



Homelessness

In Ireland today, there are babies, toddlers and young children growing up in households impacted by poverty, addiction, neighbourhood violence, discrimination, mental health problems, homelessness and domestic violence, and some children are being subjected to chronic neglect and/or abuse. Working in Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings, we have seen first-hand the devastating impact that traumatic experiences such as these can have on the lives of the youngest and most vulnerable people in our society. For many children, the impact of adverse experiences will negatively affect their wellbeing and development, leading to poor outcomes, and social, emotional and physical issues over the course of their lives.

As early years educators, we can play a critical role in supporting children and families by promoting a safe, supportive environment and providing stable, caring relationships in those critical first years of life. Through our intimate relationships with young children and their families we have the opportunity to make a real, positive difference.

This resource, which is one in a series looking at how ELC settings can support children experiencing adversity, focuses on children experiencing homelessness. It explores how homelessness can impact children, and how, as early years educators, in partnership with families and other agencies, we can support children and their families experiencing homelessness.

What is Homelessness?

There are many different living situations that amount to forms of homelessness. The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA, 2017) developed a definition that identifies four main categories of living situation. They are:

1. Rooflessness (sleeping rough)
2. Houselessness (with a place to sleep but temporary in institutions or shelters)
3. Living in insecure housing (no legal tenancy, under threat of violence, under threat of eviction, temporarily with family/friends)
4. Living in inadequate housing (in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding)

In Ireland in January 2024, the Peter McVerry Trust reported that there were over 13,000 people accessing emergency accommodation, including over 4,000 children. There are many, many more families in Ireland who are the 'hidden homeless'. This might be families living with extended family or friends in temporary situations, for example, with no legal right to stay there. Many are in very stressful circumstances, where there is overcrowding, for example, or in situations where the family has to sleep in separate locations, such as children staying with a grandparent and their parent staying with a friend.

When we think of our own homes we likely think about it not just as a physical shelter but also as a sanctuary and a safe space, a refuge from whatever else is going on in the outside world. For families living in any of the situations described above there will be feelings of insecurity, which causes stress, while the temporary nature of many of these situations may also bring about feelings of anxiety. Some families may be feeling forced to stay in situations that are dangerous to them and their children, for example, living in a home where there is violence, addiction and /or mental health problems.



What Leads to Homelessness?

Homelessness is an experience that can impact children and families at various points in their lives, rather than a fixed occurrence. Multiple factors can lead to families experiencing homelessness and these can generally be described as structural, institutional, and personal causes (Peter McVerry Trust, 2024). Some people living in the family home, for example, might become homeless when they themselves first become parents, with their baby's first home being homeless accommodation. For others, homelessness may come about due to a combination of factors, including:

- Lack of social and affordable housing, over reliance on private rental market
- Poverty, often caused by low-wage employment, unemployment
- Health challenges, including mental health and addiction
- Domestic violence and other traumatic events
- Leaving state care
- The break-up of a family, relationship breakdown, death of a family member
- Discrimination
- Issues related to immigration



Given the scale of homelessness in Ireland, some families will have to face the challenge of finding a place to stay on a weekly or even a daily basis.

For too many young children living in Ireland, homelessness continues to be a day-to-day reality of life, and it is generally not a situation that is quickly and easily resolved. Finding a sustainable housing solution for children and their families is the most important consideration to reduce the stress of homelessness.

The longer a child is homeless and living in poor and unsuitable accommodation, the more significant negative impact it has on their future wellbeing and development.

The Impacts of Homelessness on Young Children

Babies, toddlers and preschoolers who experience homelessness have an increased risk to their physical health, development and wellbeing (Fanning, 2021). In 2019, The Ombudsman for Children's Office explored the difficulties experienced by children living in a family hub. The parents of children under 5 years of age identified many challenges including:

- Lack of space, leading to concerns about children's physical development and room to play safely
- Noise levels as families live in close proximity with each other, leading to problems, especially at sleep times
- Tensions between residents, leaving parents stressed trying to shield their children from being exposed to arguments, fighting and inappropriate behaviours including alcohol and drug use
- Parenting challenges, such as maintaining routines for children, the lack of family support, involvement of Hub staff and infection control of childhood illnesses
- Detrimental effects on children's development, with parents describing attachment, development and behavioural issues

Additional challenges for children and families experiencing homelessness may include:

- Stress leading up to the situation and feelings of insecurity
- Poor parental mental health, low self esteem and even feelings of shame
- A lack of agency, especially for those living in emergency accommodation
- Decrease in parent's capacity to respond sensitively to their child's emotional and behavioural needs due to feelings of tension and stress
- Children separated from a parent at night experiencing separation anxiety
- Lack of storage space for books and resources that contribute to a quality home learning environment and reduced access to personal belongings with many possessions lost forever
- Lack of access to outdoor space and natural environments
- Lack of cooking facilities for parents to make nutritious meals, expense of buying pre-prepared food
- Lack of privacy, meaning children are exposed to adult conversations
- Family routines being severely disrupted
- Children experiencing multiple transitions as a result of moving
- Disrupted access to healthcare (e.g. family GP may be miles away from where family currently reside)
- Families having to rehome loved family pets



Additional Risk Factors

Most children and families who experience homelessness aren't just without appropriate housing. The stress associated with homelessness can exacerbate other trauma-related difficulties and adversities including domestic violence, poverty, addiction, physical or mental health problems and discrimination. This means that children and their families may need a range of supports to meet their individual needs.



Families who are homeless tend to move around a lot, especially those who are required to self-accommodate. This can impact on their ability to access services for themselves and their child, for example, they might not receive notification of appointments and as a result their child misses out on a long awaited assessment.

Childhood Trauma and Adversity

While the experience of homelessness will be traumatic for most people, this is particularly the case for young children.

Childhood trauma can be defined as, 'An actual or perceived danger that undermines a child's sense of physical or emotional safety or poses a threat to the safety of the child's parents or caregivers, overwhelms their coping ability, and impacts their functioning and development' (Nicholson et al, 2018, p.viii).

Children who experience strong, frequent and/or prolonged adversity without adequate adult support are vulnerable to what is called toxic stress (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). Toxic stress experienced early in childhood takes a toll on a person's physical and mental health, and can seriously impact children across a range of different developmental domains (Byrne, 2022). This has lasting adverse effects on wellbeing, and increases the likelihood of physical, psychological and behavioural problems later in life (Felitti et al., 1998).

When children have the consistent caring support of at least one parent or caregiver who responds appropriately to their needs and acts as a buffer against stress, however, they are more likely to recover from frightening experiences and any potential lasting impacts on their health, wellbeing and life opportunities from the damaging effects of stress will be lessened.

Behaviour We Might See in a Child Experiencing Trauma

When young children experience traumatic events such as homelessness, they do not always have the words to talk about what has happened to them or how they feel, instead communicating their distress through their behaviour. Children experiencing toxic stress have a stress response system that is set to high alert, leaving them overly sensitive to triggers or trauma reminders. This means that they can experience the world as inherently dangerous, even in safe situations. Children might present in a constant state of hyperarousal (fight or flight) or hypoarousal (withdrawal or shut-down).

Behaviours that might be observed in traumatised young children include (NCTSN, 2008):

- Separation anxiety or clinginess towards educators or primary caregivers
- Regression in previously mastered stages of development (e.g., baby talk or toileting accidents)
- Re-creating the traumatic event or situation (e.g., repeatedly talking about, 'playing' out, or drawing the event)
- Difficulty at naptime (e.g., avoiding sleep, waking up, or nightmares)
- Increased somatic complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach aches)
- Changes in behaviour (e.g., appetite, angry outbursts, decreased attention, withdrawal)
- Over- or under-reacting to physical contact, bright lights, sudden movements, or loud sounds
- Increased distress (crying, unusually whiny, irritable)
- Anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others
- Worry about recurrence of the traumatic event
- New fears (e.g., fear of the dark or monsters)
- Statements and questions about death and dying

Supporting Children who have Experiences of Homelessness

Provide security and reassurance

For all young children, their family circumstances will have a huge influence on their experiences of relationships. Understandably, many parents experiencing homelessness may be more focused on meeting their children's physiological needs such as securing food and shelter than their relationship needs. Relationships are the most important influence on a child's psychological wellbeing. When babies, toddlers and young children have a primary



caregiver who is exposed to the high levels of stress that homelessness can bring, it can impact on that caregiver's ability to be consistently attuned, sensitive and responsive in their interactions with their child. This in turn can negatively impact on their child's attachment and can be devastating to a young child's foundational experience of safety and security.

