

## Talking With Children About Poverty and Homelessness

As parents, we tend to want to protect our children from the more frightening aspects of life, including homelessness and poverty. But children are apt observers and they perceive that the world isn't perfect in spite of our efforts to shield them. More importantly, children have an innate desire to help others and are interested in social issues. We can foster this natural tendency by having open, honest, intentional conversations about the issues of poverty and homelessness.

Parents often wonder how to start the conversation or what to say. Start by spending some time thinking about your own views on the subject. Do your perceptions match up with your values? Do you have some unconscious biases to overcome? People often become impoverished through no fault of their own, but through circumstances, such as job loss, death, divorce, or health issues. What do you want your children to know about poverty and homelessness? In what ways would you and your family like to help? Once you're clear on your own feelings, it's time to talk with your kids. These conversations don't have to be long or heavy-handed. Start simply and continue to talk as your children get older.

- **Become informed.** Learn more about homelessness and poverty yourself, and work to dispel myths and stereotypes. People become homeless for all sorts of reasons that are not their fault, including health problems, the death of a child or spouse, a job loss, and domestic violence. Homeless people come from all demographics and all walks of life. Many are families with children. In New York City, for example, over 22,000 children are homeless -- the highest number since the Great Depression.
- **Consider your child's developmental level and interest.** Young children are naturally somewhat egocentric, but as they reach early elementary school, they are able to consider the needs and perspective of others and understand more abstract concepts. This is an ideal time to broach the subject of homelessness and poverty, although some younger children will also be interested in discussing these topics.
- **Talk about homelessness as it comes up.** When you encounter a homeless person, answer your child's questions or bring up the topic yourself. Your child may ask questions spontaneously or in response to a book or movie. Be sure to offer simple answers that are appropriate for your child's age and maturity. Think about the message you want to send to your child about homelessness and make sure your tone, body language and facial expression represent your true intention.
- **Encourage compassion, empathy, and respect.** All humans deserve our kind regard, simply because they are human. Avoid making judgmental comments or put-downs. Treat homeless people with dignity and respect. Look people in the eye and smile. Your children will learn more from these simple moments than any lecture.

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- **Help your child understand your viewpoint.** Think about how you want to help homeless people ahead of time and be ready to explain your approach to your child. Perhaps you feel comfortable giving homeless people food, rather than money. Pack a few extra sandwiches when you go out or order an extra meal at a restaurant. Explain to your child that people don't always use money wisely (if that's your view), but by giving food, you know you're helping. Perhaps you donate time at a shelter or give money to programs that help homeless people. Explain these efforts to your child.
- **Use children's literature as a springboard for learning.** Children sometimes feel less threatened by reading about a difficult topic than they would discussing it. Well-written children's books can help children understand and process the challenging issues of poverty and homelessness. Older children will enjoy *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Monoz Ryan or *The Double Life of Zoe Flynn* by Janet Lee Carey. For younger children, try *Those Shoes* by Maribeth Boelts or *The Lady in the Box* by Ann McGovern.

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