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Exploring the Lived Experiences of Homeless Families with Young Children

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### Abstract

This study researched the experiences of homeless families with young children between the ages of four and eight. Many families experience homelessness every year, and there is an importance for early childhood educators to understand how homelessness affects families with young children so that early childhood educators can effectively serve the needs of homeless families as they seek to find more permanent living situations for themselves and their young children. The research sought: (1) to explain reasons families with young children become homeless; (2) to explore the developmental effects that homeless living situations can have on young children; (3) to increase awareness of beneficial resources available to families and their perceptions of the resources. The outcomes of this study will be used to inform early childhood educators' practices as they seek to serve young children living in homeless situations. Research suggested ways that parents and young children were affected by homelessness and identified common themes that occurred throughout the parents' reasons for being homeless, their perception of resources, and their perceptions of themselves and their children.

### Exploring the Lived Experiences of Homeless Families with Young Children

Homelessness is a reality in the United States for many families with young children. Though accurate and thorough accounts of the homeless population are difficult to assemble, there are several telling statistics on homeless families with young children. The U.S. Conference of Mayors reported in 2008, “At least 3.5 million people are likely to experience homelessness during a year...more than half of this group are women and children,” (p. 1) and forty-two percent of this population is reported to be under the age of five (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2010). Though several decades earlier the homeless population was predominately composed of single men, that has now changed with “an increase of people of color and a sizable number of women, children, and young people...now among the ranks of those without homes or shelter” (Bradley, 2008, p. 263). The injustice of this life situation on our youngest, most vulnerable citizens and their caretakers was addressed by President Obama in his first Presidential Press Conference. President Obama stated: “It is not acceptable for children and families to be without a roof over their heads in a country as wealthy as ours” (Obama, 2009).

In a review of the current literature on the issue of homeless families with young children, much of the research compiled seeks to understand common stressors through the parents’ perspectives, and attempts to provide ideas for resources and solutions to assist families of homelessness. Since “housing only addresses the structural needs...which does not completely alleviate the often complex stresses associated” with being homeless, it is vital to meet the various needs of families experiencing homelessness (Karim et al., 2006, p. 455). Researchers concerned with homelessness as well as early childhood stakeholders must take the time to learn

what the most current needs of homeless families are and what important resources they need access to in order to best serve their needs.

Families living in homelessness are under overwhelming amounts of stress.

Homelessness, by itself, is considered a powerful source of stress on parents with young children; however, two common themes throughout current literature suggest that the major causes of stress within families of homelessness are chemical dependency and family violence (Swick & Williams, 2006). These two factors were not only noted as causes of homelessness, but also as reasons for chronic homelessness (Vostanis et al, 2001). Swick (2008) reported that homeless children and families experience a great deal of violence and witnessing a violent act still produces negative effects on young children creating an atmosphere of “high anxiety, distrust, and chaos within family dynamics” (p. 81). Living in shelters can cause families with young children to feel insecure and vulnerable, since “shelters are not regulated by the government...there are often no minimum standards or official guidelines for a homeless shelter” (MacGillvray et al, 2010, p. 385). Shelter conditions can also hinder parents’ feelings of control and independence over one’s own life. Other peripheral themes that emerged from the literature included unstable relationships within the family and an abdication of parental responsibility (Morris & Butt, 2003). Torquati (2002) suggested that during “periods of stress, parents may be able to maintain some warmth and support in their relationships with their children, but they may be at higher risk for irritable parenting” (p. 481). Early childhood educators hold a position in which they can encourage and support homeless parents and young

children; however, schools are often “ill equipped to combat the multifaceted problems associated with homelessness” (Gargiulo, 2006, p. 360).