One of the most important factors in mitigating the impact of trauma in children is having a positive and secure attachment with at least one caring adult. As early years educators, we can offer children the opportunity to form secondary attachments that promote children's social and emotional wellbeing. Stay close to the child and connect with them often throughout the day. This will help reassure children that they are safe. When we give children the message 'I see you, I hear you, you are important', this creates a sense of security.

Children need to know that we are committed to them and will be with them and take care of them during their time in the setting.

Encourage children to talk

Sometimes adults, with the best of intentions, will avoid talking with young children about difficult situations like homelessness, fearing it will upset them. Not talking about what has occurred, however, can make the experience more confusing for children as they may feel that it is too bad to talk about or they may use their imagination to try and fill in the missing information on the circumstances of their living arrangements.

By openly talking with children, we create a supportive environment where the child feels safe to express their feelings and concerns, and this will help them to cope and make sense of their experiences.



Speak sensitively to the child's parents to find out what the child already knows about their housing situation. Acknowledge how difficult it must be for them and share with them how children often need help to make sense of what is happening in their lives in a way that is appropriate to their level of understanding.

Children will process as much information as they can – it is important that they can return and ask for more information when they are ready or are feeling confused. Children might ask for explanations about why they had to leave their home, how long they will be staying in the new place and other questions that might be difficult to answer. They may ask the same questions over and over again.

Provide familiarity and routine

Early Learning and Care settings are important places to foster a sense of safety and security for children. Experiences of homelessness result in multiple disruptions for children, the loss of their home, possessions, community, privacy, and daily routines. As outlined earlier, children's experiences of homelessness have a detrimental impact on the ability of families to conduct normal family life. The familiarity and routine of attending their ELC setting can provide much needed stability to children.

Homelessness can change the way a child sees the world, making it seem a scary and dangerous place. Maintaining consistent and predictable daily routines within the setting that children experience as familiar and dependable helps to provide a sense of security and safety.

Families experiencing homelessness can lack access to high quality nutritious food due to issues such as no access to kitchen facilities, severely limiting their ability to prepare, cook and store food. They may not be able to sit around a table together to eat a meal. In the setting, provide meals and snacks that are high in nutrients and provide children with family style dining experiences where children and adults sit together. Include children in the preparation of healthy food.

Co-regulate with the child

*When little people are overwhelmed by big emotions,
it's our job to share our calm, not join their chaos.* – L.R. Knost

When children are feeling stressed or anxious, they may struggle to manage the intensity and duration of their emotions, resulting in them becoming easily overwhelmed and dysregulated. They may struggle to self-regulate, not only on an emotional level but also on a physiological level. Traumatized children may have 'triggers' that remind them of traumatic events they have experienced, such as loud noises, transition times, certain smells and separation from caregivers etc. These can result in a range of different feelings, thoughts and behaviours in children, and they will need our help to stay calm and regulated. It is helpful to identify these triggers and, where possible, to avoid them. In cases where triggering events can't be avoided, such as arrival times, it will be helpful to create a plan to support the child to feel safe during these times.

Through the relationship we have with children, we engage in a process called co-regulation, which means that we organise their feelings, offer them strategies to help them manage their big emotions and behaviours, and support them to feel calm and regulated. When children are feeling calm and regulated, encourage them to practise some coping skills such as taking deep breaths, engaging in sensory activities, snuggling a soft toy or asking for a hug, and help them to use these strategies during their times of stress. We should aim to stay close to children who become easily dysregulated so we can notice quickly if they are becoming dysregulated and respond appropriately, supporting them to stay calm.

Through co-regulation, children learn that it is ok to have big feelings and that we will be there to comfort and soothe their emotional distress.



Provide for play

Play can help children cope by providing a medium where they can work through their thoughts, experiences and feelings and help them make sense of their experiences (Byrne, 2022).

Babies, toddlers and preschool children experiencing homelessness may be living in cramped, confined spaces which lack adequate space to play, in particular restricting their opportunities for exploration and movement (e.g. tummy time, crawling, running). Ensure children have ample opportunities to move freely indoors and outdoors in an environment that encourages and promotes children's physical development. Spend plenty of time outside as outdoor play offers children many opportunities to regulate through gross motor movements like running, swinging, climbing and hanging from monkey bars. This is particularly important for those children whose living situation means they may have limited outdoor space to develop their gross motor skills.

