

Appendix B – Supporting children and young people



Because of the violence I experienced at home, it was safer for me to be away from my family and sometimes that meant I had to sleep in the park... it was scary but not as scary as my home life. What makes it harder is people looking at me like I'm nothing, like I'm a thief or something, just because I'm not at school and have nowhere else safe to go. I didn't choose to be homeless-I just chose not to be hurt by my family anymore.

Female, 16

Each person has their own unique experience and needs. It is important to understand the intersectionality between a person's gender, race, sexual identity, culture, experiences and circumstances. Workers may refer to multiple appendices to assist their understanding, engagement and support for each person they engage.

Overview

On any given night in NSW, approximately 7,680 young people aged 12 to 24 years are experiencing homelessnessⁱ. They may be homeless alongside their family, or carers, or without an adult present.

The main causes of homelessness for children and young people are family breakdown, poverty, severe overcrowding, domestic and family violenceⁱⁱ or other safety issues in the home. In these cases, a child or young person may be making the safest choice out of a number of unsafe options or may believe this to be the case.

Aboriginal children and young people make up 33 per cent of the total number of unaccompanied children and young people presenting at specialist homelessness services in NSWⁱⁱⁱ. Aboriginal children and young people are overrepresented in at risk groups including young people leaving out of home care. It is important that Aboriginal children and young people are offered supports in a culturally safe way. For information on supporting Aboriginal people see **Appendix C**.

Young people leaving care may experience additional trauma, disadvantage and increased risk of experiencing homelessness. Research has shown that, on average, 17 per cent of care leavers in NSW access specialist homelessness services (SHS) in the year after they leave care and more than half will access homelessness services at some point in their lives^{iv}.

Children and young people with no safe place to stay are extremely vulnerable. They are at higher risk of sexual exploitation, sexual and other forms of assault, and poor physical and mental health outcomes including exacerbation of pre-existing health conditions. They may also be dealing with feelings of fear, shame and/or anger.

Impact of trauma on children and young people

Trauma-informed practice is crucial when working with any person experiencing homelessness, including children and young people. Most children and young people experiencing homelessness will have experienced trauma. This may be due to the events which led to their homelessness and/or events which have occurred during their homelessness. Family members or carers often find symptoms of trauma difficult to manage, and therefore may contribute to homelessness experienced by children and young people.

Children and young people who have experienced traumatic events are more likely to withdraw from conversations and may need time to build rapport or feel comfortable communicating their circumstances or seeking support^v. Their experiences may lead them to distrust adults and be wary of any help that an adult/worker is offering. This may be part of their learned survival skill set.

Other impacts of homelessness on children and young people

Some children and young people may not have, or safe access to, identity documents and a stable mailing address which can impact access to services and supports.

Homelessness is associated with decreased engagement in school and when coupled with frequent school moves, is associated with poor academic achievement^{vi}. Children and young people may be in public places during school hours due to a disassociation with schooling. Children and young people who experience homelessness are also more likely to leave school as well as be placed in juvenile detention.

Children and young people experiencing homelessness may behave in ways that increase risk (often termed risk-taking behaviours). Although these behaviours may increase risk for the child or young person, they are often adaptive coping mechanisms in response to trauma. This includes the use of alcohol and other drugs.

Preschool and school-aged children experiencing homelessness are more likely to experience mental health concerns, with evidence suggesting they are also more likely to have physical disability, emotional or behavioural problems^{vii}. One in ten young people experiencing homelessness report experiencing suicidal ideation in the past three months^{viii}. Additionally, food insecurity is frequently reported by young people experiencing homelessness, leading to increased risk of poor health outcomes^{ix}. For information on supporting people with complex health conditions see **Appendix K**.

Most young people experiencing homelessness, turn to couch surfing or sleeping on floors, temporarily staying with friends, relatives, family and sometimes complete strangers, until they need to move on^x.

Workers responses to children and young people experiencing homelessness

Children and young people often have distinctly different pathways into, and experiences of, homelessness compared to adults. Specific youth-focused, person-centred and trauma-informed responses and approaches are required to address their homelessness effectively and in any long-lasting, meaningful way.

It is important for workers to approach children and young people with empathy, care, compassion and respect. Age-appropriate communication and strategies must be used to connect with children and young people effectively, understanding that children and young people affected by complex trauma may be developmentally behind their peers.

Workers must be aware of all child protection responsibilities including mandatory reporting requirements.

