

# PARENTING DURING HOMELESSNESS

Unstable living environments (doubled up with friends or relatives, or temporary stays in emergency shelters, hotels/motels, cars, tents, etc.) combined with parents' efforts to keep children safe in their new surroundings can cause stress and create barriers to healthy child development. For example, parents may keep infants or toddlers in strollers for long periods of time to keep them off dirty floors or away from dangerous objects. This type of confinement limits opportunities for muscle development as well as healthy parent-child interaction.

Here are some tips for promoting healthy child development despite homelessness.

## Infants

Infants crave contact and interaction.

- Touch, hold, rock, sing and talk to infants to help them feel safe and secure.
- Talk to your infant about what you are doing and what will happen next to build language and thinking skills.
- Use eye contact and a reassuring tone while talking about feelings—like happy, sad or mad—to help infants learn social and emotional skills.
- Spread a blanket on the floor or in the grass for tummy time and simple games like pat-a-cake that build muscle strength and motor skills.
- Read simple books and encourage your baby to hold the book and turn the pages to build both language and motor skills.



## Toddlers

Toddlers need room to move, which can be especially challenging if your whole family is living in a single room. Try to find a few safe places for your toddler to walk, run and climb. Parks, schools and even many shopping malls often have playgrounds and some community centers and libraries also have playrooms available for toddlers.

- Throwing and kicking a ball or dancing to music builds motor skills
- Using crayons and Play-doh builds fine motor skills.
- Playing simple counting and matching games with a deck of cards builds language and thinking skills.

## Preschoolers

Preschoolers need activities that encourage independence. Making simple choices, like choosing between two activities or snack options allows them to express themselves and builds self-confidence.

- Cutting and pasting builds fine motor skills
- Playing the "I am going on a trip" game builds language and thinking skills.

*Players take turns saying what they will pack for the trip, naming items from A–Z. With each turn, the list of items to be repeated is longer and harder to remember. For example, with two players it would look something like this:*

**Player 1:** I am going on a trip and I am packing an Apple.

**Player 2:** I am going on a trip and I am packing an Apple and a Baseball.

**Player 1:** I am going on a trip and I am packing an Apple, a Baseball and a Cat.

- Playing games like "Mother may I" or "Simon Says" build social and emotional skills like listening, following directions and self-regulation.

A quality pre-school can provide your child with a safe, predictable environment with social interaction and a variety of resources and opportunities for learning. In Florida, parents can enroll their 4-year-old children in FREE voluntary pre-K (VPK) programs. For more information on enrolling your child in Florida's VPK program, contact the Florida's Office of Early Learning at 866.357.3239 (1-866-FLREADY) or [www.floridaearlylearning.com](http://www.floridaearlylearning.com).

### School age children

Enroll your children in school and make regular attendance a top priority. The McKinney-Vento Act requires public schools to immediately enroll students experiencing homelessness, even when lacking:

- Proof of residency
- Guardianship
- Birth certificate
- School records
- Medical records, including immunization records
- Uniforms or other dress code items

The McKinney-Vento Act also allows families experiencing homelessness to enroll their children in either their school of origin (the school they were attending prior to displacement) or the school in the area where they are currently living, whichever is best for the child. Whichever school option you choose for your child, they are also entitled to transportation to and from the school. Call toll-free 1-800-308-2145 for more information.

Communicate with your child's school. Your child's teacher and the school administrators should be made aware of your family's crisis situation. School counselors are knowledgeable about many community resources that can help your child through this difficult time. School staff may be able to connect you to organizations that can assist with school clothes and supplies, tutoring/mentoring, and school activity fees. Ask teachers to keep you informed if they notice troubling changes in your child's behavior or performance. Counseling may also be available to your child through the school's guidance office.

Staying active and participating in social activities with peers are healthy ways for children and youth to cope with stress. Ask your child's school if assistance is available to help your child attend afterschool and summer programs and participate in extra-curricular activities.

Good nutrition will help your child better manage stress. Apply for free and reduced price breakfast and lunch programs, summer feeding programs and other services that will help you consistently meet your child's nutritional needs (see listings under Health and Nutrition Services in the Family Resource section of this guide).

#### Resources:

[www.pbs.org/parents/familiesstandtogether](http://www.pbs.org/parents/familiesstandtogether)

[www.resiliency.com/free-articles-resources](http://www.resiliency.com/free-articles-resources)

### HERE'S HELP



Use the **Family Resources on**

**pages 91–95** to learn about a variety of family support services available in your community.