

## Chapter Ten: Working with Parents



### Section 10.1 McKinney-Vento and Parental Rights

The McKinney-Vento Act accords parents and guardians experiencing homelessness the right to have their voices heard on what they believe is in the best interest of their children. The law requires local homeless liaisons to provide parents and guardians information on the McKinney-Vento Act and on the process for disputing decisions of the local educational agency (LEA) when they disagree on enrollment and best interest determinations for their children.

### Section 10.2 Challenges in Working with Homeless Parents

While most parents experiencing homelessness are cooperative and trust that school administrators, teachers, and staff have the best interest of their children in mind, some may be uncooperative and even confrontational. Homelessness puts parents under inordinate stress. As the local homeless liaison, it is important to keep this in mind and work with parents in ways that build trust and empower them to work with you to enable their children to succeed in school.

### Section 10.3 Working with Parents Who Have Experienced Trauma

Many homeless parents have experienced trauma, which predisposes them to losing control of their behavior when they experience things that trigger emotions or situations related to the trauma. Common trauma triggers for homeless parents include

- a sense of being ignored or not being heard,
- a sense of being disrespected,
- a sense of being viewed as wrong or incompetent,
- a feeling of being threatened or pushed against a wall (literally or figuratively),
- the perception of being denied what they deserve or having things taken away,
- one too many requests or requirements, and

- being touched.

A seemingly innocent comment or subtle body language can trigger a counterproductive response on the part of a traumatized homeless parent.

Typical trauma responses include

- flight (parents will minimize the seriousness of their challenges or those of their children and avoid taking responsibility);
- fight (parents will become aggressive and confrontational, and may even become verbally or physically abusive); and
- freeze (parents will become passive and nonresponsive).

See Section 10.6 Useful Links for a list of resources on trauma.

### **Section 10.4 Developing Rapport Through Communication**

Communication is critical for developing trust with parents. Good rapport enables liaisons to establish a working relationship with parents that results in good educational decisions for children. The following tips will help you develop positive, productive relationships with parents.

- Keep impersonal communication, such as letters and emails, to a minimum; conduct face-to-face conversations whenever possible.
- Provide a welcoming environment.
- Conduct sensitive conversations in a private and comfortable place.
- Avoid using the word “homeless;” avoid charged and judgmental language.
- Talk to them about their living situation; be sensitive and discrete.
- Ask them about their needs.
- Assure them that their children are welcome in your school and that you have their best interest in mind.
- Empower and encourage parents; discuss solutions to challenges with them.
- Discuss things about which they feel positive.
- Listen! Listen! Listen!

### **Section 10.5 Strategies for Working Together**

Table 10.1 Challenges and Strategies for Working with Homeless Parents identifies some of the more common challenges in working with parents and provides some strategies for addressing the challenges.

**Table 10.1 Challenges and Strategies for Working with Homeless Parents**

Challenges	Considerations	Strategies
Parents and their children have unmet basic needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents may be new to an area and not know what resources are available.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage parents to advise you of their needs and assure them that you are willing to link them with available services.</li> <li>• Keep a list of community resources and contacts on hand (and in print form).</li> <li>• Keep a few donations on hand, such as hygiene items, gift cards, snacks, folders to store student records. (See Section 10.6 for a link to NCHE’s Parent Packs.) solicit donations through community partnerships.</li> <li>• Use bus tokens to assist parents with getting to agencies from your office.</li> </ul>
Parents are mistrustful and confrontational.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents may have become disillusioned by agencies in the “helping” field.</li> <li>• Parents may fear having their children taken away.</li> <li>• Parents are passionate about getting what’s best for their children and may feel any means justifies the end.</li> <li>• Parents may lack diplomacy skills.</li> <li>• Parents may bring a history of bad school experiences to their meeting with you.</li> <li>• Parents may have experienced trauma and may react with aggressive behavior.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be honest and respectful in dealing with parents, and understand that building trust takes time.</li> <li>• Center conversations on what is best for their children while acknowledging their passion.</li> <li>• Discuss concrete solutions for what their children need and ways these solutions can be implemented; establish a tone of thinking things through together.</li> <li>• Model good communication behavior by remaining calm and respectful; keep the conversation focused and moving toward solutions.</li> <li>• If the conversation gets out of hand, set boundaries; if necessary “take five” or set a time to continue the discussion later.</li> </ul>

