming homeless. Multiple stressors make problems worse: children are more likely to suffer emotionally during homelessness if they become ill, are frequently absent from school, or are chronically homeless. At times, these negative feelings can be dangerous – suicidal tendencies are common among homeless children over the age of five."

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“The emotional impact of homelessness is an additional burden for children. Those who suffer from depression or anxiety will have greater difficulty in school; those who react with anger and aggression will only become further isolated from their peers. In the end, these children lose out on their childhood – something they can never regain.”⁶

3. Violence in the Family or Neighborhood

Domestic violence may be the reason that a family finds themselves in a homeless situation. “According to parents, nearly half of homeless school-aged children (47 percent), and more than one-quarter of those under five years of age (29 percent), have witnessed domestic violence in their household.”⁶

4. Educational History of the Parent(s)

Homeless parents often have lower rates of high school diploma or GED attainment as compared to housed parents. “Forty-one (41 percent) do not have a high school diploma, and the typical homeless parent reads at a sixth grade level. They often feel unprepared or too intimidated to become involved in their child’s schooling.”⁶

Information about each family will be helpful to determine the strengths and resources they already have as well as what may be needed. However, this information must be kept confidential. Written authorization should be obtained from the parents before sharing information with other agencies or support staff. A sample authorization form is provided in Appendix A.

SUPPORTING & INVOLVING FAMILIES

Research shows, especially for children from families in poverty, that achievement in school is strongly linked to the family’s involvement in the child’s learning process. *The Harvard Family Research Project* makes the case that family involvement can predict a child’s academic achievement and social development including:⁵

- The child’s social competence;
- Cognitive development;
- Communication skills;
- Literacy development;
- Vocabulary growth;
- Expressive language;
- Comprehension skills; and
- Positive engagement with peers, adults, and learning.

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Family Resources and Protective Factors

In an effort to identify a feasible approach to child abuse and neglect prevention, the Center for the Study of Social Policy developed a host of strategies that early care and education programs can use to support and strengthen families. *Protecting Children by Strengthening Families: A Guidebook for Early Childhood Programs* was developed to integrate effective prevention strategies into existing child care and education systems.³

In keeping with the goal of focusing on the family's strengths instead of deficits, the *Strengthening Families* approach uses a model of building resiliency rather than reducing risk. Their research revealed several factors that contribute to a family's ability to provide a healthy and safe environment for their child. While this study was concerned specifically with lowering incidences of child abuse and neglect, the identified protective factors may also be linked to other positive outcomes for children. These protective factors include parental resilience; an array of social connections; adequate knowledge of parenting and child development; and substantial support in times of need (including access to necessary services such as mental health, medical care, food, etc.).

The *Strengthening Families* program offers strategies for building protective factors. Key strategies that exemplary programs use are:

- Facilitate friendships and mutual support between parents;
- Strengthen parenting skills;
- Respond to family crises;
- Link families to services and opportunities;
- Facilitate children's social and emotional development;
- Observe and respond to early warning signs of child abuse and neglect; and
- Value and support parents.

Through a process of program assessment and staff training, early childhood programs can become skilled at helping parents build protective factors. In addition to employing the strategies described above, exemplary programs also include the following practices:

- Build a respectful staff culture;
- Support parents as leaders;
- Create a welcoming, safe space for parents;
- Engage fathers as well as mothers in parenting activities;
- Form positive relationships with child welfare personnel when children are placed "out of home";
- Provide family support services;
- Provide mental health consultation; and
- Support families whose children have special educational needs.

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Involving Families

A series of briefs by the *Harvard Family Research Project*⁸ summarizes the latest evidence-based research on effective parent involvement. The first briefs focus on the linkages between family, early childhood education settings, and schools. The brief also states that “home-school relationships buffer the negative impacts of poverty on the academic and behavioral outcomes of poor children.” The following “nontraditional contacts” were cited as “enjoying increased levels of family participation”:

- Home visits;
- Parent discussion groups;
- Parent resource rooms; and
- Home lending libraries.

