

How to Explain Homelessness to Children—An Expert Weighs In

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Homelessness is an extreme issue in our country. Oftentimes we are so desensitized, because of its prevalence in our society that we don't talk to our children about it in a thoughtful way. And in order to raise empathetic humans, teaching them to see the world around them, those who are different from them with different circumstances, and having respect for others no matter where they come from is important.



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According to the January 2022 Point in Time (PIT) Count, in America, 582,462 people were experiencing homelessness. 72% are chronically homeless individuals or people with disabilities who have experienced long-term or repeated incidents of homelessness, 6% are veterans, 5% are unaccompanied youth under 25.

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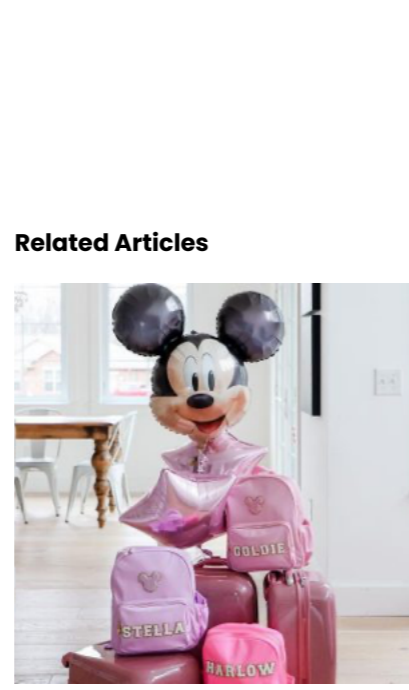
If 18 out of 10,000 people are homeless, then we see people who are homeless way more than we register in our minds. And that means our children do as well. So having a conversation with them is imperative to grow their understanding of the concept of unhoused people with empathy.

Whether you bring this conversation up to them when you see a person experiencing homelessness or they ask you about it, the language should be intentional and honest, in addition to checking your own bias. We've spoken to Dr. Amy Mezulis, Co-Founder and Chief Clinical Officer of Joon, on ways to address homelessness with children.

MEET THE EXPERT

Dr. Amy Mezulis
COFOUNDER AND CHIEF CLINICAL OFFICER OF JOON

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How To Explain Homelessness to Children

- Dr. Mezulis shared that these conversations typically have several parts:
- Explaining or defining what it means to be homeless
 - Explaining, in terms they can understand, why someone may be homeless
 - Helping them tolerate what a complex problem homelessness is to solve, and identifying ways to help those in need.

Below are her recommendations for language or phrases you can use to explain the complex issue of homelessness to children.

Explaining what homelessness is

Why is that person sleeping on the sidewalk/asking for money/pushing their belongings in a cart?

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Children may ask you in many ways to explain to them what they are seeing when they first observe homelessness. You may want to say "that man appears to be homeless—do you know what that means?" Older children likely know the term "homeless", but younger children may need to have it explained. One explanation is "He doesn't have a house or bed to sleep in, so he has to find places outside to sleep."



Source: Shutterstock

Explaining why homelessness occurs

How do people become homeless? Why don't they just get jobs?

Most children will be quite perplexed as to how homelessness occurs, particularly if their home life has been comfortable and stable. You may need to explain that places to live—houses, apartments, even motels or campsites—cost money and homeless individuals don't have enough money to pay for another place to live.

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That usually leads to the deeper questions of why someone would have a hard time paying for housing. Some ways to handle this include:

"It can be difficult for many people to find jobs that they can handle or that pay enough to support them. Some people experiencing homelessness do work, but it isn't enough to pay for somewhere to live—it can be very difficult to save up enough money to pay for housing these days. There may be circumstances that we can't see that make it hard for them to work. They might have a disability or a mental health problem. They might not have transportation to work. Some jobs require that you have a permanent address to send paychecks to, or that you are able to arrive showered and well dressed every day. We may never know someone's circumstances, but I think we know that this is not how most people want to live, and not everyone has had the same opportunities that you or I have had."

Explaining the complexity of homelessness

Why are so many people homeless? Why don't we build more shelters or help them find housing?

Older children and teens may really struggle to understand how society allows people to become or stay homeless. Explaining that because there are so many complex reasons someone may be homeless can help them understand that it's a difficult problem to solve. Some helpful language may be:

"There are a lot of different reasons why people become homeless, and a lot of organizations trying to help solve this problem. One reason is that there's a lack of affordable housing, especially for people who make minimum wage or receive disability pay. Another reason is that shelters and other organizations often have complex rules that don't apply to everyone. For example, many shelters will take women and children only but not men, so families can't stay together. Other shelters are only open at night but people have nowhere safe to be during the day. It's very complicated."

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Supporting their desire to help

Children are very naturally empathetic and want to help those in need around them. Most nonprofits and homelessness advocacy organizations recommend that rather than give money directly to individuals, families dedicate time or money to organizations that have the infrastructure and expertise to help people stay nourished and safe—and find homes again. When you donate time or money to trusted organizations you can have faith that your efforts are working toward long-term solutions. If children really want to help individuals directly, passing out bags with needed items (such as food, water, or toiletries) or volunteering directly in a shelter is a good idea.

Kids want to help in the moment, so what are other things they can do?

Explain to children that giving one individual money only helps one person for a very short period of time, but helping organizations that are dedicated to long-term solutions can help many people over a longer period of time. Other than money, kids can take action by:

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Making care packages

Care packages (sometimes called "Manna bags") are Ziplock or paper bags filled with essential, nonperishable items such as bottled water, granola bars, socks, soap, or other toiletries that may provide some comfort to people experiencing homelessness.

Donating used toys or clothing

Children can help with collecting items no longer used in their homes and donating them to homeless shelters. Understanding how used clothing may help someone be more comfortable on the street or dress for a job interview can help kids connect their actions to real outcomes.

Donating time or money to nonprofit organizations

Helping to serve food at shelters, or dropping funds or items off at collection sites, can also be a practical and hands-on way to help.

How can parents continue to instill empathy as children get older? Homelessness is so prevalent that we often become desensitized to it.

The most important thing we can do as parents is continue to model that people experiencing homelessness are humans just like everyone else—and as such worthy of respect and kindness. Modeling, making eye contact, offering a friendly greeting, or being kind if turning down a solicitation request are ways that we can show our children that we continue to have empathy for others regardless of their circumstances.

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