There are many reasons why homelessness occurs, as many reasons as there are homeless individuals. Much research has pointed to the combination of cuts in welfare assistance programs with the lack of affordable housing and the static minimum wage has led to the overwhelming number of homeless families with young children. “Cuts in federal low-income housing programs and state cash assistance programs in combination with rising housing costs and minimum wage that has not kept up with the cost of living has created a context in which homelessness continues to spread throughout US society” (Bradley, 2008, p. 262). These issues have been the leading cause for the increase in families with young children living in homeless situations (Bradley, 2008). Without a change in public policy these issues will continue to affect the most vulnerable citizens in our society.

It is important that homeless parents with young children are heard; homeless mothers “experience the needs of their children every minute of the day” (Swick, 2010, p. 299). Swick found many parents wanted “to do a good job in parenting and family life...because of their problems they often want to compensate by increasing their focus on their children” (2010, p. 301). Herbers’ et al. (2011) research focused on the correlation between effective parenting and academic success regarding homeless children. Their research found that children experiencing homelessness were still able to maintain high academic functioning when effective parenting was practiced. “Children with very high-risk family backgrounds and higher quality parenting had more academic success than children with lower quality parenting from similarly high-risk

backgrounds” (p.99). However, young children subjected to homelessness are “twice as likely to experience learning disabilities and three times as likely to experience an emotional disturbance,” compared to housed children (Shaw & Goode, 2008, p. 6). Therefore, parents experiencing homelessness are in need of resources and supports to ensure that effective parenting is practiced.

The clear and essential needs of most homeless mothers and fathers were listed by parents as supportive help, adequate and affordable housing, high quality child care so they can work or receive training, and education opportunities, especially in parenting (Swick, 2010). Swick, in another study, explained that educating parents is effective “when combined with essential social support resources,” and these resources lead to better access of programs and activities for parents experiencing homelessness (2009, p. 329-330). Early childhood teachers can begin aiding homeless families by “developing an awareness of the challenges and situations experienced by homeless children and families” (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2008, p. 243). Through authentic communication, early childhood educators can gather information about “family perceptions on needs, resources, and strengths,” build trusting relationships with homeless families, and connect parents to key supports such as food and clothing (Swick & Bailey, 2004, p. 212). Additionally, early childhood educators can also engage “in service-learning roles with shelters and other groups that serve” homeless children and families. Through mentoring and tutoring opportunities educators can use their “liaison roles to weave together more supportive school and community settings,” and involve “community experts on various issues connected to homelessness” (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2008, p. 244). Swick also

commented on the ability early childhood educators have on increasing the self-esteem of parents experiencing homelessness, reminding teachers that, caring relationships are paramount. Other roles include “linking parents to needed resources and helping them develop needed skills” (2009, p. 187) Swick & Williams listed key strategies on how early childhood educators can build relationships and effectively support homeless families: These strategies include: (1) encouraging the family to access education and counseling to address the challenges of their situation; (2) supporting the family with resources and help that empowers them; and (3) involving the family in learning ways to promote healthy lifestyles (2006). In a later study, Swick & Williams (2010) also pointed out, that since “single parent homeless mothers develop adaptive parenting strategies to accommodate the various contexts they experience...early childhood professionals need to better understand the problems faced by single parent homeless mothers” (p. 53). Parents of young children often report a lack of enabling resources within shelters; many resources that are supposed to help parents often prevent their ability to gain independence and leave homelessness (Swick, 2005). Their research concluded that early childhood educators and shelters serving homeless families needed to: a) involve “faith-based groups more effectively in supporting and empowering homeless families, b) seek to dispel the many negative and incorrect stereotypes about homeless mothers and their children, and c) interact more with homeless mothers in supportive ways such as mentoring and one-on-one counseling” (Swick & Williams, 2010, p. 54).

The research available on homeless families with young children lacks information on how young children experience homelessness and the importance of early childhood educators



understanding the homeless experience and effectively providing care to families with young children through that experience. If early childhood educators are going to effectively serve homeless families with young children, research is needed that brings understanding to their life situation through their perspective. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of young children, ages four to eight, and their families who have experienced or are currently experiencing living in fixed, non-transient, homeless situations. Research will seek to understand common themes of the family dynamics and the development of young children who are homeless to help early childhood educators relate to these families and to support their children's learning. The basis of conducting this research study is to understand: (1) reasons families with young children become homeless; (2) the developmental effects that homeless living situations can have on young children; and (3) the beneficial resources available to families and their perceptions of the resources.