Supporting Parent’s Relationship with Their Child

In order to work together with the family to provide supportive care and education for a child, we need to know what the family’s vision and hopes are for the future of their child. Ask parents what their plans and goals are for their child. We also need to ask the child what her/his dreams are (see *Hopes and Dreams* activity).

Parents are their child’s first and most important teacher. However, parents may not always feel confident about helping their child with day-to-day situations and feelings. The following tips can be shared with parents.

Abandonment

Children may feel frightened when they become separated from their parents.

TIPS FOR PARENTS:

- Reassure your child that you (or someone else) will be there when they come home; and
- Let your child know who will be picking them up from school.

Insecurity

Children need to know that there will be consistency in their lives to enable them to feel secure and trust adults.

TIPS FOR PARENTS:

- Maintain as much of a daily routine as possible;
- Reassure your child that you will always be there for them even if changes happen;
- Let your child know s/he is special to you. Remind him/her often that you love them;
- Acknowledge your child’s talents and abilities;

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- Acknowledge your child's progress and tell them you are proud of her/him;
- Schedule special "one-on-one" time with your child;
- Tell them when they do a good job;
- Hold her/him and cuddle if it helps to make him/her more secure; and
- Read with your child on a regular basis.

Apprehension

Children may require help adjusting to a new school environment.

TIPS FOR PARENTS:

- Reassure the child that the teachers and school staff are there to keep her/him safe. Your child will build trust if s/he knows you are leaving them in the care of someone you trust;
- Try to visit the school before the first day of attendance and meet teachers, secretaries, social worker, principal, bus driver, etc.;
- Stay with the child for a short time on the first day; and
- Contact teachers and staff with any questions or concerns you may have.

Boredom

Children may get bored on days when s/he is not in school. Help your child be actively engaged during non-scheduled times.

TIPS FOR PARENTS:

- Take time to play games, draw, sing, or go for a walk together;
- Encourage your child to use their imagination and play pretend games on their own;
- Tell real and imaginary stories; and
- Read books, magazines, newspapers, and other printed materials.

Guilt and Helplessness

Children feel what their parents feel. They may feel guilty or frustrated for being homeless or living in a transitional situation.

Children may feel they are the cause of their parent's negative feelings.

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TIPS FOR PARENTS:

- Reassure your child that s/he is not to blame for being homeless or in a transitional living situation;
- Suggest ways s/he can help and take responsibility (care for themselves and their belongings);
- Remind your child of her/his strengths;
- Help your child to like themselves and feel proud; and
- Tell your child how much you love her/him and you will always be there for them.

Nostalgia

Children may miss the things they remember from the past and wish their life could be the way it was before they became homeless.

TIPS FOR PARENTS:

- Talk about the changes in her/his life;
- Affirm her/his feelings. Say something like “it’s okay to miss the way things were before”;
- Find humor in situations to help relieve tension; and
- Tell your child how much you love them and that you will always be there for her/him.

Worry

Children may worry when parents are upset.

TIPS FOR PARENTS:

- Be honest about your situation and explain it to your child in simple terms;
- Reassure your child that they will be safe and that the family will be there for her/him;
- Help your child to think of all their options;
- Plan ways to handle setbacks;
- Encourage your child by suggesting ways s/he can help; and
- Remind your child of how special s/he is and that your daughter/son has strengths that will help her/him to cope with their situation.

Inappropriate Behavior

Children may act out in ways that are inappropriate when they are angry, confused, or frustrated.

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TIPS FOR PARENTS:

- Be consistent when enforcing simple rules that fit your child's developmental level. Children need rules for things like bedtime, chores, and where they can or cannot go;
- Discipline your child only when you are calm. Take time to calm yourself before talking with your child;
- Think about what is best to say to your child. If you can, talk with another adult about what is upsetting you or your child;
- Give the child time to calm down. Children will be more ready to listen when they are calm;
- Be kind when you discipline your child. Rather than calling them names, tell them what you do not like about what s/he did. Say that you expect her/him to behave and that you still love them;
- Be firm, and take fair disciplinary action, explain how you want your child to behave. For example, if your child made a mess, have them clean only the mess that s/he made. It would not be fair to have them clean up the whole room;
- Be sure that the discipline fits your child's age. It is important to know what you can reasonably expect of children at different ages; and
- If you take away a privilege such as TV time or play time, be sure you follow through on what you said you would do.