Challenges	Considerations	Strategies
<p>Parents miss deadlines and meetings or do not follow through with expectations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sometimes, parents experience basic logistical challenges to meeting deadlines for tasks.</li> <li>• Parents may be under so much stress that they cannot follow through with expectations without help.</li> <li>• A lack of follow through is a classic trauma response (fight or freeze).</li> <li>• Parents may need guidance and structure to meet expectations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine if there is a simple solution to parents' lack of follow through, such as a need for an alarm clock, reliable transportation, or access to a phone.</li> <li>• Give parents responsibilities for helping their children be successful in school, but try to match the level of responsibility to what they can successfully handle at this time.</li> <li>• Try to determine what is triggering a trauma response (fight, flight, or freeze), and see if you can eliminate this trigger.</li> <li>• Develop parent compacts or agreements that both the parents and the liaison sign and agree to follow; specify the benefits and consequences for all parties. (See Appendix 10.A for guidelines on developing a parent agreement.)</li> <li>• Set goals and break them into attainable benchmarks to show progress.</li> </ul>
<p>Parents are hopeless and helpless.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents may have experienced so much failure that they feel they have no chance of success and no assets to build on.</li> <li>• Working with service systems can reinforce a client mentality that causes parents to feel helpless.</li> <li>• Parents may carry with them the sense that they have failed their children and suffer embarrassment and self-degradation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledge something you observe that is positive: "It's obvious that you want your child to do well in school," or "You've overcome a lot of challenges to provide for your children in these difficult circumstances."</li> <li>• Ask for parents' input in any discussions regarding their children: "Your son is having a lot of difficulty in math; what do you think that comes from? What type of help do you think would work best for him?"</li> <li>• Share something you have observed in their child that indicates that he or she is resilient and can succeed.</li> </ul>

Challenges	Considerations	Strategies
<p>Parents have poor skills in assisting with their children’s education.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents may not have had success in school and lack experience in knowing how to help their children be successful.</li> <li>• Parents may not have space or supplies in their temporary living circumstances to help their children with educational activities.</li> <li>• Parents may be so overwhelmed that they are emotionally unavailable to their children.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Link parents with school or community parenting classes, especially if transportation and childcare are available.</li> <li>• Provide a basic parenting handbook, such as NCHE’s <i>What You Need to Know to Help your Child in School</i>. (See Section 10.6 Useful Links.)</li> <li>• Reinforce the importance of regular attendance and school stability; ask parents to inform you if they are planning on moving and ensure they understand their children’s right to remain in the school of origin and receive transportation.</li> <li>• Model good parenting skills when you meet with parents; note something positive that their child did in school or some talent that their child is exhibiting; discuss good disciplinary practices that they can provide at home to reinforce improving behavior at school when needed.</li> <li>• Send home notes with the children frequently about something positive they did in school.</li> <li>• Provide parents with supplies to assist their children in their temporary living space or provide space either before or after school for the parent to work with children on homework or school activities.</li> <li>• Invite parents to serve as tutors in the classroom or to be involved at school with their children’s activities.</li> <li>• Invite parents to participate in parent groups at the school, such as the Parent Teacher Association.</li> </ul>

## Section 10.6 Useful Links

**Trauma Resources from NCHE's Information by Topic Webpages**  
[http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/sps\\_resilience.php](http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/sps_resilience.php)

**NCHE Parent Packs**  
[http://center.serve.org/nche/pr/parent\\_pack.php](http://center.serve.org/nche/pr/parent_pack.php)

**NCHE Parent Handbook: *What You Need to Know to Help Your Child in School***  
[http://center.serve.org/nche/pr/parent\\_booklet.php](http://center.serve.org/nche/pr/parent_booklet.php)