## **Methodology**

### **Context for the Study**

Participants in this study were homeless parents with young children living in a fixed, non-transient, urban downtown shelter in the southwestern United States. All the participants in this study are involved in a faith-based program that the shelter provides. The mission statement of the shelter is, "To lead our community by serving the homeless and near homeless with help, hope, and healing in the spirit of excellence, under the call of Christ." On entering the shelter, any homeless individuals or families are limited to a thirty day stay of transition. Within that thirty day timeframe the individual or family has the option of entering the program the shelter

provides. If they choose not to enter the program they must leave and find refuge elsewhere.

They are always welcomed to return and will be given the same thirty day timeframe with the option of entering the program.

The program offers a variety of classes for the individuals and families and is specific to the needs of each individual. The classes offered to the residents include Bible study, parenting, marriage, job or skill related education, and GED test preparation. If a resident is married upon entering the shelter they are required to attend marriage classes, likewise if a resident is a parent they are required to attend parenting classes. Family units live together in apartment-like housing, and fathers are allowed to live in family units if the father is a single parent with custody of the child or is married to the mother. With this exception to fathers, women and men are kept separate. The program has four steps: anger management, spirituality, addiction control, and transition to life outside the shelter. The program's main goal is to educate and equip homeless individuals to be successful after leaving the shelter, and is attempting to accomplish this by being a high accountability, low control living environment for the residents. The program does not include a time limit. Residents may move up each step after meeting with a staff counselor and deciding together that the resident is ready for the next step. However, though no time frames existed, the majority of residents completed this program within ten months to one year whereas some stayed in the program for multiple years. The residents of the shelter agreed to adhering to a specific schedule on entrance into the program. The schedule had time constraints and consisted of a morning wake-up call, periods of free time, three meals, devotions and church services, and work shifts. The shelter consisted of common areas and private living

areas for the families and individuals. The common areas include the lobby, gym, and dining hall. The living areas are separated according to families with children, single men, and single women.

The role of the researcher was that of a participant-observer. The researcher participated in volunteer work with the children of the families living at the shelter before the research began. The researcher participated in volunteer activities that the children attended; the activities were educational and engaged the children throughout the summer. As a volunteer in the program, the researcher built relationships with the children and their parents through these interactions prior to the research.

### **Participants**

Eight families, residents in the homeless shelter, participated in the study. All parents and children involved in the study volunteered to participate. Participants in this study were homeless and had at least one child between the ages of four and eight with the average age of child participants being 5.4 years old. The average family had 2.8 children living at the shelter with them and eight children were interviewed. All the parents in this study were jobless, four parents were working on completing their GED, three had received their GED, one parent had a few years of college work completed, and one was seeking a degree in higher education at the time of the study. The average amount of time spent at the shelter was 5.5 months at the time the interview with the family occurred. The age of the parents ranged from 22 to 38 years old with an average age of 30.3 years old. The families were 25% white, 50% African American, and 25% Hispanic. The mother was the interviewed parent in each interview, but of the families

participating three families were comprised of a married unit. In only one of those families was the father living separately from the family unit and was not living in the shelter. Furthermore, of the two fathers living in the shelter both attended the interview but only one contributed.