Provide ample opportunities for children to play and stay close by to watch out for signs of distress and to offer support when needed. Consider what activities the child enjoys engaging with, those activities that you notice foster positive emotions in the child such as joy, interest, happiness and humour and plan around these.

Ensure children are supported to make decisions about what activity they would like to do so they know their views are important and their decisions are respected.

Think about the environment

The physical environment can make a big difference to how children feel in a space. It can help children feel safe and welcome or it can have the opposite effect and trigger feelings of anxiety, fear and danger.

- Provide a low arousal environment, considering the number of people in the room, lighting, noise, tone of voice etc. Children living in emergency accommodation, who may be exposed to tensions or fighting between other residents, may be easily frightened by loud noises, by strangers coming into the setting, by loud voices or when other children are fighting.
- Provide natural spaces in the environment as being around nature improves wellbeing and helps children to feel calmer.
- Create calm, cosy spaces where children can go to take a break away when they are feeling stressed or overwhelmed or are not able to focus on activities or listen to others.
- Include objects that support regulation such as cushions, blankets, soft toys, mind jars and sensory materials.



- Ensure children have ongoing access to a wide range of activities and materials that they find calming and regulating such as art, music, storytelling and books.
- Provide materials that support imaginative play such as open-ended materials and toys like blocks and wooden dolls, which children can use to express what they need. The more open-ended their toys are, the more opportunities children will have to play out and talk through their thoughts, fears and concerns.
- Some children will benefit from engaging with materials that encourage them to take on caring roles with a doll or other child as this will activate good feelings about themselves. Offer children opportunities to experience being nurturing.

Offer choice and control

Experiences of homelessness can cause children to feel like they have little or no control over their lives. To help children to develop a sense of agency in their lives, provide them with many opportunities to exercise choice and control throughout the day.

Adopt a strengths-based approach

Adopt a strengths-based approach, which believes in the ability of children to overcome adversities such as homelessness. Make time to share good news and talk about positive stories from children and families' lives, such as family outings and acts of kindness.

Supporting Families

Families experiencing homelessness are likely to face challenges that increase the levels of parenting stress and have a negative impact on their family wellbeing. We know that a child's relationship with their parents or primary caregivers is their most significant and that this relationship greatly influences a child's psychological wellbeing. We also know that when parents are stressed, this impacts on their parenting behaviours.

In ELC settings, we need to consider ways to appropriately support families in their role. Parents/caregivers may be uncomfortable discussing private matters, including their housing situation. They may feel ashamed or embarrassed and they may worry about being judged. Parents may be left feeling powerless with limited control over their lives. For this reason, it is especially important that we work in partnership with parents in a consistent, respectful and strengths-based way and let parents know we see them as the experts on their children. Some parents may be in 'survival mode' and become easily overwhelmed, irritated, or withdrawn, and our understanding and compassion will be key to building a supportive relationship.

Parents under stress might interpret their child's behaviour as 'bold' or 'difficult'. Share with families that these behaviours are normal responses to the disruption they are experiencing due to their living situation. Work in partnership with parents and offer support on how to respond to their child in a sensitive and attuned way.

Families may already be attending the setting when they unexpectedly experience housing instability or homelessness. If you have an established trusting relationship with families, they may be more likely to share this information with you.

- Use respectful and sensitive language when asking families about their living situation. Talk to parents in quiet, private spaces. Don't use the word 'homeless' but more neutral language like 'temporary living situation'. Avoid asking unnecessary questions.
- Prioritise available places in your setting for children experiencing homelessness. Families experiencing homelessness can find it more difficult to access ELC and often relocate before they reach the top of a waiting list.
- Ask the child's parents to share with you how homelessness is explained to their child.
- Parents may find it difficult to provide basic items like nappies, change of clothes etc. so have spare supplies available.
- Offer practical support where possible such as access to a washing machine and dryer, cooking facilities, flexible hours, transportation.
- Work in partnership with parents/caregivers to agree a plan to support their child. It might be more difficult for parents to support their child's development in areas such as toilet training. Listen to parents' goals for their child and any concerns they may have. Check in regularly to share queries, observations and positive feedback.
- Document children's experiences in the setting with photos of them at play, records of their interests and learning stories, and reflect on them often with children and their parents/caregivers. These will provide concrete evidence of how children are adapting.
- Share ideas on how parents could promote children's wellbeing and development in their accommodation, while being mindful of likely constraints such as space and noise. Emphasise the importance of positive interactions and connections.
- Connect with health and wellbeing services in the community that can promote healthy environments for children such as food assistance programmes, play experiences, and cooking facilities.
- Understand that families may have to move at short notice and offer supports to help children with transitions, for example, linking them with potential new ELC setting.
- Advocate for a housing approach that is guided by the best interests of children and families.



