

Teaching Module: Working With Families in Transition (Homeless)

Overview:

Definition: Individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence

Parents and families who are homeless need positive communication experiences with the educational system. This module provides several examples of ways to connect with families who are homeless and to meet their needs through continuous communication. Staff development ideas, parent and family involvement, and school-community support strategies are also presented.

A key to empowering children and families who are homeless is in the planning and use of supportive and nurturing communication (Quint, 1994). Too often families avoid the "school culture" because of negative experiences in the past or other fears related to their homeless situations (Pawlas, 1994). It is also the case that far too often educators fail to encourage family-school dialogue. One example is the parent-teacher conferencing agendas that are typically established by the school professionals (Swick & Graves, 1993).

This module will also present the main elements for establishing nurturing communication with homeless families. These include developing contacts with families, doing joint assessments and plans with families who are homeless, and establishing the needed processes for having strong communication.

Why study homeless issues? It is important to introduce prospective teachers to homeless issues because homelessness is on the rise across the nation. The fastest growing segment of over three million people experiencing homelessness in the U.S. is now the single-parent family, which makes up approximately 67% of the homeless population. This figure includes approximately 1.2 million school age children who experience academic, social, and emotional difficulties that are worsened when classmates ridicule them and when teachers are not prepared to deal with their needs.

Objectives:

At the completion of this lesson students will:

- Be able to identify basic forms and causes of homelessness and characteristics of homeless families
- Develop strategies for connecting with families who are homeless and meet their needs through continuous communication
- Develop school-community support strategies for working with homeless families

Introduction:

- Have any of you known a homeless student? Family?
- What was your interaction with them?
- Why do people become homeless?
- How do you think losing your home would affect your thoughts, your feelings, your schoolwork, your social life, and your behavior? List words that come to mind.

Activities:

1. Discussion:

- Students will share with the class their knowledge of homeless issues.
- Identify 10 common reasons that people become homeless

2. The Nature/Causes of Homelessness

False notions and stereotypes often shape public opinion of homelessness. For example, many people would describe homeless as the "bum on the street". We will look at some basic forms and causes of homelessness in today's society.

- *Structural* – Homelessness caused by institutional problems such as lack of affordable or available housing, poor employment opportunities, coupled with lack of health benefits and lack of social services.
- *Personal* – Homelessness caused by mental illness, substance abuse, divorce, or lack of personal skills for job interviews.
- *Accidental* – Homelessness caused by floods, fires, or other disasters and unexpected events.
- *Chronic homelessness* – People who are homeless for long periods of time
- *Episodic homeless* – One instance of homelessness caused by a specific event, such as divorce or loss of a job
- *Intermittent or seasonal homelessness* – Migrant workers are often periodically homeless or resort to living in campgrounds

3. Family Characteristics

In your group, identify some basic characteristics of homeless families and students.

Frequent Indicators of Homelessness

- Students or their parents may make statements that indicate whether they are likely to meet the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness:
- "Our address is new; I can't remember it."
- "I'm not sure what the address is of this place we're staying."
- "I don't know where we live."
- "I'm not sure where we're staying right now."
- "We've been moving around a lot lately."
- "I'm just going through a bad time right now."
- "We're staying with relatives/ friends until we get settled."
- "I'm with a friend for a short while."
- "We just aren't settled quite yet."

4. Making Connections: The Challenges

Establishing contact with families who are homeless or in other high-risk situations is the initial challenge.

Five strategies in this regard are noted:

- *Interagency links*: Having connections with agencies in the community who are likely to have contact with homeless families is a starting point.
- *School and district initiatives*: Through staff development efforts, use of school liaisons, school-community awareness activities, and promoting a family friendly school culture - the venues for reaching homeless families is strengthened.
- *Teacher and staff observations and initiatives*: Teachers and other school personnel have many opportunities to initiate contacts with children and parents who are homeless *Parent and family requests*: In some cases parents or other family will seek help from the school through early contact.
- *Community initiatives*: We can empower everyone in the community through establishing activities that encourage homeless families to seek positive involvement in their children's schools.

5. Working with Families on Needs and Strengths

What are family perceptions on needs, resources, and strengths?

- *Family perceptions on needs, resources, and strengths*: Swick suggests that teachers involve homeless parents in identifying key needs they feel should be addressed.
- *Building trust with homeless families* is best achieved through well-designed partnership efforts.
- *On-going communication plans and opportunities* are needed to sustain and foster strong involvement of homeless families in their children's education (Nunez & Collignon, 2000).