Reporting child wellbeing or protection concerns

The *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* provides for the care and protection of, and the provision of services to, children and young people.

Under the Act, mandatory reporters are required to report suspected child abuse and neglect to government authorities. Specific legal and policy requirements apply to mandatory reporters, including workers responding to children and young people who may be experiencing homelessness. Requirements depend on the child or young person's age, whether they are known to be a 'child in care'⁴ and whether they are at risk of significant harm. Requirements are subject to change, and workers are encouraged to use the links listed below for the most up to date information.

4 'Child in care' refers to a child under the Parental Responsibility (PR) of the Minister or Care Responsibility of the Secretary (including shared care where PR for residency rests with the Minister).

As of June 2023:

- If you believe a child or young person (aged 0 - 15 years) may be at risk of significant harm, you must make a report to the Child Protection Helpline on **132 111**.
- It is not mandatory under the *Care and Protection Act* to make a report if it is an unborn child, or a young person aged 16 to 17. However, your organisation's policies and procedures may make reporting for these groups mandatory. Reporting may also help pregnant women, families and young people access services they need.
- A report to the Helpline can be made if the young person aged 16 or 17 years and experiencing homelessness consents to the call.
- If you know or believe the child is in the care of the Minister, regardless of their age, you must make a report to the Helpline on **132 111**.
- Mandatory reporters should use the Mandatory Reporter Guide (MRG) to help decide whether a child is suspected to be at Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH) and a report to the Child Protection Helpline should be made.

Information on mandatory reporting can be found at <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/families/Protecting-kids/mandatory-reporters>

In addition, many departments, organisations, and businesses have policy directives that specify the reporting obligations within particular employment contexts. All workers should be familiar with their reporting requirements.

Child Wellbeing Units

As an alternative to reporting to the Child Protection Helpline, reports about child protection or wellbeing concerns can be made by NSW Police, NSW Department of Education staff, or by NSW Health workers to their agency's Child Wellbeing Unit (CWU). A report made to the Police, Education or NSW Health's Child Wellbeing Unit fulfills a reporter's mandatory responsibility and involves the CWU planning additional ways the child or young person may be assisted. See: <https://reporter.childstory.nsw.gov.au/s/article/How-can-a-Child-Wellbeing-Unit-help>

Information Sharing under the *Care and Protection Act*

The *Care and Protection Act* includes information exchange provisions to allow for the flow of information between organisations to facilitate collaborative service provision to vulnerable children and their families. Further information about what information can be shared can be found at <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/providers/children-families/interagency-guidelines/information-sharing-for-service-coordination>.

People who are not mandatory reporters

Members of the public or workers who are not mandatory reporters but have concerns about a child who is experiencing homelessness may also contact the Child Protection Helpline as outlined above on **132 111**.

Engagement strategy

Things to consider before engaging:

- Workers often view children and young people experiencing homelessness to be at imminent risk, however, the child or young person may view it as the safest choice out of a range of unsafe options. It is important to find out more about the child or young person's circumstances without triggering traumatic memories. This may be done by asking the child or young person basic questions about their day or what they are most concerned about.
- Workers may encounter children or young people who are accompanying a parent experiencing homelessness. This is often a result of domestic and family violence (DFV). It is important to work with both the parent and child or young person, to avoid further trauma, disempowerment, or negative impacts on the family. For more information on supporting people experiencing DFV see **Appendix L**.
- Children and young people experiencing homelessness are likely to have experienced trauma. A trauma-informed approach is critical throughout all engagements.
- Children and young people affected by trauma can find it hard to regulate their emotions. A young person's experiences or fear can result in behaviours and emotions which may be difficult for workers to respond to, including sadness, irritability, aggression, withdrawal, anxiety, substance use, and/or feeling overwhelmed^{xi}. When their fight or flight mode is triggered, workers may need to use de-escalation strategies to try and assist the child or young person to return to a calm state.