Our Own Wellbeing

As early years educators, we play a critical and ongoing role for children and families to buffer the impact of trauma and support the child and their family to recover and thrive. Our ability to respond appropriately to children experiencing homelessness requires presence, sensitivity and empathy, and it can be easy to become tired, stressed and overwhelmed ourselves at times.

There is a cost to caring and any professional who works with traumatised children is vulnerable to the effects of trauma (Figley, 1995). We will not be able to support children's emotional wellbeing if our own emotional needs are not being met. It is important that we recognise signs that we are becoming stressed in our work and seek support from colleagues and from the management in our setting. We can also actively engage in the self-care practices we find restorative, whether than be yoga, creative activities or spending time with supportive people and access professional supports should they be needed.

All early years educators will benefit from accessing information, guidance and mentoring support to help us in our role supporting children.

When a family experiences homelessness they feel overwhelmed and this can have serious consequences on their child's physical and psychological wellbeing. Without adequate supports, these effects can be lasting. While most children who experience homelessness do not go on to develop traumatic stress, it is important those who do are identified and access specialist supports. If you are concerned that a child is delayed developmentally and/or is displaying signs of traumatic stress and these symptoms are persisting, this child will benefit from professional support. Discuss this with the child's parents and advise parents to access professional supports for their child and for themselves if needed.

References

- Byrne, S. (2022). *Trauma and Young Children: Building trauma awareness in early learning and care*. Dublin: Barnardos.
- Center on the Developing Child. (2007). *The Impact of Early Adversity on Child Development* (InBrief). www.developingchild.harvard.edu.
- European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless. (2017). European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion. ethos2484215748748239888.pdf (feantsa.org)
- Fanning, K. (2021). *What about the babies? A critical review of infants' and toddlers' absence in homelessness scholarship*. *Infant Behaviour and Development*, 64, 1–12.
- Felitti, V.J., Anda, R.F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D.F., Spitz, A.M., Edwards, V., Koss, M.P., Marks, J.S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14 (4), 245–258. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797\(98\)00017-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8)
- Figley, C. R. (Ed.). (1995). *Compassion fatigue: Coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder in those who treat the traumatized*. New York: Routledge.
- Nicholson, J., Perez, L. & Kurtz, J. (2018). *Trauma-informed practices for early childhood educators: Relationship-based approaches that support healing and build resilience in young children*. Routledge.
- Ombudsman for Children's Office. (2019). *No Place like Home: Children's views and experiences of living in Family Hubs*.
- Peter McVerry Trust. (2024.) *Causes of Homelessness*. Causes of Homelessness - Homelessness in Ireland
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN). (2008). *Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators*. [CTT inside cover.indd\(nctsn.org\)](http://CTTinsidecover.indd(nctsn.org))

Further Supports

ELC settings play a critical role in identifying and supporting families who are experiencing homelessness and in connecting those families to services in the community. Working in partnership with other professionals and agencies is key to ensuring children and their families get the right supports when they need them. Identify the homelessness and family support services available in your local area and build working relationships with these services so that you can call on them when you need them.

Click on the links below for information.

Homelessness supports

If families find themselves homeless or think they may lose their home, they should generally contact their [local authority](#) to access accommodation.

[DePaul Ireland](#)

[Focus Ireland](#)

[Peter McVerry Trust](#)

[Simon Communities of Ireland](#)

[Threshold](#)

Other supports

[The Key Person Approach: Positive Relationships with Children in the Early Years](#)

[Creative Mindfulness](#)

[Mindfulness in Early Learning and Care](#)

[How Relationships Impact on Children's Behaviour in Early Learning and Care](#)

[Staff Wellbeing in Early Learning and Care](#)

[Trauma and Young Children: Building Trauma Awareness in Early Learning and Care](#)

T: 01 453 0355

E: resources@barnardos.ie

W: www.barnardos.ie

For regular updates [join us on Facebook](#)

Registered Charity No: CHY 6015 / RCN 20010027

© Barnardos 2024