### **Procedures**

The research study was a qualitative phenomenological study that was carried out from October 2011 until March 2012. Interviews and observations were conducted. Weekly interviews occurred in an office at the shelter on Friday after dinner of each week, while observations occurred throughout the week at the shelter in the common areas of the foyer and the dining hall. Interviews lasted, on average, one hour for each family and observations occurred after the interview with the family until the completion of the study. Families were observed interacting twice per week. After each interview, field notes were written on the details of the interviews. The interviewer asked parents about their own childhood and what led to their current situation, their child(ren)'s strengths and interests, their support system as a homeless family and the impact homelessness has had on their family, and their views on parenting. The children's interview questions focused on the children's favorite activity for fun and play, who they like to play with, their favorite thing about school, what makes them happy and scared, and to describe where they live. An audiotape was used to help accurately record interviews; without the use of the audiotape important details of the participants' responses might have been missed. While conducting observations, the researcher focused on parent and child interactions; such as reading together and helping with the child's school work, eating meals together, and types of communication between the child and parent. During the observations the researcher observed

from the common areas during the residents dinner time and their two hours of free time in the evening, which is spent in the foyer and the dining hall. The researcher interacted with the participants in the study during times of observation as the participants initiated an interaction with the researcher.

### **Data Collection**

The basis of conducting this research study was to understand: (1) reasons families with young children become homeless; (2) the developmental effects that homeless living situations can have on young children; (3) and the beneficial resources available to families and their perceptions of the resources. All data, from interviews conducted and observations taken, was categorized into these subcategories.

### **Interviews**

Through interviews conducted the interviewer asked parents about their own childhood and what led to their current situation, their child(ren)'s strengths and interests, their support system as a homeless family and the impact homelessness has had on their family, and their views on parenting. The interviewer asked the young children interview questions that focused on the children's favorite activity for fun and play, who they liked to play with, their favorite thing about school, what makes them happy and scared, and to describe their living environment.

Table A details the reasons participants cited for being homeless, indicating that each participant explained multiple reasons for their homelessness. Some of the reasons parents of young children cited for their homelessness included a description of an unhappy childhood,

teenage pregnancies, multiple children, being a high school drop out, drug usage, joblessness, and abandonment of the father of their children.

Table A

*Reasons for Homelessness as Stated by Homeless Parents*

Participant in Study	Reason for homelessness						
	Unhappy Childhood	Teenage Pregnancy	Multiple Children	High School Drop Out	Drug Use	Spouse (Father) Abandonment	Jobless
1	X	X	X	X			X
2	X	X	X	X		X	X
3	X	X	X	X		X	X
4	X	X	X	X	X		X
5	X		X	X	X	X	X
6			X	X	X	X	X
7	X		X	X	X	X	X
8	X	X	X		X	X	X

An unhappy childhood was a common theme in the participants of this study. All the participants described growing up in poverty situations stating that their basic needs were met, although their childhood felt unstable at times. One of the participants talked about alcohol usage of caretakers, another participant described the early death of her parents, and seven discussed parental fights or the abandonment of one or both parents. The only participant who described a happy childhood was adopted at the age of eight months and was the adoptive parents' only child. While an unhappy childhood was considered by seven participants as a reason for homelessness, these seven mothers further described their unhappy childhoods as leading to poor

relationships with family members. Interestingly, these poor familial relationships was cited as being the reason of their lack of resources and support systems as adults.

Teenage pregnancies were common with five participants stating that they were still teenagers during their first pregnancy. The other three participants explained that their first pregnancy occurred before they reached the age of 25 years. All the participants in the study had at least two children, with the range being from two children to six children. Two families did not have all children living with them at the shelter during the time of the study. In both the children's other biological parent or a close relative had full custody of these children and were living in a housed setting. Early pregnancies were cited as reasons for homelessness because it led many of the participants to dropping out of high school. The participants that became pregnant as teenagers and felt they could not juggle the responsibilities of a baby with the demands of high school. These parents also found it difficult to find affordable housing with jobs paying minimum wages. Five of the families that participated in the study also cited a lack of paternal help and involvement as a source of their homelessness, stating the difficulties of being a single mother. One participant explained, "[I] had to raise them by myself without a father's help, very little support system at all, and having to go to doctor's appointments on my own, do it here, do this, do that. I think that's the biggest struggle." Six of the participants explained that their children each had different fathers, with only two of the participants stating that all of their children had the same father. Having multiple children was also cited as a reason for living in a homeless situation because of the financial responsibility each child adds.

