



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

Tips for families experiencing homelessness

Before you start ...

There are some important things to know before continuing.

Voices of lived experience

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

We hope these resources have something to offer all families, but recognise they are simply a snapshot reflecting the lived experiences of the families who helped us create them – other families will have different experiences and stories.

We also intentionally create resources that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of *knowing, being and doing* with guidance from our National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultancy Group and partners.

For more information please see emergingminds.com.au/working-with-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples

Language notes: 'Parents'

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. In our resources, the term 'parent' encompasses biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising children. Our resources aim to support families and the children in their care. We acknowledge that every child is unique and has different strengths, vulnerabilities and experiences that shape their health and development.

Families experiencing homelessness are always skilfully responding to the difficulties they are facing, in big and small ways that often go unseen. Unfortunately, most parenting books don't provide advice on how to parent while homeless.

This resource has been created with families who have been through homelessness. These families generously shared the things they want you to remember, along with some tips for surviving homelessness.

Tips for surviving homelessness

- Build routines and rituals into homelessness.
- Find small moments of connection throughout the day.
- Take time to notice small strengths in yourself and your children.
- Give children choice when you can – small things that can help them feel more in control of their lives.
- Think about children's safety.
- Try to stay sober however you can.
- Try to take care of yourself as a parent so you can best take care of your children.
- Having a small amount of handy items.
- Get creative about postal addresses.
- Be wary, sometimes people who say they want to help have hidden harmful intentions.
- Connect with nature.
- Find libraries, and free activities and spaces.
- Stick together.

Things to remember

- [It's not you, it's the system.](#)
- You don't have to be grateful for people doing their job.
- You can find a way out of even the deepest trauma.

When we are in survival mode, parents can have a hard time figuring out what children need and connecting with community. This is normal and not your fault, it can take time to find the right support, but [there is support out there](#).

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To kids I would say, there are people who want to help you (service workers). They want to hear what you have to say and are genuinely interested and love helping kids. You can tell them stuff you might not want to talk to your parents about.

ELLIOT, YOUNG PERSON, KAURNA COUNTRY, REFLECTING BACK ON CHILDHOOD HOMELESSNESS

Things we did to survive homelessness

We asked families about the skills and strengths they used to survive through homelessness – here is what they told us.

Building routines and rituals into homelessness

‘We had a regular afternoon routine that was go for a walk in nature, then we would go to the supermarket to get something to make for dinner and things for school lunch the next day. Because we didn't have storage or anything bigger than an esky to keep things cold this became the normal each day to try and keep costs down. The kids enjoyed doing this too, as they got to pick things to pack for the next day and it was teaching them to keep within our budget as we would set this before heading into the store. We also had laundry days we would all head off to do our laundry. We would pick one close to facilities too, so we could go and borrow books from the library or take a walk while we waited. All of these things helped create a bit of normal. We also had a routine with friends before we had to move away from them all – that was Friday night we would get hot chips and head to a park after school and we managed to keep this up throughout, until we had to move out of the area.’

‘Because we were in a tent a lot and moving lots, we couldn't stick to routines that well. Even things like not having a place to charge the phone to set an alarm. But it did help to keep our little spot tidy. Being able to organise the little bit we had was good because it kept a bit of order in the chaos.’

Finding small moments of connection throughout the day

‘For example, colouring in one small drawing, you don’t need to play elaborately for hours. Also, pointing out small things to take pleasure in when we were out, like finding the wonder in nature – “Look at the clouds, aren’t they beautiful today?”, or “Look at that little plant, isn’t it unusual?” That kind of thing of thing.’

‘We did a lot of beach time and sometimes it would just be to collect sticks and make pebble pictures and draw in the sand. We would do some basic yoga breathing exercises together as there was a lot of anxiety for the kids.’

The following resources might give you some extra ideas:

- [20 ways for bonding with your child](#) (from newborn to school aged)
- [Homemade toys and free activities for children](#) (0–8 years old)
- [Staying connected with pre-teens and teenagers](#) (9–18 years old)

Sometimes it helps to contact local councils or services to find out what options there are in the local area and whether there is any funding available to support children attending these activities.

Take time to notice small strengths in yourself and your children

‘One thing my kids did consistently – and it seems simple, but it was big – is that they just walked *everywhere* with me. A lot of the times we didn’t have a car or money for public transport or we didn’t know how to use it because it might have been a new area. So we did a lot of walking. You would go to one service and they would say, “Well you have to put this form in there” and that might be on the other side of town. And you had to walk there, sometimes you had to walk there quickly, ‘cause you had to get there before they closed.

‘When we were in the refuge, we were able to go back to our house a couple of times and pick up some possessions. We couldn’t go back many times because it was too traumatising. So we would get as much as we could in one go. We had these big stripy laundry bags and we’d come back loaded up and it was a walk from the train station to our refuge. And we would just do it, you know? They never said, “I can’t do that. I’m not walking.” It was just like, “Yeah, OK, let’s go.”’