Getting Along with Other Children

Highly mobile and homeless children can experience anxiety about making new friends.

TIPS FOR PARENTS:

- Model being kind to others and show your child how to be a good friend;
- Show respect for other people's feelings and their personal belongings;
- Participate in events that involve your child's friends and classmates; and
- Plan events that will give your child opportunities to play with other children.

MEETING THE CHILD'S NEEDS

The Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards

The Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards (WMELS) are a guide for parents and professionals to clarify and communicate expectations about child development for children from birth to first grade¹⁰. The standards in connection to early childhood curriculum, instruction, and assessment are intended to:

- Improve the quality of all early learning environments;
- Guide professional development activities and investments;

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- Inform educators and caregivers in their decisions regarding approaches to curriculum development across all early learning environments; and
- Guide communities as they determine local benchmarks at the district level. The local benchmarks assist to make decisions regarding curriculum and assessment that will determine instruction, interactions, and activities.

The Whole Child

It is important to learn about the “whole child” before deciding which resources are needed to support their growth. Children learn and develop in several areas referred to as “developmental domains”. The WMELS use the following developmental domains when addressing child development:

- Health and Physical Development;
- Social and Emotional Development;
- Language Development and Communication;
- Approaches to Learning; and
- Cognitive and General Knowledge.

The developmental domains are highly interrelated. Knowledge and skills developed in one area impact the acquisition of knowledge and skills in other areas of development. In the WMELS each domain is divided into sub-domains which include developmental expectations, program standards, performance standards, and a developmental continuum, along with samples of children's behavior and adult strategies to support their continued growth. Expectations for a child’s development are not tied to a specific age level, but are related to the skills and level of ability that the child demonstrates. Observation and ongoing assessment is necessary to determine which resources should be provided in order for the child to progress at his/her own pace to the next level on the developmental continuum. Every child’s development is unique. Children from families who are homeless and/or highly mobile may progress and regress depending on internal and external factors that influence their growth and development. Therefore, it is highly important that each child’s situation be considered individually. What may be developmentally appropriate for one child, may not be appropriate for the next.

However, attention to all developmental areas or domains is critical to the success of ALL children. The following charts list the Performance Standards for each Developmental Domain of the WMELS. TIPS provides suggestions about resources that a child who is homeless or highly mobile may need correspond with each Performance Standard. While the WMELS span the growth and development of children from birth through age five, the following TIPS primarily focus on children from three to five years of age. It is the responsibility of the education and care provider to know what the individual child’s level of development is and then decide which resources are needed and how best to provide them.

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Health and Physical Resources

Food, shelter, and clothing are among our most basic physiological needs. The prominent psychologist, Abraham Maslow, took the position that many human motives derive from basic biological drives. If physiological needs become intense, they will dominate behavior. A child from a family experiencing high mobility and/or homelessness may have overwhelming physiological needs. The following are tips for supporting children who need health and physical resources.

Performance Standards

Physical Health and Development

During the early childhood period, children in Wisconsin will show evidence of developmentally appropriate abilities in the following areas:

- A.EL.1a – Demonstrates behaviors to meet self-help and physical needs. *Sleep*
- A.EL.1b – Demonstrates behaviors to meet self-help and physical needs. *Dressing*
- A.EL.1c – Demonstrates behaviors to meet self-help and physical needs. *Toileting*

TIPS

Sleep

- Be aware of the child's need for rest and relaxation;
- Allow the child to have uninterrupted sleep; and
- Provide space where quiet times and even sleep are available whenever a child needs to rest.

Self Care

- Provide opportunities for children to practice daily hygiene routines;
- Keep additional clothing handy or launder clothing that may be soiled;
- Provide opportunities for children to brush teeth and wash and comb their hair; and
- Provide opportunities to shower or bathe when facilities are available.