All but two of the participants in the study had dropped out of high school. However, at the time of the interviews, three of the participants had obtained their GED, and the other three were working to obtain their GED through courses the shelter provided. All participants were jobless before coming to the shelter and were jobless through the duration of the study. Dropping out of high school and not pursuing higher education or technical training was considered by all participants as a reason for homelessness and cause for the lack of job opportunities. Joblessness was considered a reason for homelessness because it led to a lack of financial support and an inability to pay daily living expenses.

Four of the participants cited that becoming jobless and having multiple children led to their drug usage. One participant explained that she had started using drugs at the age of 17 which led to her dropping out of school, having multiple children, and being jobless. Drugs were explained as being a reason for homelessness by all participants that were involved in drug use because they could not leave their addiction, even though they were also aware that they were not completely functional as addicts. The shelter provides many resources for individuals with drug habits and is considered a drug rehabilitation program, therefore, participants were able to receive the interventions needed to quit using drugs without the concern that their children might be taken from them.

Taking responsibility for individual actions that led to homelessness is considered to be a crucial part of the shelter's rehabilitation process for homeless families. Clients of the shelter are encouraged to take responsibility for life decisions that led to their current situation. Through interviews with homeless parents, similar themes existed of contributing factors in each family's



case. These factors include unhappy childhoods, young pregnancies, multiple children, failure to complete schooling, drug or substance abuse, paternal abandonment, and unemployment.

Parents were asked to describe how their child(ren)'s behavior had changed since moving to the shelter. Many parents who had described positive experiences since moving to the shelter also described their young child(ren) as being angry and emotional since arriving at the shelter. One parent described her six year old as "getting more emotional...he has more issues going on with him cause he's able to see and know what's going on around him," and another parent of a four year old stated that the "little one has a lot of problems like anger issues." There are many different children from all age groups living in the shelter, and some parents expressed that to be a good thing for their child(ren), while others expressed it as negative. One parent stated "they like that there's a lot of other kids," while another stated that; "sometimes it's rough on my kids" having other people around all the time. Another parent stated that her struggle with living in the shelter with young children was in her ability to provide for her children; "whenever my daughter asks for something it's hard to say you know mommy doesn't have enough money right now." While another parent felt that due to the stability and constant routine her children were a lot happier than when they were living on the streets or with different people. Each child reacted to the experience of moving to the shelter differently but each of the participants stated that they saw a change in their child(ren)'s behavior or demeanor.

In interviews with the young children, all the children stated an interest in school and learning. Of the nine children interviewed; three children attended public school, three children participated in an early childhood program, and three of the children stayed in the day care the

shelter provided. Seven of the children gave two to three word answers to the interview questions; two of the children spoke in complete sentences in response to the questions asked. All the children exhibited an inability to engage in the interview questions and distractibility was high with all children interviewed. Interviews on parent-child interactions and communication revealed effects on homeless children's behavior and vocabulary.

Most of the participants expressed positive views towards life at the shelter, with seven of the participants explaining that they have had a positive experience while living at the shelter and participating in the program the shelter provided. One participant stated that it's hard to live in the shelter and expressed a desire to leave. Of the participants that shared a positive view of life at the shelter, some cited other families as being a support system needed and causing the positive experience. Others explained their positive experience came from the staff and the program itself. One mother clarified; "It's not the place, it's the people..." that made living in the shelter a good experience for her family. Another parent described the difference in her feelings toward the program compared to society's viewpoint on homelessness: "You know what, to me, you see people on the outside think it's like this horrible thing. It's actually, I mean, it's a good program." Other parents credited the staff and program as their main support and reason for their success; "It was like they knew exactly what I was going through, you know, when they didn't...the staff here...were so compassionate about my situation that they helped me kick my drugs...They made me stick it out, which I'm so grateful for." For these parents the shelter was described as a blessing where needs were consistently met and a place of stability and routine. The heartfelt sentiment of one participant was: "It's given me the opportunity and the ability to

be the good parent that I want to be.” The participants described a great ability to be more stable and consistent with their children, therefore, they viewed the shelter as a safe haven where they had the opportunity to be better people, parents, and in cases where it applies, spouses.

