



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

Talking to children about homelessness

Definitions

We know that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' includes the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child. We also appreciate that every child is unique and has different strengths, vulnerabilities and experiences that shape their health and development.

Money, housing and health

This fact sheet is part of a series we created with families who've been through homelessness to give you new ideas for how to get through as a family – and spark some hope.

We know that every parent, young person and child who experiences homelessness is responding to their situation in – often unseen – creative ways, using knowledge and skill to survive, get through, and hold onto dignity and care.

When we are homeless with our children, we have to make thousands of difficult decisions every day, and one of these is how to talk to them about what we are experiencing and why.

The following sections show how the differences in the way we talk can affect children.

Helpful ways of talking about homelessness can support children to:

- make sense of what they are going through
- strengthen trust and relationships
- understand that it's OK to talk about it
- acknowledge feelings and reduce worries and concerns
- reduce feelings of stigma and isolation
- feel hopeful when you explain the actions you are taking
- ask questions and get the correct information; and
- keep safe.

Unhelpful ways of talking about homelessness might make children:

- think it's somehow their fault
- think that it's their responsibility to fix it
- feel like they are a burden on the family because they cost too much money
- feel worried or anxious
- feel shame or embarrassment; or
- feel hopeless about their situation.

Sometimes it may not be possible for us to have the conversations with children that will help them make meaning of homelessness. Especially after experiences of trauma or when everyone is just too overwhelmed or stressed to be able to do anything more than put one foot in front of the other. If we are also living with neurodiversity, disability or [experiencing racism](#), we might be experiencing many challenges, all at once.

But even in tough times, we can find ways of connecting without words and showing up for each other. And when we can use a little extra support, sometimes reaching out to [mental health crisis and counselling services](#) can help parents navigate these challenges.

'It takes energy, but I look at the info provided on services websites, and look at what's not mentioned as well, and think about if what they offer is what we need. I also pay careful attention to the cost. And I talk to trusted people I know, find out if anyone else has tried the service and what their experience was. Then I weigh up if reaching out to this service might be worth my time and energy, or if it's better to focus on something else. When you're in despair, you just have such a low threshold for bad news.'

Take a moment to think about...



- How do you decide if a service might be worth reaching out to?
- What kinds of things do you consider? Is there anyone who can help you?
- How do you prepare yourself for hearing from a service representative that they can't help your family in the way you need?



It is all confusing as a kid, nothing anyone says makes it really OK. Just being with my family was helpful, and Mum telling me it would not be forever, and that lots of other people are going through the same thing, was the only thing that was OK. And that I was loved.

LIAM, 11 YEARS OLD, NGARRINDJERI COUNTRY, REFLECTING ON BEING HOMELESS AT AGE 9

Podcast: How to talk to your children about experiencing family homelessness

In this Emerging Minds Families podcast episode, we interview homeless workers Susie Lukis and Savannah West from Statewide Children's Resource Program to get an understanding of how living without a home impacts babies, children and young people.

Susie and Sav share some tips for parents on [how to talk to children of different ages about homelessness](#). They also chat about the needs of neurodivergent children, children with disabilities, families who experience racism, and how this can add to the load of people in an already tough situation.

How we talked to our children about homelessness

We asked two single parents, Emi and Kirsty, about how their families supported each other while experiencing homeless – here's what they told us...

Kirsty

Kirsty describes herself as a single, white, female, middle-aged, casually employed parent of four.

Talk about what is happening

'The conversation started when my kids started to see me stressed. They're pretty tuned in when I'm stressed or worried about something. They started asking a lot of questions before we became homeless. And as the time drew closer [to losing our accommodation], I talked them through it. Obviously I kept it quite positive with them: "We're just gonna stay with a friend for a couple of weeks and mum's gonna keep looking for a house."

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Parents should be honest and open about it, and answer any questions kids have; and stay calm and positive. Talk to them about the positives in their lives so they know it's not all bad. Let them talk about their feelings often, and offer helpful strategies.

SOPHIE AND MATILDA, SISTERS, 13 AND 14 YEARS OLD, NGARRINDJERI COUNTRY, REFLECTING ON BEING HOMELESS AT AGES 10 AND 11

Holding 'team meetings'

'[When we became homeless] I was very open with them. They're all quite inquisitive children, so there was a lot of questions that I had to answer and I found it quite exhausting. We'd have little team meetings so that I could talk to everybody and we wouldn't dwell so much on things. Like: "We're gonna talk about what's happening today and where things are at; and what Mum's doing to try to get us a house; and different things that we might have to consider, like moving out of the area and starting new schools." We kind of made

those decisions together. There was some tough decisions, like moving away, which wasn't really what the kids wanted, but it was something we had to do to be housed, so I had to make that really hard decision. But I think it was a journey together.'

Knowing we can do hard things and taking it day by day

'I always brought it back to we'd been through difficult things. I've always got through to the other side and there was always a positive outcome at the end of it all. And if I could do that again, then I just had to take it day by day. I started to really focus on taking care of myself through it; making sure I got a walk in and the kids got exercise, being in nature and connecting in with some normality of our lives. We didn't have a house to go home to every night, but we did have our friends and we did have people that loved us around us.'