Toileting

- It is normal for children to have toileting accidents through the ages of six or seven years. It is important not to punish but to remind children to use the bathroom as soon as they have the need to.

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Performance Standards

Physical Health and Development

During the early childhood period, children in Wisconsin will show evidence of developmentally appropriate abilities in the following areas:

- A.EL.1d – Demonstrates behaviors to meet self-help and physical needs. *Eating*
- A.EL. 2 – Demonstrates behaviors to meet safety needs.
- A.EL. 3 – Demonstrates a healthy life style.

TIPS

Eating

- Provide snacks and meals at least every three hours;
- Make nutritious food choices available throughout the day;
- Provide enough food so children may have additional portions upon request; and
- Discuss good eating habits with children.

Safety

- Give and model consistent, clear rules to follow regarding safety precautions;
- Set up simulations for children to rehearse using safety precautions including dealing with inappropriate touch and identifying adults they can trust to help them when they are in danger; and
- Provide clear directions in a variety of forms such as verbal, visual, and musical. Young children have diverse learning styles and need to have information repeated several times before it becomes a part of their memory.

Healthy Lifestyles

- Model and discuss ways to stay healthy including choosing healthy foods, and getting plenty of sleep and physical exercise;
- Use stories, books, and other concrete examples of what it means to have a healthy lifestyle; and
- Help children brainstorm ways to include healthy practices into their daily routines.

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Performance Standards

Motor Development

During the early childhood period, children in Wisconsin will show evidence of developmentally appropriate abilities in the following areas:

- B.EL.1a – Moves with strength, control, balance, coordination, locomotion, and endurance.
- B.EL. 2 – Exhibits eye-hand coordination, strength, control, and object manipulation.

Sensory Organization

During the early childhood period, children in Wisconsin will show evidence of developmentally appropriate abilities in the following area:

- C.EL. 1 – Uses senses to take in, experience, integrate, and regulate responses to the environment.

TIPS

Large and Small Muscle Development

- Provide daily activities that involve active play both indoors and outside; and
- Children need enough space to use both large and small muscles and opportunities to engage in activities that require them to use full body movement.

Sensory Organization

- Watch for cues that a child may have an under or over exaggerated response to sensory stimulation.

Referral for Specialized Services

Severe, persistent, physical issues may require assessment and support from other professionals.

- Document and provide information to the family about their child's physical development;
- Inform the family about specialized services available from birth-to-three, early childhood special education, or medical consultants;
- Ask the child's family to authorize any referral for specialized services. A sample authorization form is provided in (Appendix A);
- Whenever possible, offer specialized services in the child's natural environment; and
- Encourage parents to attend meetings with specialists. They may require assistance with transportation, language translation, as well as someone to accompany them.

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Social and Emotional Resources

Highly mobile children develop behaviors to help them survive in response to their situation. They may not be aware that their fears and anxiety affect their relationships with others. Highly mobile or homeless children tend to internalize the negative results of their circumstance and may even blame themselves for their situation. They often experience frequent disruptions in making and keeping friends and feel discouraged or frustrated about establishing relationships with adults and peers.

Performance Standards

Emotional Development

During the early childhood period, children in Wisconsin will show evidence of developmentally appropriate abilities in the following areas:

- A.EL. 1 – Expresses a wide range of emotions.
- A.EL. 2 – Understands and responds to others' emotions.

TIPS

Expressing and Understanding Emotions

- Talk with children about their feelings and thoughts;
- Encourage children to express hopes, fears, and anxieties through music, movement, creative arts, and storytelling activities;
- When a child says s/he is feeling sad or angry, calmly and positively reinforce them for recognizing his/her feelings;
- Introduce children to words that identify complex emotions like envy, frustration, and confusion;
- Direct attention to the thoughts, feelings, and character strengths of people in stories and songs;
- Explain that all people have a variety of feelings and emotions and it is important to know how and when to express them; and
- Some children use touch to express their feelings. Teach the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touches. Give them acceptable ways to use their hands such as doodling, drawing, snapping their fingers, or clapping.