Through interviews, research verified that moving into the homeless shelter affected the young children participating in this study. Parents interviewed described behavioral changes that occurred with their children; issues of anger and anxiety were raised as a result of being homeless. A behavior change was noticed by all participating parents. Most of the children interviewed had limited vocabulary and the attention skills necessary to complete the interview. All the children exhibited an inability to engage in the interview questions and distractibility was high with all children interviewed. Interviews on parent-child interactions and communication revealed effects on homeless children’s behavior and vocabulary.

### **Observations**

During the observations at the shelter, the researcher observed from the common areas during the residents dinner time and their two hours of free time in the evening, which is spent in the foyer, the dining hall, and living areas. The observations revealed how the parents and children interacted with one another during their personal time.

In observations of parent and child interactions, behaviors of educational support, such as reading and completing school work, were not observed at any time during evening free time. One parent did discuss listening to her child read at the end of the day. Four parents were active in their young child’s play, either through observation and discussion or engaged in play with the child; four parents were not observed playing with their children nor was there parental

supervision of the child when playing was observed by the researcher. At times when parents were required to be supervising their children, children were observed to be running around the common area and in and out of the common area and climbing on tables and chairs. During these observations children were seen interacting freely with others in the shelter. Lack of supervision had effects on the young child(ren)'s behavior, leading to negative behaviors displayed by the children throughout the shelter and in school settings.

Families were required to eat meals together while the children were not in school or in a child care setting. Regular observations were made of seven of the families eating dinner together. One parent did not attend dinner with her young child during any of the observations, yet no reason was given. Observations of communication and affection between parent and child revealed that three of the parents spent time having conversations with their child(ren) while five of the parents communicated through short verbal directions. Affection, such as hugs and kisses, were observed frequently in three of the families. Restrictions, harsh tones, and general disapproval was observed as an often occurrence in five of the participating families. Verbal and nonverbal communication affected the young children living in the shelter. During observations, single word responses were also common from child to parent.

### **Perceptions of Resources**

Support from others, including counselors, mentors, or other homeless families, was viewed by seven of the participants as an important resource. Having these supports in place led participants to feel successful in the program. As a part of the shelter's program, clients are encouraged to have future plans for when they leave the shelter. Two of the participants

discussed job plans. One participant wanted to be a nurse and was taking college courses towards that goal. Many participants explained how they would like to give back to the homeless community by becoming a resource to other homeless families. All the participants expressed a desire to be stable and independent. The participants interviewed wanted what was best for their family and saw it as their responsibility. The goal of the resources was to ensure their success in this area. By the program's decision to constantly discuss life beyond the shelter, participants were able to look ahead and plan for their next step; the resources that the shelter provides gave participants the opportunity to make their goals a reality.

A program for school-aged children existed as tutoring and after school activities. Children up to age five, who were not in an outside program such as a child care facility, were required to stay with their parents when the shelter's day care was not open. Children in prekindergarten, kindergarten, or Head Start were not engaged in any tutoring or after school activities. One parent described a need for more opportunities for the younger children, she stated the shelter needs to get "...a class together for the kids" with more opportunities to learn. This resource could have the potential to use developmentally appropriate practices, such as engaging children in play with materials like water and sand, while also giving children early literacy opportunities. There is also a need for parenting classes to include what parents should expect at different developmental stages as well as ways that parents can promote learning for their young child.

