

P A R I T Y

Homelessness and Children



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Joining the Dots: Homeless Children's Experience of Education

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The North West Regional Children's Resource Program aims to advocate for children who have experienced homelessness and/or family violence. Over several years through our ongoing relationships with homelessness support and family violence services and through secondary consultation and brokerage support, we have identified that there are strong links between being a homeless family and educational disruption and disadvantage.

During November and December of 2010 the North West Regional Children's Resource Program surveyed 40 children who accompany parents through the Merri Outreach Support Service (MOSS) case management programs. The surveys focused on the children's educational experiences and the impact homelessness has on school attendance, academic achievement and connections to school and recreational opportunities.

Through our case management services and support provided to homeless families a common theme was that children were well behind their peers, had missed many months of school and found it difficult to get adequate educational support.

The aims of the Report are to:

- Determine the impact homelessness has on children's education;
- Assess whether current housing and education policy is addressing these issues, and
- Recommend strategies for improving outcomes for children's education.

MOSS has eight support programs that all aim to support individuals and families through homelessness our programs support people from crisis through to long term housing. The families who were invited to participate in our surveys were referred from our Crisis Response Program/ICMI (Intensive Case Management Initiative) and our Hume Transitional Support Teams One and Two.

All the families that were interviewed had experienced significant periods of homelessness occurring over many years. Families were not in crisis at the time of the data collection and all had their accommodation secured even if temporary. Of the 40 children surveyed they came from 12 families. All the families involved were reimbursed for their generous contribution.

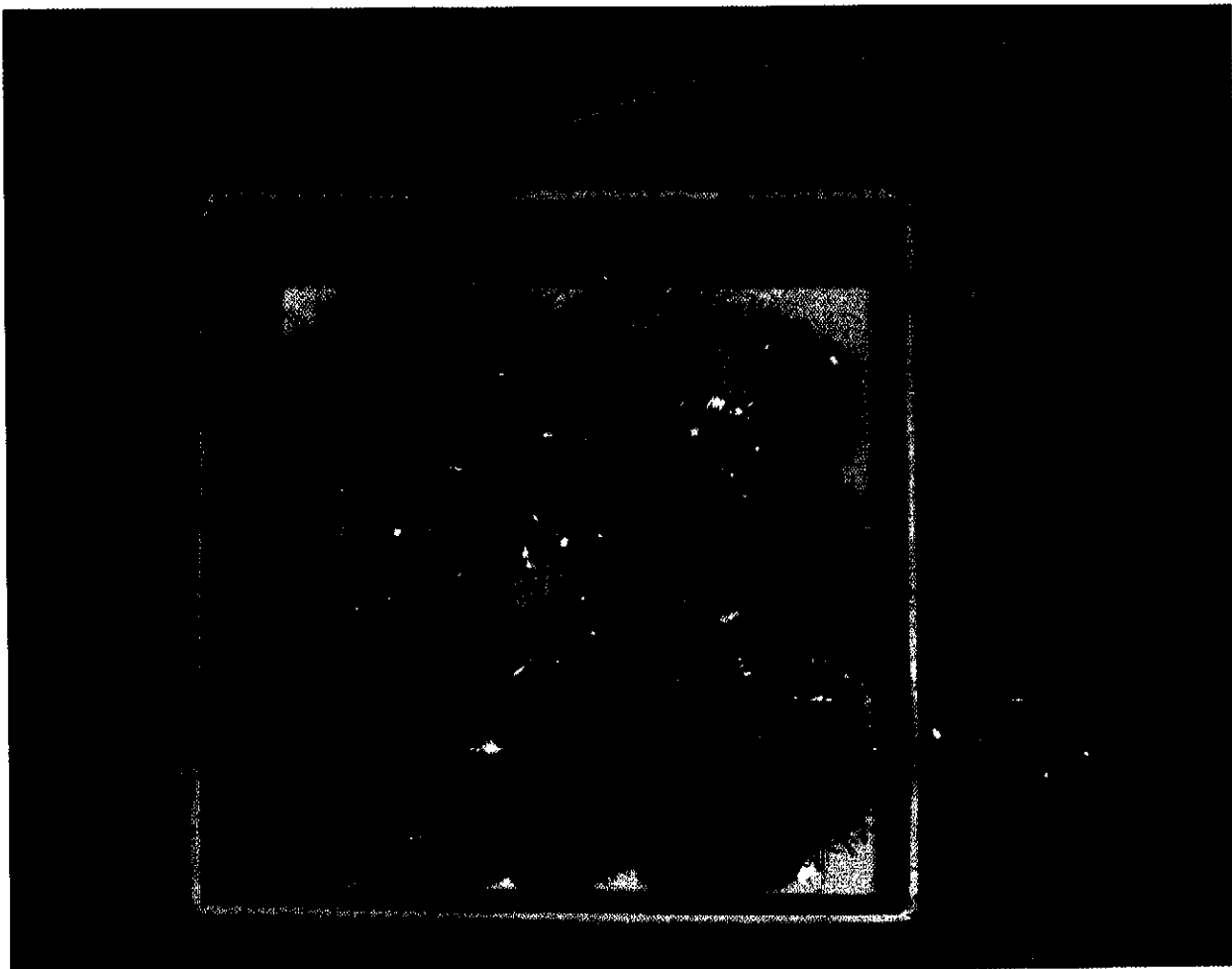
Following is a summary of the findings in the report:

Gender and Children's Ages

Of the 40 children surveyed 24 were male and 16 were female. The children surveyed in the data collection were ages three and up to 17. We captured the experiences of children's early learning including attendance at childcare and kindergarten. The majority of children were of primary school age.

Cultural Identity

Twenty four (60 per cent) of the children surveyed identified from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds countries of origin consisted of Lebanon, Turkey,



Sudan, Jordan and Kuwait. The children that identified from these cultures all spoke more than one language and English was their second language. Ten (25 per cent) of the children surveyed identified as Aboriginal and six (15 per cent) identified as Anglo Australian.

Current Accommodation

The families that participated in the survey lived in the northern suburbs of metropolitan Melbourne. The accommodation types recorded in the survey represented where the family were residing at the time the survey was conducted. 70 per cent of families were residing in transitional accommodation whilst waiting for Office of Housing accommodation.

Disability

Disability included physical or intellectual disability. Parents were asked if formal assessments had been completed by professionals. The seven per cent of children who identified as having a disability reported these to be assessed Intellectual disabilities. The children who were identified as having intellectual disabilities had been tested by an educational psychologist. This should ensure that children were receiving additional support in the class room, one on one from an integration aid, which is funded through the Department of Education.

Significant Health Issue

The children surveyed were asked whether there was any significant health issue that required ongoing treatment from a specialist. Of the five per cent that reported having a significant health issues, families identified Asthma and Cardiac problems. Children who experience homelessness often have health issues that may go untreated or inadequately treated; this can impact on children's attendance at school if they are unwell on a regular basis.

Families reported respiratory complaints as the most common health issue. Health issues that were neglected tended to be issues that couldn't be treated at the local GP, such as dental, skin conditions, hearing and sight problems, as these were usually costly and waiting lists were long.

Student Enrolment

Student enrolment identified whether at the time of being surveyed the children were enrolled in childcare, kindergarten or school. 83 per cent of children were enrolled in school and had been attending during 2010. The three per cent of children not enrolled were Aboriginal children and had not attended school during 2010. Two per cent were enrolled in child care and 12 per cent were enrolled in kindergarten.

Multiple School/ Kindergarten Attendances

This survey question asked each parent how many kindergarten and schools the child attended. Of the 40 children surveyed families reported attending a total of 101 schools and 53 kindergartens. An alarming 59 per cent of children attended more than three schools. 15 per cent of children attended six schools that is a change of

more than one school a year.

"My son has just turned five. He has gone to five different kindergartens because we've been homeless. He used to be a happy kid, now he is clingy and withdrawn and hates it when I leave him there. I hope to keep him in the one school once we find a house"

Periods of Not Attending School

This survey question examined whether children had missed any lengths of schooling which included more than half a term. We asked specifically if this was related to homelessness and transience. Parents reported that when there were significant times of absenteeism it was due to not being able to transport their children, issues related to family violence, and children's separation anxiety and fears of starting new schools. If families had to move into a new area and change schools it was common for children to not want to attend another new school.

62 per cent of children surveyed had missed more than half a term of school on at least one occasion.

Expected Level of Achievement for Age

With the majority of families surveyed we were able to look at children's latest school reports. The school reports gave us a clear idea of whether the children were at the expected level of achievement for their age, and we took a breakdown of how far behind the children were.

60 per cent of children were not at the expected level of achievement. Of the 60 per cent of children who were not at the expected level of achievement 28 per cent are two years or more behind, four per cent 18 months behind, 32 per cent 12 months behind and 36 per cent six months behind.