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Performance Standards

Self Concept

During the early childhood period, children in Wisconsin will show evidence of developmentally appropriate abilities in the following areas:

- B.EL. 1 – Develops positive self-esteem.
- B.EL. 2 – Demonstrates self-awareness.

TIPS

Self-Esteem

- Build positive relationships between the child and adults in the classroom;
- Provide **10 to 20** times the reassurance to highly-mobile and homeless children that you would normally provide to “housed” children to counter-balance the negative experiences of being homeless;
- Facilitate successful experiences for children; and
- Acknowledge the child’s progress, talents, and character.

Self-Awareness

- Help children become aware of the strengths they bring to situations with comments such as “It takes courage to move into a new community”; and
- Help children reflect on internal messages. For example, ask “What was your inner voice telling you when that happened?”

Positive Self-Talk

- Help children who have internalized shame about being homeless change negative internal messages into positive self-talk;
- Provide stories, songs, and puppet shows with examples of children with healthy self-esteem. Ask children what messages the characters might say to themselves; and
- Model positive self-talk with comments such as “I’ve never done this before, but I know what to do and I will be just fine.”

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Performance Standards

Social Competence

During the early childhood period, children in Wisconsin will show evidence of developmentally appropriate abilities in the following areas:

- C.EL. 1 – Demonstrates attachment, trust, and autonomy.
- C.EL. 2 – Engages in social interaction and plays with others.
- C.EL. 3 – Demonstrates understanding of rules and social expectations.
- C.EL. 4 – Engages in social problem solving behavior and learns to resolve conflict.

TIPS

Trust

- Give children time to develop a sense of trust; and
- Provide a place for personal items that children can readily access.

Friendships

- Provide a consistent relationship with one supportive adult staff member for as long as possible;
- Support the child's efforts to interact with other children; and
- Use stories, puppets, and everyday examples to help children understand what it means to be a friend and how to make new friends.

Cultural Rules and Norms

- Talk about cultural rules and expectations;
- Involve children in decisions about rules and norms;
- Use concrete examples such as charts and pictures to reinforce classroom rules; and
- Explain when and why there are "exceptions" to rules.

Conflict Resolution

- Model and discuss coping skills, appropriate times to use them, and when to ignore other people's inappropriate behavior; and
- Model and discuss the "Stop and Think!" strategy and show children how to calm themselves and think about their choices and actions.

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Language and Communication Resources

Children from highly mobile or homeless families may have been exposed to a limited vocabulary. “Simply in words heard, the average child on welfare was having half as much experience per hour (616 words per hour) as the average working-class child (1,251 words per hour), and less than one-third that of the average child in a professional family (2,153 words per hour).”³ A vocabulary “gap” may cause difficulties with academic achievement in later years.

Performance Standards

Listening with Understanding

During the early childhood period, children in Wisconsin will show evidence of developmentally appropriate abilities in the following areas:

- A.EL.1 – Derives meaning through listening to communications of others and sounds in the environment.
- A.EL.2 – Listens and responds to communications with others.
- A.EL.3 – Follows directions of increasing complexity.

TIPS

Listening

- Acknowledge a child’s ability to listen and interact with stories or conversations;
- Introduce new words in conversations at meal times and during other daily routines; and
- Model listening skills with children and parents. For example, when parents or children are talking, do not interrupt them.

Following Directions

- Invite the child to tell you the sequence involved in the routines s/he engages in such as dressing, going to bed, or getting up;
- Provide visual images to help children understand schedules, transitions, and the passage of time. (For example, post a daily schedule using pictures to show each part of a child’s day. Use a picture or toy clock to show the time for lunch, for naps, for going home);
- Begin with simple one or two step directions and increase the level of complexity over time; and
- Play games that involve following directions in sequence, such as *Simon Says*.