Give children choice when you can, small ways they can feel in control

‘Letting them pick the lunch snacks for the next day was a consistent one. We also had a suitcase each and they picked their colour. And they had their “home away from home” things, so one special toy to bring on our travels with us. One of my kids wanted to always wear their school uniform like every day, so I just let them.’

‘Because we were in the car so much we played a lot of music. So the kids would take it in turns to pick the music. We would have favourite songs and when one would come on I’d turn up the volume and we would all sing loudly and car dance (dancing while you’re sitting!). We would also make up silly rap songs. One of the kids would also always do a really silly voice which would crack us up every time.’

Think about children’s safety

‘There are unsafe situations that happen when you’re not housed. Both from other people, but also from nature if out camping in a rural area. I really spoke to my kids about staying together and looking after each other. Being extra aware of dangers.’

‘When organising accommodation with refuges, I would phone around and try to get one that could house us all in one room, so we could be together and keep safe.’

‘At one point I was so traumatised, I had to recognise that I couldn’t keep my children safe. I couldn’t even look after myself. I was lucky we were in a refuge and I was able to allow the staff to step in and help keep the kids safe. The staff helped care for the kids – if I was falling apart, they would come and engage with the kids. I would say to other families in this situation that having specialist DV [domestic violence] support is necessary as well, as the refuge staff who were not trained in DV missed some important signs in me. And if DV services are involved they can put in extra strategies and security to keep the kids safe.’

‘At one time I couldn’t keep my kids safe, so I asked my brother to care of my son for a short time while we found safer accommodation.’



ELLA, 15 YEARS OLD

Try to stay sober

'If you are in recovery for AOD [alcohol and other drug use], despite the feelings of hopelessness the situation can bring, keep doing whatever it is you do in recovery to maintain sobriety – journaling, calling supports, going to meetings. Having experienced homelessness in active addiction and then in recovery, I can say that the difference is when in active addiction, it's very hard to keep your kids safe.'

Try to take care of yourself as a parent

'You just have to take one day at a time and stay strong. And most of the time bad times don't last forever. And if they last a long time, we still do get through them. I just had to start to really focus on taking care of myself through it. So, making sure I got a walk in and the kids got exercise, being in nature and connecting in with some normality of our lives ... friends. 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.'

Having a small amount of handy items

'One thing that helped was I kept all of our essential documents handy; like Centrelink

statements, letters from service providers, school reports, birth certificates, police reports. Then they were easy to find when we had to provide them to services.'

'Sometimes we stayed in a tent or in our car. At those times we needed to plan for not having electricity. I had a small camping stove, and lots of torches. And tonnes of blankets because it got really cold. We would charge phones at libraries or anywhere we found a power point.'

'We cooked on free barbecues in parks a lot. And I also had a pressure cooker. It was handy as I could make a big bolognese sauce for dinner and make enough for lunch the next day as well. The containers would fit in a small motel bar fridge.'

Get creative about postal addresses

'I started to have my mail forwarded and I started to just tell people my old address because it was easier at appointments to do that than have all the questions. My daughter was actually enrolling in high school and we couldn't get her into a high school. We had to lie about where we lived, provide a bill from a friend's address so that we could get her into the high school that she needed.'

Sometimes people have alternative motives in supporting you

'I've learned a lot from ... from my experience ... that sometimes people have alternative motives in supporting you when it's actually them that maybe need the help. I stayed with one friend and I was cooking and cleaning and going above and beyond to try and make it easy for us living there. And she took advantage of that. She would leave her kids with me, go out for dinner. I was cooking for nine people every night and I was shopping. I was paying for all the food and there was all this extra pressure on me taking care of another family along with mine when I was the one that was dealing with all the stress of trying to find a home. I think understanding that, and instead finding people that support, listen, encourage and try and brainstorm with you.'

Connect with nature

'Aside from the day-to-day mechanics of surviving, we were lucky because we were always in rural spaces. So we had a lot of nature on our doorstep. Getting into wide open spaces is really important. If you've got kids ... it seems like it should be the opposite because you're homeless, but being able to have a place where they can just run around and just be in those wide open spaces, not playgrounds because they're too structured, but unstructured open space. It's really, really good.'

'I've spent a lot of time in nature. Playing with rocks and building things outta sticks and all of that stuff is so wonderful for kids and mums, whether you are watching it, participating in it, walking in it or just being in the present moment. Photography helped me focus in on the beauty in the world. I started taking a lot of photographs of nature and two of my kids have followed my footsteps and now they're doing photography at school and it's one of their passions. It actually just took everything else that was going on for us away. So, stay in touch with nature and connect with your hobbies or your loves or your interests, whatever that might be for your family.'