Factors that Build Resilience to Supporting Children Academically

40 per cent of the surveyed children were not behind academically whilst the majority 60 per cent did not meet standards. We examined with parents the reasons why some children were able to experience homelessness and not fall behind at school.

What our surveys discovered was that the 40 per cent who did well at school were children who had less housing moves, i.e. on becoming homeless, accessed crisis or transitional accommodation fairly quickly, and were able to avoid much school disruption, these children tended to do better at school.

Some parents who despite homelessness, were disciplined at ensuring that minimal disruption to their children's education occurred. These parents were engaged in their children's education and homework and understood that it was essential to give their children an education to break the poverty cycle.

The 60 per cent of children who were falling behind at school experienced extended periods of homelessness, with many years of transience and housing instability found it more difficult to engage and go to school on a regular basis.

Parental attitude also played a role in determining how a child engaged well in school. Parents whose own experience of school and education that had been incomplete, negative or lacking, often had fear associated around schools, and discussed finding engaging with the education system overwhelming and intimidating.

Children who have had to move completely out of their area and experienced significant trauma also tended to have issues engaging with school usually because they were struggling to manage emotionally. Parents who had no reliable means of transport and who did not live in close proximity to their children's school these children also missed a lot of school and fell behind with their work.

Areas of Learning

Of the 60 per cent of children who have identified that they are behind in their academic achievements, we surveyed the areas of literacy and numeracy that they identified as being delayed. The data for the following was obtained from the children's most updated school reports. It was evident from the data that children were falling behind across all areas of literacy and numeracy. In one case a child who had been identified as gifted and was moved into the school year above her age after experiencing extended periods of homelessness she not only fell behind but struggled with her confidence and which affected her ability to catch up to her peers.

"My nine-year-old daughter was in grade three, she was doing really well in a primary school in the southern suburbs and was put up to grade four as we was really advanced with her school work. Then I split from her mum we became homelessness and moved to Melbourne, we were homeless for many months, finally when she was re-enrolled into a school in Melbourne, she had missed so much school work, and had lost all her confidence, she went back to grade three and struggles to keep up with the work. She went from being an advanced student to being unhappy and behind in all her work." (parent)

Naplan Testing

Students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 sit the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy test in May each year. The tests are used to determine how children across Australia are faring academically and to set a national average. Children who experience homelessness may miss out on NAPLAN testing due to being absent or not enrolled in school at the time testing occurs. Our survey asked parents if children who were eligible to be tested had sat the NAPLAN tests.

Of the 25 surveyed children who were eligible, 19 had sat the test, and 6 had missed the test. Some children had been tested in earlier years then missed out on the following years. The main concern with children missing NAPLAN testing is that they go undetected; and parents and schools do not know how their children are managing in comparison to the national standards. If they do get tested and the school is approved for additional funding to support them the following year, often they move to different schools where no follow up occurs.

Assessment for Learning Difficulties

Of the 60 per cent of children surveyed who identified as having learning difficulties we asked parents if at any time during their schooling they were formally assessed by a school arranged Educational Psychologist. An educational assessment can determine whether there are any issues with Intellectual functioning and can provide teachers and parents with specific strategies to support the students.

If the IQ assessment falls below a score of 70, funding may be applied for by the school for an integration aid to support the student. Seventeen (71 per cent) of the students surveyed who had identified as being significantly behind in their work had not been formally assessed. The seven (29 per cent) of children surveyed who had been assessed generally had better support in place to assist with learning difficulties.

Support for Learning Difficulties

Of the 60 per cent of children who identified as having academic delay, only 15 per cent of these children had support put in place. This support included Individual learning plans, tutoring, in some cases integration aids, and one on one support in schools from teachers. When discussing with families about available support, advocacy, and schools responsibilities, families commented that they were frustrated at lack of information and poor relationships with schools.

On occasions SAAP services would assist children to access tutoring support through brokerage funds. All families surveyed commented that tutoring support is unaffordable and not sustainable although their children benefited from the one on one individualised support. Of the 60 per cent of children who were identified as having academic delays only 12 per cent of these children had received tutoring, and this tutoring wasn't consistent, families may have only accessed tutoring for just one school term. Of the families surveyed none of the children attended homework clubs. Tutoring support consisted of children attending, outside their school, a private teacher or tutoring service.

Individual Learning Plans

Children who have been identified through schools as having an academic delay are required to have in place an Individual Learning Plan (ILP). This is a plan/agreement

developed by the class teacher in partnership with the student and family. The plan highlights the areas which need improving, and detail what the school, student and family will do to support and improve learning. These plans should have timelines and review dates attached to them in order to mark progress.