The interviews revealed that the parents felt positively about the resources provided by the shelter. The shelter provides very individual and specific resources to the clients, and through

this the shelter is able to ensure that their clients' needs and goals are met. However, there is a need to develop more engaging resources for the young children that are developmentally appropriate and promote learning.

### **Conclusion**

The basis for conducting this study was to understand: (1) reasons families with young children become homeless; (2) the developmental effects that homeless living situations can have on young children; (3) and beneficial resources available to families and their perceptions of the resources. Conclusions were assembled through themes that emerged from the observations and the interviews conducted for the research study. Through interviews with parents reasons for homelessness emerged. Similar themes arose through multiple interviews, including: unhappy childhoods, young pregnancies, multiple children, failure to complete schooling, drug or substance abuse, paternal abandonment, and unemployment. These factors were considered to be the causes of homelessness and reasons for continual homelessness resulting in an inability to leave a homeless lifestyle.

Through interviews with the parents and children and observations of family interactions and communication, moving into the homeless shelter adversely affected the young children. Parents interviewed described behavioral changes that occurred with their children such as anger and anxiety. Observations and interviews of parent-child interactions and communication revealed effects on homeless children's behavior, attention span, and vocabulary. It was clearly evident that living in the shelter affected the development of the young children.

By interviewing the parents it became apparent that resources were beneficial to the families with young children. Overall the interviews revealed that the parents felt positively about the resources provided by the shelter. The shelter provided very individualized and specific resources to the clients living there. Through this service the shelter is able to ensure that their clients' needs and goals are met. However, there were resources lacking in some areas. There is a need to develop more engaging resources for the young children, resources that are developmentally appropriate and promote learning, as well as educational support for parents to learn more about their young children.

In conclusion, the families that participated in this study demonstrated common themes of family dynamics and the development of young children. Parents interviewed discussed an understanding of the circumstances that led them to homelessness and to the shelter, seven of the participants expressed verbal responsibility for the actions that led them to homelessness. However, observations proved that families still struggled in understanding the basic needs of their children and the importance of early education and intervention. The study validates the importance of and the need for educating families of young children who are homeless.

### **Implications**

Research suggested that parents and young children, were affected by homelessness and that common themes occurred throughout the parents' reasons for being homeless, their perceptions of themselves and their children, and their perceptions of resources. Early childhood educators know the value of understanding the young child's background story and culture, as well as the importance of providing care and support to the entire family. By knowing why

families with young children become homeless, the early childhood educator becomes aware of the families circumstances. This information can only help the early childhood educator in supporting the family as well as educating the child while meeting his or her needs.

Not all homeless families are a part of a working program. Unfortunately, many families with young children who are homeless are unaccounted for and their resources are limited. Swick & Williams pointed to three key strategies for early childhood educators to remember when working with homeless families no matter what their current location is: (1) encourage the family to access education and counseling to address the challenges of their situation; (2) support the family with resources and help that empower them; (3) involve the family in learning ways to promote healthy lifestyles (2006). An early childhood educator who is aware of the family with young children's situation can be a crucial resource in ensuring the family feels supported and empowered through any life situation.

It is vital that early childhood educators are aware that homelessness along with young children and their development. Developmental delays may be present, below average vocabulary, an inability to focus, or issues of anger and resentment towards life. Early childhood educators are crucial in providing support to these young children as they transition into a public school environment. Therefore, it is important for early childhood educators to be aware without bias of the reasons families with young children become homeless, the resources that are available to these families as well as ways that an educator can be a liaison to resources, and be prepared to be understanding of the effects that homelessness can have on young children.



Further research should consider looking into the family structures of homelessness, the major differences between transient homeless families and those living in shelters in a fixed location, and the benefits of engaging activities for young children who are homeless. Early childhood educators also need to be informed on the dynamics of life that lead homeless families into their current predicament, as well as the developmental needs of young children. This information is valuable to help families navigate their own way back out of their homelessness. It can also provide early childhood educators with strategies to help some of society's most vulnerable children.

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