Teaching children about the world they live in

'I started to teach the kids about recognising the world that they live in is not always an easy one. I started to teach them to be compassionate for others. I used it [homelessness] as a learning experience for them to lessen the blow on themselves: "We are not the only people that are doing this. There's other families." My kids will reach out to anybody that is on the street now if they can see or recognise homelessness, which they do. They have a little radar; they'll say, "Mum, that person – it's raining and they're trying to get some sleep", and "Can we give them something to make sure that they're warm?" I've taught them that we are housed now – we're safe and secure – but there's still people out there that are dealing with this.'

Supporting one another with care and fun

'There'd be a lot of supporting one another. If somebody got upset and someone else was OK, they would comfort that person. We'd often all end up sleeping in the same bed. I don't know how, but they would all squish in there. We'd have movie nights in the motel. We did try to make fun out of the situation. They would tell ghost stories in the house that we squatted in – it had no electricity so I got fairy lights from Bunnings cause there was no lights at night and it was an old house, kind of cold and spooky.'

'We would still have family meals together. There was a lot of togetherness that happened during that period of time. And I think we grew closer as a family because they started to say things like, "We're OK because we have each other and that's the most important thing." Now if we come across a little hurdle, everybody kind of rallies in and they're like, "You know, we got through that. We got through that together and we can do anything together."

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Make your kids aware that, yes they are experiencing homelessness, but don't focus just on being homeless – keep them living their lives doing fun things and focus on the good things around them, like the people you love and that are there for you; the things you love to do. Distract from what's happening so you're not consumed by it. The good things in life will get you through it. It happens to lots of other families, and it might be for a while, but it's usually not forever.

SOPHIE AND MATILDA, SISTERS, 13 AND 14 YEARS OLD, NGARRINDJERI COUNTRY, REFLECTING ON BEING HOMELESS AT AGES 10 AND 11

Emi

Emi describes themselves as a white (not born in Australia), single, gender non-conforming parent of four. They have a disability which is sometimes visible, sometimes not.

Having functional conversations

Please note: This reflection contains references to domestic violence. If reading about this brings up any difficult feelings for you, please skip ahead to the following story [Turning bad experiences into a family 'inside joke'](#). And if you need, seek help from your networks, or [one of these crisis or support services](#).

Sometimes conversations need to be practical and about routines and what to expect...

'At the start we didn't have any kind of reflection conversations. This experience of homelessness came about from an incredibly, incredibly violent episode. I was really so deep in trauma that I was a hairs breath away from just falling apart in general.

'I wasn't able to really function and have a lot of capacity for that kind of more complex thinking. It was more, "This is happening today..." or "This is what we're doing" or "We're going here to do this..." or "Next week we've got an appointment about this..." Functional conversations. School was just out of the picture and we never had any money. Our lives were structured around appointments with services, going to food places, etc. I wasn't in the state to be able to reflect and they [the children] wouldn't have been in the state to be able to reflect.'

Turning bad experiences into a family 'inside joke'

'I remember once, we were getting on a bus going from one refuge to the next – which was a 10-hour bus trip – and one of my kids at the time who was going through a lot of trauma responses wouldn't wear shoes. I believe that was the way that they grounded themselves. The bus driver wouldn't let them get on the bus without shoes. He started to talk to my child and say, "Put your shoes on, blah, blah, blah." And they got really upset and angry about that.

'I got really angry at the bus driver. I'd lost so much, including myself, but I thought, "F***, I'm still a parent. How dare he tell me how to raise my child, and then tell my child to the things that he thinks that I should be saying that I'm not?!" Then I tried to have a conversation with the kids that it was unreasonable for the bus driver to say this. That was the one and only time I tried to frame things in a wider context with them 'cause they just weren't able to do it. So even though I was quite impaired, I was still able to pull things together and do meaning making of this really upsetting situation. We actually ended up making a whole joke about it later on, a whole story that turned into something funny for the family.'



ELLA, 15 YEARS OLD

Take a moment to think about...



- What stood out to you from reading Emi and Kirsty's stories?
- What would you guess were the values guiding the choices of Emi, Kirsty and their children in these stories?
- How does your family talk about being homeless?
 - Do you talk about it all the time or just sometimes?
 - Do you avoid talking about it, but maybe it comes up in stressful times?
 - What might be the most useful approach for your family?
- When you do talk about homelessness, what is said?
 - What kinds of things do you consider when talking to your children about it?
 - What meaning do you think children are making from these conversations about homelessness?
 - How can conversations with children about being homeless help them have positive beliefs about themselves?

Some useful guides

Reading books together can be a great way to open the door to conversations about tough topics with your children. You could start with the tale of six-year-old Charlie and his mother, who suddenly find themselves homeless, and how they find their way home in [Charlie's story](#).

Once you have read the ideas and stories in this resource, you might like to check out the following age-appropriate guides on planning and having conversations with children.

- [Communicating with your baby during tough times](#)
- [Communicating with your toddler during tough times](#)
- [Communicating with your primary school-age child during tough times](#)
- [Communicating with your teenager during tough times](#)

Another way for our children to talk about homelessness

Being homeless can be tough on children, and tough to talk about. [Contacting Kids Helpline](#) might be a way they can [talk to someone outside the family about being homeless](#) if they want to.

Any family experiencing homelessness is *always responding* and working hard to reclaim safety, agency and dignity. Read more about families' experiences and what's helped them get through in the following fact sheets.

- [Tips for families experiencing homelessness](#)
- [Myths and misunderstandings about family homelessness](#)

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View all Money, housing and health resources



Are you a practitioner wanting to share this resource with a person or family?
[First check out our practitioner guide.](#)

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