- Workers should be aware that children and young people's responses to workers may be affected by past experiences with government agencies and organisations, or the experiences of their parents or other family members.
- Workers should consider the number of workers and the most appropriate worker to approach the child/young person to reduce any perceived threat and increase the sense of safety including cultural safety for the young person.
- Mental Health First Aid Australia has *Guidelines for Adults on How to Communicate with Adolescents about Mental Health Problems and Other Sensitive Topics* that can assist engagement with children and young people: <https://headspace.org.au/assets/Uploads/Centres/Narre-warren/MHFA-Guides.pdf>

Additional information and support to assist workers in addressing children or young people at risk of significant harm can be found at: <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/families/Protecting-kids/reporting-child-at-risk/harm-and-neglect/chapters/if-a-child-tells-you>

Strategies for engagement:

- Introduce yourself in a friendly manner, stating your name and the agency/organisation you work for.
 - Consider your body language and proximity to the child or young person, being sure not to stand over or initiate touch. Allow enough space and consider standing or sitting side by side with a child or young person rather than directly across from them.
 - Do not touch the child or young person's belongings or enter the space they are using as a shelter as this may be considered their safe space.
 - Speak in a normal tone and do not use patronising language. Keep your language simple, clear and direct. Remind the child or young person that their safety is priority.
 - Use language which recognises that children and young people might be feeling extremely vulnerable and frightened, and that you are doing your best to support them.
- Try to involve the child or young person in decision-making processes and allow them to participate where possible.
 - Encourage children and young people to share their current situation and needs.
 - Be attentive and listen to the child or young person, empowering them to tell their story, and validate the feelings they share with you.
 - Be aware of any barriers that may affect communication (e.g. language difficulties, misunderstanding, jargon and/or slang), and make appropriate adjustments (e.g. engage an interpreter, ask the young person to explain in more detail, etc).
 - Where required by policy or law, contact the Child Protection Helpline (132 111). Where consent of the young person is required (homelessness/neglect-shelter), seek their consent first.
 - Tell the child or young person if you are legally required to make a report to the Child Protection Helpline. Ask them if they have any questions or concerns about the process. Remind them that their safety is your priority.
 - Provide practical assistance where possible to increase a child or young person's safety (e.g. battery charger for their phone, phone credit, Opal card, etc).
 - Support the young person to engage with appropriate services as needed or requested.
 - Stay with an unaccompanied child under the age of 16, until the appropriate support service arrives (i.e. Department of Communities and Justice or Specialist Youth Homelessness Service).
 - You are encouraged to stay with a young person aged 16-17 who consents to assistance until the support service arrives. Alternatively, if the young person is aged 16-17 and has the capacity and means to travel independently, a worker may help them to obtain support themselves.



RESOURCES

CRISIS SUPPORT		
Name	Service	Contact Details
Ask Izzy	A website directory that connects people in need with nearby services such as housing, food, health care and legal services in their local area	Website: https://askizzy.org.au
Link2Home	A statewide telephone service providing information, assessment and referral to specialist homelessness services, temporary accommodation and other appropriate services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It is available 24 hours a day 7 days a week every day of the year.	Phone: 1800 152 152 Website: https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/housing/help/ways/are-you-homeless
OTHER SUPPORT		
Name	Service	Contact Details
Headspace	Provide early intervention mental health, physical health (including sexual health) alcohol and other drug services, and work and study support to young people aged 12-25 years old. Support is offered through Headspace centres, online and phone counselling services, and in schools.	Website: https://headspace.org.au/
Kids Helpline	Free (including from a mobile), confidential 24/7 online and phone counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25 with qualified counsellors.	Phone: 1800 551 800 Website: https://kidshelpline.com.au/
Reach Out	An online, anonymous and confidential, range of support options including one-to-one peer support and moderated online communities, tips, stories and resources.	Website: https://au.reachout.com/
Rent Choice Youth	Helps young people aged 16 to 24 years to cover a proportion of their rent for up to three years. Case work support is also provided to help young people achieve their career goals.	Phone: 1800 422 322 (Housing Contact Centre) Website: https://facs.nsw.gov.au/housing/factsheets/rent-choice-youth

- i Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), [Estimating Homelessness: Census](#), ABS website, 2023.
- ii S Roche and J Barker, [Youth homelessness and its relationship with family conflict: Models for policy and practice](#), Australian Catholic University, 2017.
- iii Yfoundations, [Yfoundations submission: National Housing and Homelessness Plan Issues Paper](#), Yfoundations, 2023.
- iv Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), [Pathways to Homelessness](#), DCJ, 2021.
- v raisingchildren.net.au, [Traumatic events: supporting children and teenagers](#), raisingchildren.net.au website, 2022.
- vi Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), [Australia's Children](#), AIHW website, 2022.
- vii Ibid.
- viii Headspace, [Clinical Toolkit - At Risk Group: Homeless Young People](#), National youth Mental Health Foundation, Headspace, 2020.
- ix Ibid.
- x Ibid.
- xi Ibid.