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Background: Children Who Are Homeless

by

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The issue of homelessness is one of great concern. When many people think of homelessness they think of an adult living on the street begging for money to survive. However, the startling fact is that many homeless individuals are children. All of them are trying to live day to day and also attend school, where they face new challenges.

According to the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAENCY), half the states saw a 50% increase in homeless students in the 2006-2007 and 2008-2009 school years (Holgersson-Shorter, 2010). By federal definition, the term “homeless child and youth”, includes minors living in shelters with or without family; doubling up with friends or extended family; settling into motels, campgrounds, or trailer parks; or using vehicles for overnight shelter (Holgersson-Shorter, 2010). With the passage of the “No Child Left Behind” Act in 2001, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act was reauthorized; this federal law “entitles homeless children to a free and appropriate public education and requires schools to eliminate barriers to their enrollment, attendance, and success in school” (Berliner, 2002, p. 1).

Children who are homeless encounter feelings of isolation, inadequacy, and fear of being ridiculed by peers. They may be taunted or ostracized for their unclean appearance, may fall asleep frequently in class because they do not feel safe where they are currently living, and frequent moving causing gaps in their education (Gibbs, 2004). Children may also be withdrawn or disruptive in the classroom as a reaction to their uncertain family situations (Holgersson-Shorter, 2010). According to the National Care for the Homeless Council’s publication, *Healing Hands*, children who are homeless experience a loss of stability and safety, fractured families, hunger, overcrowded living conditions, disrupted education resulting from multiple moves,

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increased exposure to disease, violence, substance abuse, and mental illness such as low self-esteem, behavior disorders, and depression (2000). Teachers and schools are extremely important in providing resources to children who are homeless.

According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals, there are several steps schools can take to ease the effects on children who are homeless:

- Getting help from people who work directly with the families such as shelter directors, McKinney-Vento district liaisons, and Title I staff,
- Easing enrollment policies and procedures for children whose families rarely have or can afford all of the necessary documents for school enrollment,
- Making attendance a priority by providing homeless students with the basic needs such as food, a place to sleep if needed, and a laundry and shower facility to make their routine more manageable, and
- Teachers must focus on student learning and adjust their homework policy and classroom management to reflect the distinct circumstances of educating a child who is homeless (Berliner, 2002).

With the growing number of foreclosures and rising unemployment many more families may be facing a loss of their home and belongings. Along with this come the children who will find themselves in a situation they might never have dreamed of. As educators and professionals it is our duty to help these children inside and outside of the classroom to meet their social, emotional, and educational needs.

References

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