Finding libraries and free activities and spaces

'Libraries are free, they have water, toilets, all the amenities usually, they're temperature controlled, and they've usually got play areas. So we used to do that every place we went to – we found the local library.'

'In cities, one good thing about them is there's lots of free activities. Most places you can go on public transport, especially in the centre of the city, for almost next to nothing, and that's where the bulk of the free activities are. We were able to find out kinds of activities that we wanted to do and then we'd go and join in.'

Sticking together

'Sticking together, and knowing that you've got your family there no matter what, got us through. You might feel scared, you might feel unsafe and you might feel uncared for, but we knew that our family cared and loved us. We all loved each other. And that's what got us through. Bad times don't last forever. Always remember there are better times to come.'

It's not you, it's the system

By 'the system', we mean the political and social services and institutions that are meant to prevent people from experiencing homelessness. Things that result from these systems being flawed, such as discrimination, a lack of social and affordable housing, increased costs of living without increases in wages or benefits, are just some of the reasons more people are finding themselves without a secure and stable place to live.

'The system's really f***ed. No matter your journey to homelessness, I can bet that you've arrived there because of at least one, or probably many, failures in the system. And continuing homelessness is not to do with you, it's to do with the failures of the system. You just gotta keep reminding yourself, and that's hard. And sometimes you can't, sometimes you're just gonna be sitting with that feeling of a complete failure. But it's not you and you've gotta remind yourself that.'

'It can happen to anybody today in this country. It's your circumstance that leads to homelessness. It's not anything you did. Remember, it's your human right to have a home, a roof over your head and be able to feed your kids and clothe them in this country. It should not happen and it's not your fault.'

Don't feel you have to be grateful for people doing their job

'Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including ... housing.' – United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, 1947

'If you go into Centrelink and they do their job, don't be grateful. Don't say, "Thanks, I really appreciate it." I mean maybe you wanna say it 'cause you're polite, but don't walk out of there thinking, "Oh, I'm so grateful to them." Don't be grateful to housing services or a real estate agent for letting you have an inspection. Don't feel you have to give people your gratitude 'cause they're just doing a job. They're gonna go home and sleep in their houses and you are not, so cut yourself some slack.'

You can find a way out of even the deepest trauma

'You are gonna feel like your kids are gonna be permanently damaged, but everyone can get through stuff. At the time, it feels like you just can't get through it, and it's just awfulness and it's gonna be awful forever. My kids all said, in one way or another, they wouldn't be who they are if they hadn't have been through what they went through, and they like who they are. It's really important to remember that you feel like this is a hell and that hell's gonna be with you in some form or another forever – but it's not.

'I have taken on a lot of guilt, especially around my kids and I have really had to teach myself that it [homelessness] happened to me too ... And it shouldn't have: it shouldn't have happened to us and it shouldn't happen to anybody.'

Activity

Try the [five senses grounding activity](#) as a family when you need to be in the moment and get through something tough.

Speaking up

If want to, you can contact your local Member of Parliament (MP) or council to let them know about the barriers you are up against and what kinds of things might make a difference. [Search for your federal MP](#), or type 'who is my state MP' into Google and follow this guide on [how to write a letter to your MP](#).

Take a moment to think about...



These ideas helped our families when they were homeless ... what do you think?

- Which of these ideas stand out to you and why?
- Do any of these stories give you ideas for your family? Which ones do you think are most important?
- What steps might you want to take next? Is there anyone or anything that could support you in taking those next steps?

Every family is different and up against a unique set of circumstances. These tips might not work for your family.

- What advice would you have for families going through it?

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

- [Talking to children about homelessness](#)
- [Myths and misunderstandings about family homelessness](#)

Dive deeper into Emerging Minds podcasts

In [*How to talk to your children about experiencing family homelessness*](#), we interview 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.

Services that might be able to help if you are homeless or at risk of homelessness

- If you require support in your local area, you may wish to visit AskIzzy. This website aims to [connect people in need with housing, a meal, help with money, family violence support, counselling and more](#).
- If you are in urgent need of accommodation, you may wish to contact one of the following services in your state or territory:
- ACT [Onelink](#) 1800 176 468
- NSW [Link2Home](#) 1800 152 152
- NT [ShelterMe](#) (08) 8985 4389
- QLD [Homeless Hotline](#) 1800 474 753
- SA [Homeless Connect](#) 1800 003 308
- TAS [Housing Connect](#) 1800 800 588
- VIC [Crisis and Emergency Accommodation](#) 1800 825 955 or (03) 9536 7777
- WA [Entrypoint Perth](#) 1800 124 684

If this is the first time you have experienced homelessness or being at risk of homelessness and are new to using services, you may also wish to read [Skills for navigating services](#).

AVAILABLE HERE

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: emergingminds.com.au/resources/practitioner-guide-money-housing-and-health-resources

Emerging Minds Families

For more resources to support the mental health and wellbeing of your family visit emergingminds.com.au/families

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