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Performance Standards

Speaking and Communicating

During the early childhood period, children in Wisconsin will show evidence of developmentally appropriate abilities in the following areas:

- B.EL.1 – Uses gestures and movements (*non-verbal*) to communicate.
- B.EL. 2a – Uses vocalizations and spoken language to communicate. (Language Form - *Syntax: rule system for combining words, phrases, and sentences, includes parts of speech, word order, and sentence structure.*)
- B.EL. 2b – Uses vocalizations and spoken language to communicate. (Language Content - *Semantics: rule system for establishing meaning of words, individually and in combination.*)
- B.EL. 2c – Uses vocalizations and spoken language to communicate. (Language Function - *Pragmatics: rules governing the use of language in context.*)

TIPS

Speaking and Communicating

- Invite children to use gestures or other nonverbal means to convey understanding;
- Engage the child in simple tasks that require an action or verbal response;
- Be intentional about providing time and opportunities for exploring new words and learning the meaning of words; and
- People from generational poverty may use “casual” rather than “formal” language patterns when communicating. Be aware that “formal” language may appear rude and discourage further conversation.

Dual Language Learners

- Use the child’s “home language” systematically and strategically to access background knowledge, introduce new vocabulary and concepts, and to check for understanding;
- Encourage and support the child’s acquisition of his/her “home language”;
- Read an entire story or sing an entire song in one language when reading or singing with young dual language learners;
- Provide additional supports and adaptations in order for dual language learners to access early language and literacy experiences in English; and
- Provide assessments that are culturally diverse and appropriate for dual language learners.

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Early Literacy

During the early childhood period, children in Wisconsin will show evidence of developmentally appropriate abilities in the following areas:

- C.EL. 1 – Shows an appreciation of books and understands how print works.
- C.EL. 2 – Develops alphabetic awareness.
- C.EL. 3a – Develops phonological awareness.
- C.EL. 3b – Develops phonemic awareness.
- C.EL. 4 – Demonstrates the use of strategies to read words.
- C.EL. 5 – Uses writing to represent thoughts or ideas.

TIPS

Literacy

- Provide opportunities for children to take books home and read them with their family;
- Put new letters of the alphabet and new words up on a “word wall” in the classroom;
- Point out familiar letters as well as new words when looking at books, taking walks, and riding in the car or bus;
- Provide opportunities to “play” with words and sounds using rhymes and silly songs;
- Ask a child to tell a story about a picture s/he has drawn or offer to draw a story as the child dictates it to you;
- When introducing a new word, ask the child what they know about the word. This gives the adult the opportunity to clarify misunderstandings;
- Ask the child if they have heard the word before. Clarify confusion with words that sound alike;
- Ask the child what they think the word means. Encourage the child to use contextual clues;
- Ask the child to guess about what the word might mean. Encourage the child to explore and use creative thinking and problem-solving with words; and
- Enable children to practice with a variety of writing tools. Indoors use feathers, corncobs, or form letters with string. Outdoors write with chalk or form letters in the sandbox.

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Educational Resources – Approaches to Learning

Highly mobile or homeless children may become overwhelmed with having to move frequently or live in crowded conditions and find it difficult to focus on one detail at a time. Some highly mobile children have so little involvement in fun activities that they may need encouragement to engage in play.

Performance Standards

Curiosity, Engagement, and Persistence

During the early childhood period, children in Wisconsin will show evidence of developmentally appropriate abilities in the following areas:

- A.EL. 1 – Displays curiosity, risk-taking, and willingness to engage in new experiences.
- A.EL. 2 – Engages in meaningful learning through attempting, repeating, experimenting, refining, and elaborating on experiences and activities.
- A.EL. 3 – Exhibits persistence and flexibility.

TIPS

Curiosity and Engagement

- Encourage the child’s curiosity and desire to find answers to questions rather than providing answers for them;
- Encourage and acknowledge effort as well as completion;
- Acknowledge the child’s willingness to try something new; and
- Encourage the child’s natural inclination to question and wonder without being judged for accuracy.

Persistence

- Help a child focus by identifying what s/he notices and then bring his/her attention to one single stimulus;
- Break routines and procedures into small steps;
- Encourage the child’s decision to continuously repeat a skill;
- Reinforce the child’s efforts by taking pictures of his/her progress and displaying them and talking with the child about s/he was doing; and
- Acknowledge the child’s ability to be flexible with comments such as “I see you decided to do it differently.”