6. Interactive Communications: Enhancing our Relations with Homeless Families

It is indeed essential that schools have regular communication with homeless families related to needs, interests, and their perceptions related to their children's learning and development. Communication that encourages collaborative relations with families enhances the potential of homeless parents and children to become more effective in their lives.

- Schools need to be asking questions related to how we can enhance family needs and resources, thus strengthening them for having meaningful dialogue with families and their children
- We should be visualizing how we could support homeless families in achieving these needs without undue barriers. For example, schools can streamline paperwork needed for registration or other input procedures.
- Create effective and efficient channels for referrals or related supports.
- Having interactive communication with families in continuous ways enhances the process of meeting needs and empowering families to take ownership of their lives
- Initiate a variety of enabling supports that help homeless parents and children access and fully benefit from educational, counseling, job training, and other services.
- Other resources such as temporary housing peer-group sessions, relocation supports, parenting courses, and links to ongoing community support groups are needed to help homeless families move beyond the immediate crisis.
- Holding regular conferences with parents, providing children with "buddies" to help them negotiate school adjustments, and involving parents in leadership roles in schools all provide needed motivation to parents and children to become a part of the school and community culture

7. Information and Resource Sharing that Empowers Parents

McKinney- Vento Homeless Education Act of 2001

This act mandates schools communicate with parents and families who are homeless to inform them of their educational rights. The purpose of this communication is to ensure that all homeless children have equal access to a free appropriate education, to eliminate barriers to children's enrollment, to improve their attendance, to improve their overall school success, and to enhance parent involvement in the population of parents who are homeless.

School Liaison

A key part of this legislative mandate is that liaisons be appointed in schools to inform parents and children of their educational rights and to assist them in needed transitions to school or between schools should mobility be a factor. Additional important functions of the "school liaison" include: helping parents with keeping children in school (improving school attendance rates), supporting families with needed resources related to school participation such as receiving immunizations, dental and medical care, clothing, school supplies, counseling, and related resources.

Liaisons also are educators of school personnel in that they keep them informed of local situations of families who are homeless, what they need to know to be effective in working with children and parents, and supportive of the situations educators face in trying to meet multiple educational needs

Student Identification

The legislation also encourages schools to use alternate forms of personal identification to facilitate children's enrollment in school. For example, it provides for families to use motel receipts, letters from shelter directors, or related residency proofs—to facilitate quick entry of the child into the school system.

Barriers

Some of the barriers homeless parents and children point to include: need for immunization records, access to past school records, proof of guardianship, and continuity related to special needs situations child and/or family may be facing. Use of special "survival kits" that contain student records, parent and child identity materials, and school records—all provide a sense of security when meeting officials at new

schools, shelters or community agencies.

Keeping computerized records of the situations of homeless students might also help to offer immediate records to officials at the new school. However, a long-range solution is to form strong partnerships with homeless parents and children to help them establish stability in housing and other contextual situations—thus reducing the number of moves they make.

8. Professional Dispositions for Supporting Parent – Professional Relations

Positive interactions with parent and family are key to establishing caring relations with them. Schools need to establish communicative relations with homeless families that:

- Build respect
- Nurture ongoing relations
- Are non- judgmental
- Are responsive and caring
- Empower families to have meaningful and beneficial communication
- Avoid assumptions that trap families within narrowly conceived stereotypes.
- Do not scare the homeless family from our schools and centers by probing into confidential areas we need not and should not go to.
- Focus on listening, responding, and caring in relation to the needs and strengths of the families

A priority in interactions with homeless families must be to identify and nurture their strengths. Using an “assets approach” we can work with parents on listing their strengths, organizing resources and strategies that help them build on these strengths, and then seek to partner with them in educational efforts to help them build competence and confidence.

The communicative attitudes we present in our nonverbal and verbal communication with families in every situation is key to a successful partnership. What does our body language say to them and how do we phrase our inquiries? We need to project optimism and confidence in their skills and potential. Suggestions related to effective communication with families are noted as follows

- Model positive nonverbal communication behavior such as being open in your physical approach to parents
- Learn about the nonverbal world of the parents and students you work with; what is it that they truly value?
- Create a relaxed and pleasant environment for holding conferences and other communicative interactions with parents.
- Present yourself in an attractive and professional way that also communicates your respect and support for parents.
- Be respectful and supportive of the children and share your positive feelings about the children with parents.
- Follow through on your commitments with the parents and the children.