Our surveys asked parents if they were aware of ILPs and whether their children had them in place. Many families were unaware of them and felt that their children would benefit from having a learning plan in place. Of the 60 per cent of children who identified as having academic delays only 29 per cent had learning plans in place (seven children). All Aboriginal children are required to have Koorie Education Support Plans (KELPs) which is a learning agreement between the families; school and department of Education. None of the Aboriginal children we surveyed had KELPs in place.

The Impact of Homelessness on Children's Education

It is well researched and understood that the impact of homelessness on children can have detrimental effects on development and wellbeing. Our survey wanted to determine with parents and children specifically what the impact their period of homelessness had on them, and how the parents saw their children cope at the time and thereafter.

We asked parents whether they felt that their children's education was directly impacted on by being homeless. 85 per cent of the parents said yes, and reported their children missed school mainly due to not being able to transport their children to school because they had to move out of area. The 15 per cent of parents, who said no, were all committed to ensuring their children would attend school.

We asked parents to identify how they saw their children coping during their period of homelessness. Parents identified issues that they saw within their children and commented on how sibling groups coped in different ways.

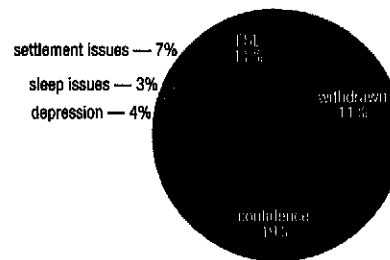
The following chart is a breakdown of identified issues. Parents commented that sibling groups who went through the same experience of homelessness depending on where their child was in age and emotional development determined on how they coped and moved on from their experience of homelessness. Parents commented that children who were younger and received appropriate support seemed to cope better long term, in comparison to children who were older at the time of homelessness they had increased emotional difficulties and found it harder to engage in a new school environment, and catch up with work.

Children whose first language wasn't English struggled to keep up with work and found settling into school difficult, finding tutors who are bilingual are very hard to access and unaffordable. Parents struggled to

communicate with schools and teachers when language was a barrier and often did not know what resources were available or where to go for assistance.

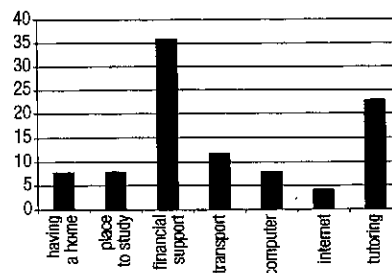
The following is a chart of emotional issues reported by parents:

Impacts of homelessness on children



What resources do you think would assist learning?

We asked parents and children what they thought would improve their child's wellbeing and educational outcomes. This question often raised the issue that parents were not aware of support available, and commented on feeling like they were not part of the school community therefore did not go to the school teachers or principal to ask for additional support. When parents raised the issue of financial support they discussed not being able to afford booklists, uniforms, excursions, camps, tutoring etc. The following is a chart of resources parents felt would assist their children's education:



Children's happiness at school?

We surveyed parents and children's happiness as school, and found that although children may be struggling academically, 67 per cent were still quite happy to go to school. Of the 33 per cent of children who were unhappy at school and displayed school refusal on a regular basis, issues identified that caused this were bullying, social issues with friendship groups, teachers, and very poor academic achievement. Children who were two years or more behind in their work or who had to repeat school reported to being unhappy at school.

School Community

We surveyed parents on whether they felt part of their school community. This included their children participating in recreational activities outside the curriculum, having friends over after school, and socialising with other parents and families and well established relationships with teachers. 83 per cent of the surveyed parents reported not feeling part of the school community

due to transience (thinking they won't be at the school very long), shame about family circumstances, negative childhood experiences of schooling and time commitments due to attempting to resolve their housing issues.

Sport and recreational activities outside of school

This survey question examined whether children were connected into sporting and recreational activities outside of school. Parents commented that they would like their children to participate in swimming, football, basketball and dance classes but find the cost a barrier. In particular larger families with many siblings are less likely to engage in sporting or recreational activities as the cost of sending several children is unaffordable. For the children who did attend recreational activities it was usually financed by a brokerage program as families found it difficult to afford annual fees.