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN WHO ARE HOMELESS

Performance Standards

Creativity and Imagination

During the early childhood period, children in Wisconsin will show evidence of developmentally appropriate abilities in the following areas:

- B. EL. 1 – Engages in imaginative play and inventive thinking through interactions with people, materials, and the environment.
- B. EL. 2 – Expresses self creatively through music, movement, and art.

TIPS

Imagination

- Invite the child to draw pictures or tell a story about their experiences;
- Ask the child to tell a story about a picture s/he has drawn or offer to write the story as the child dictates it to you; and
- When reading an unfamiliar story, invite the child to imagine how the story ends.

Creativity

- Ask the child to draw a picture of what they think a new word means, draw an idea, or a person they have been wondering about;
- Model using puppets to create stories and engage in imaginative play;
- Encourage the child to act out their favorite storybook;
- Provide opportunities to use a variety of materials in creative ways;
- Explore ways to make music with non-traditional instruments;
- Encourage the child to make up songs and dances or engage in karaoke with familiar tunes;
- When taking a walk, invite the child to think of different ways they can move their feet to get to the destination; and
- Acknowledge a child's expression of feelings even if they are negative. Sometimes acting out frustrations in dramatic play can be therapeutic as long as no one is hurt.

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN WHO ARE HOMELESS

Performance Standards

Diversity in Learning

During the early childhood period, children in Wisconsin will show evidence of developmentally appropriate abilities in the following areas:

- C.EL. 1 – Experiences a variety of routines, practices, and languages.
- C.EL. 2 – Learns within the context of his/her family and culture.

TIPS

Consistency and Diversity

- Maintain a regular daily schedule, being flexible to accommodate individual student needs and unpredictable situations that arise; and
- When making changes in the environment or the daily schedule, give children advance notice to help prepare them for change and give them time to adjust to changes. Role playing prior to a new routine or a special event may help children feel comfortable when the change occurs.

Culture

- Talk about how rules differ in various settings. (“Those are words we don’t use in this classroom.” “Some families have different rules about using words like that.”)
- Incorporate opportunities to learn other languages through music, stories, and interaction with people from other cultures;
- Provide opportunities for children to become familiar with a variety of family cultures;
- Take time to get to know each child’s family and their child-rearing practices; and
- Model respect for people with different customs without judging others as “better than” or “worse than.”

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN WHO ARE HOMELESS

Performance Standards

Diversity in Learning

During the early childhood period, children in Wisconsin will show evidence of developmentally appropriate abilities in the following areas:

- C.EL. 3 – Uses various styles of learning including verbal/linguistic bodily/kinesthetic, visual/spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal.

TIPS

Styles of Learning

- Be open to various ways of doing things based on the child's preferred learning style;
- Offer a variety of choices that take into consideration what you know about the child's interests and preferences;
- Encourage the child to display individuality;
- Provide access to knowledge and skills through multiple learning strategies;
- Provide instructions in a variety of formats such as verbal, written, diagrams, and modeling;
- When deciding how a task can be accomplished, encourage the child to consider a variety of approaches;
- When problem-solving include as many options for possible solutions that might meet the needs of different children; and
- Encourage the child to learn from each other and support their efforts to share their ideas and different approaches to learning.

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN WHO ARE HOMELESS

Educational Resources – Cognition and General Knowledge

Children in highly mobile situations frequently do not have access to consistent educational opportunities. Homeless children have a higher rate of delayed development and more academic problems than other children. Many repeat a grade due to frequent absence from school.² They may find it difficult to translate concrete information into abstract perceptions and may not have the expectations for achievement that middle-class children often learn.

Performance Standards

Exploration, Discovery, and Problem Solving

During the early childhood period, children in Wisconsin will show evidence of developmentally appropriate abilities in the following areas:

- A. EL. 1 – Uses multi-sensory abilities to process information.
- A. EL. 2 – Understands new meanings as memory increases.
- A. EL. 3 – Applies problem solving skills.