Closure

Establishing meaningful communication with families who are homeless begins with the attitudes and behaviors professionals demonstrate in their ongoing interactions. We can use the following questions to guide our efforts in developing and continually renewing our communication relations with homeless families.

1. Are we responsive to the stressors families are experiencing?
2. What steps have we taken to encourage ongoing communication with families?
3. Are we engaging families in setting up the agenda for our various communicative activities?
4. What specific steps have we taken to help homeless families feel invited and important in our schools?
5. What are we doing to continually evaluate and improve our communication strategies?

The following activities and scenarios are designed for small and/or large group participation.

Group Activity:

My name is and I like to cook. Toss the ball to someone in the class, they will share and then toss the ball to someone else. This is a getting to know you activity. A classroom teacher may use the activity at open house, during a parent workshop, or during orientation at the beginning of the school year. The activity is especially helpful for new students and their families and will help everyone feel a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar setting.

Students will suggest strategies for communicating with the families from each scenario

Case study/Scenario:

By the time Micah reached fourth grade, he had changed schools more times than he could remember—at least eight. During most of his fifth grade year, he slept in a box behind an industrial-size dumpster, relying on his father's pickup truck for shelter when it rained.

Micah's family eventually got a stable home. He had missed so much school, and had fallen so far behind his classmates, that catching up felt impossible. He stopped attending school in eighth grade and wound up in prison during his teen years. Schools can't fix everything for students who are homeless; what we can do is make sure that children without homes are not also children without schools.

Small group or large group discussion and sharing:

- Identify some education challenges Micah's parents are facing. List some possible intervention.
- How can a teacher help his parents support Micah's education?
- List ways a teacher can ease the transition of homeless students into the class.

Note: The following scenarios provide some real-life examples of how easily people are at risk for losing their homes. Students may discuss the impact these will have on parent/family and school communication.

Scenario #1

Joe and Carol have two children. Joe makes \$7 an hour washing and detailing vehicles at a car dealership. The family was living in a mobile home until it was flooded out two days ago during a major hurricane. The mobile home was paid for, but they didn't have insurance, so it's a total loss. Joe and Carol don't have any relatives living nearby, but they want to stay in the area because of Joe's job.

Scenario #2

Alex is a pharmaceuticals sales rep who makes nearly \$100,000 a year. His wife, Brenda, is a high school graduate who spends her afternoons doing volunteer work for several local charities. Last year, Alex and Brenda purchased a new home in an exclusive neighborhood. Alex drives a new Lexus 4-door sedan; and Brenda drives a new Lexus SUV. They are paying for both vehicles on 48-month payment plans. They are also making monthly payments on the cars they bought for their twin daughters, who turned 16 two months ago. Last week, Alex had a major stroke. His physical therapist says that it will be a long time before Alex can walk without assistance. His doctor says he may never be able to drive again because his vision and coordination were affected by the stroke.

Scenario #3

Thomas and Marie have four young children. Thomas has a minimum wage job working as a janitor for a large insurance company. He works from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m. and uses the local transit to go to and from work. Last year, Thomas and Marie moved in with his mother, Margaret, because she was no longer able to look

after herself. Every day, Marie assists Margaret with physical tasks, prepares her meals, and helps her bathe and dress. Thomas and Marie don't pay rent, but they do pay the utility bill and buy groceries to feed everyone in the house. Last week, Margaret told Thomas and Marie that they would have to find another place to live because the four kids were getting on her nerves.

Scenario #4

Traci is a single mom with two small children. She and the kids live in a rental home with Traci's grandmother, who receives \$235 a month from Social Security. Traci dropped out of high school but is now working studying at home to get her GED. Traci works 30 hours a week at a Chinese restaurant, where she makes \$8 an hour including tips. She pays her Grandmother \$100 a week to look after Barry and Sean while she is working. Last week, the landlord told Traci's grandmother to move out as soon as possible because he wants to give the house to his son, who will be getting married next week. Traci and her grandmother don't have any savings and don't know where they will find the funds to cover the costs of moving into a new place.

Information for this teaching module adapted from the following sources:

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