Financial Costs of Education

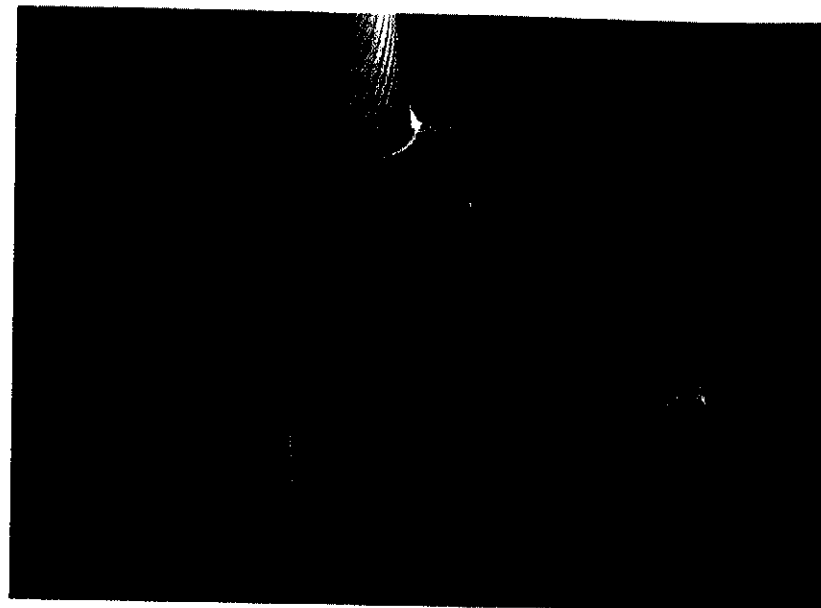
The cost of sending children to school is a financial burden that all families reported struggling with. Larger families with children in kindergarten, primary school and high school, struggle with all school payments and transport. Families are also not well informed of the rights when it comes to educational costs and available financial support.

95 per cent of families reported not being able to meet the educational costs of their children resulting in their children missing out on educational opportunities.

Recommendations

For SAAP and family violence workers:

- As part of the children's case plans develop educational plans which are goal focused and have regular review dates and include supporting and assisting the families to develop better relationships with their school communities and teachers.
- If children are behind, ensure the school has an adequate Individual Learning plan in place and advocate that the school puts in additional support, often discretionary funding is available that can be utilised for children who are falling behind.
- Develop relationships with key staff of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, discuss with them the impacts of homelessness and your role and explore what support is available.
- Find out what homework clubs and tutoring support is available and resource brokerage options.
- Encourage and support children to become involved in sport and recreational opportunities that are sustainable.
- Assist families to get computer and internet access at home if possible.



For Schools:

- Ensure accountability mechanisms are in place for children who are disadvantaged, to ensure that they do not fall between the gaps and become disengaged from education, this includes early identification of difficulties and planning with families to improve educational disadvantage.
- Develop educational responsibilities for children with difficult/disruptive behaviour, to reduce expulsion and suspension rates. Children should not miss out on education due to behavioural issues.
- Improve access to free or low cost recreation opportunities for children (i.e. excursions, camps, lap top programs, etc.)

For Housing providers, Policy and Government:

- No moves and no evictions housing policy – keep children in their communities and in schools;
- Continue and expand initiatives with a housing first approach to enable families to maintain education;
- Ongoing free, accessible, counseling support to children who have been impacted by family violence and trauma;
- Safe appropriate family crisis accommodation options, with direct links to ongoing long term preventative support and housing pathways;
- Make public transport free for all school aged children;
- Improve guidelines for disability support through schools, so children who have fallen behind but may not have an Intellectual disability can access Learning Aid support if appropriate;
- Review current initiatives, policy and guidelines to ensure they are

accessing children and families (i.e. Wannik Strategy, Supporting Children and Families affected by Homelessness 2009 guidelines);

- Improved relationships between Office of Housing and Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, to ensure that the needs of families experiencing homelessness are addressed and adequate support is provided by:
 - Providing school homework clubs /and or tutoring subsidies for families and children on low incomes or who have fallen behind academically;
 - Adequately fund schools so that families who have experienced homelessness do not miss out on school uniforms, books, or other educational expenses;
 - Children who are falling behind need to be identified and supported early and strategies put in place to ensure that children do not fall between the gaps regardless of multiple school changes;
 - An education support program available to children and families should be in every school with the focus on continuing social support, advocacy and education planning and tutoring support;
 - Specialist support for Aboriginal children and ensuring strategies like Wannik are reaching all Aboriginal children in need, and
 - Specialist support in multiple languages for children from diverse cultural backgrounds whose first language may not be English (this includes refugees and newly arrived migrants).

For further information or a copy of the full report, contact North West Regional Children's Resource Program 03 9359 5493 or visit website on www.homelesskidscount.org