TIPS

Exploration

- Provide experiences that require the child to use multiple senses to explore such as cooking; and
- Help the child compare and contrast sensory experiences by going on “hunts” to find objects that feel soft or scratchy, sounds that are loud or quiet, or foods that taste sweet or salty.

Memory

- Provide visual images to help the child remember schedules and transitions. For example, post a daily schedule using pictures to show each part of the child’s day;
- Use a toy clock to show the time for lunch, naps, and going home;
- Ask the child to draw a map with pictures to show how they would get from one place to another; and
- Provide pictures to explain the rules of a game.

Problem Solving

- When talking with the child about problem situations, encourage them to think of possible solutions rather than providing answers;
- Encourage the child to “brainstorm” and think of multiple potential solutions to a problem; and
- Ask the child to reflect on which solutions worked or did not work and why.

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN WHO ARE HOMELESS

Performance Standards

Mathematical Thinking

During the early childhood period, children in Wisconsin will show evidence of developmentally appropriate abilities in the following areas:

- B. EL. 1 – Demonstrates an understanding of numbers and counting.
- B. EL. 2 – Understands number operations and relationships.
- B. EL. 3 – Explores, recognizes, and describes shapes and spatial relationships.
- B. EL. 4 – Uses the attributes of objects for comparison and patterning.
- B. EL. 5 – Understands the concept of measurement.

TIPS

Numbers

- Point out numbers in everyday objects such as calendars, clocks, and grocery receipts; and
- Use familiar materials to teach numbers such as playing cards and coins.

Spatial Relationships

- Invite the child to demonstrate shapes and spatial concepts with their bodies. Ask them to form a circle with their fingers or place a hand behind their back;
- During snack talk about the shape of the foods;
- Play “I Spy A Shape”; and
- Hide objects in the room and give clues using words such as “It is under something.”

Patterns

- Teach patterning with weaving, clapping in rhythm, lining up (boy, girl, boy, girl);
- Ask the child to tell you the sequence involved in the routines s/he engages in such as dressing, going to bed, or getting up; and
- Use multiple photos of the child's daily routines and have the child select pictures and put them in order of what will happen in a day.

Measurement

- Encourage the child to measure with non-traditional tools such as string or straws; and
- Provide a food scale and weigh foods being served for meal time.

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN WHO ARE HOMELESS

Performance Standards

Mathematical Thinking (continued)

- B. EL. 6 – Collects, describes, and records information using all senses.

Scientific Thinking

During the early childhood period, children in Wisconsin will show evidence of developmentally appropriate abilities in the following areas:

- C. EL. 1 – Uses observation to gather information.
- C. EL. 2 – Use tools to gather information, compare observed objects, and seek answers to questions through active investigation.
- C. EL. 3 – Hypothesizes and makes predictions.
- C. EL. 4 – Forms explanations based on trial and error, observations, and explorations.

TIPS

Collecting, Describing, and Recording Information

- Provide a scale and growth chart and encourage children to track their height and weight over time; and
- Collect a variety of natural objects such as seeds, nuts, or leaves, and ask children to list the size, color, texture, etc.

Observation

- Invite the child to describe what they saw on their way home; and
- Change something in the room and ask the child to guess what's new.

Investigation

- Provide a variety of simple tools such as measuring spoons, binoculars, and magnifying glasses to encourage exploration; and
- Show the child how to find answers to questions rather than providing answers.

Predicting

- When reading a story for the first time, invite the child to guess how it will end; and
- Before serving a new food, ask the child to predict how it might taste.

Conclusions

- Provide opportunities to try different strategies without being “right” or “wrong”; and
- Let the child know making mistakes is a way to learn.

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN WHO ARE HOMELESS

CLOSING COMMENTS

As the numbers of families experiencing homelessness and/or becoming highly mobile increase, so must our response to support the children affected by these socio-economic situations. This document identifies many resources that may be useful. Collaboration between schools, early care and education professionals, community services, and agencies is an effective way to provide the support families need. By working together we may be able to help them overcome the challenges and barriers they face and give their children the opportunity to succeed.

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