



Homelessness in the Classroom

A resource for
primary schools

FOCUS
Ireland

Challenging homelessness. Changing lives.

into 

Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann



“ During a period of upheaval I find that children sometimes express their feelings in non-verbal ways so I give them lots of opportunities for art, drama, writing, games. — Teacher

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 **With the permission of parents, I informed the other teachers and principal that there had been a change of circumstances and directed the parents to local agencies for financial and other support. — HSCL Teacher**



About the Guidance

Focus Ireland and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) have worked collaboratively to produce this guidance for primary school teachers and principals who are supporting students and families experiencing homelessness.

About Focus Ireland

Focus Ireland is one of the largest housing and homelessness charities in Ireland. We are driven by the fundamental belief that homelessness is wrong. We support children, families and individuals around Ireland who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Focus Ireland operates the Family Homeless Action Team in Dublin, which supports families in emergency accommodation to find alternative accommodation. Our child support workers engage with children and their families to assess and support child welfare and well-being, developing parenting skills and capacity.

Focus Ireland has been raising concerns about the educational impact of homelessness since the beginning of the current crisis. We worked with the Educational Welfare Service (EWS) to produce guidance for Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) teachers and School Completion Officers. We are often contacted by teachers outside the EWS structures who are seeking guidance and support while working with children experiencing homelessness.

About the INTO

The INTO is the oldest and largest teachers' union in Ireland. It represents teachers at primary level in the Republic of Ireland and at primary and post-primary level in Northern Ireland.

Teachers are acutely aware and concerned about the escalating homelessness crisis. They witness the impact on pupils in their class every day as it manifests itself in pupils' school attendance, punctuality, academic achievement, participation, social engagement and educational aspirations. In recent years, homelessness has been a key priority area for the INTO as our members have adopted resolutions at Annual Congress in an effort to raise awareness and to work towards a solution to homelessness.

The INTO has long called for action on homelessness as more children struggle in school. In particular, the organisation has called for additional resources, ring-fenced funding and advice and guidance for teachers who are working with pupils experiencing homelessness. As this has not yet materialised, the INTO has worked with Focus Ireland to develop this practical guidance in an effort to better support teachers.

A recent report commissioned by the Children’s Rights Alliance, *HomeWorks*,¹ found that consistent routines and responsive schools often offered children a sense of stability and continuity amid the uncertainty of family homelessness. The report showed that simple goodwill gestures on the part of schools made all the difference to pupils and their families. These included making allowances for pupils being late, giving less homework and providing children with basic school materials.

It may not always be obvious to teachers that a pupil is experiencing homelessness. Parents can be understandably reluctant to inform the school that they have become homeless due to the perceived stigma. Once schools are aware that families are experiencing homelessness, they are enabled to become more sensitive to the needs of pupils and the challenges they face. *HomeWorks* reported that, despite the lack of guidance and support at system level, schools were considered to be ‘beacons of hope’ for children experiencing homelessness.

Teachers report that they often feel helpless, powerless and ill-equipped to effectively respond to, and support, pupils who are experiencing homelessness. The purpose of this document is to share suggestions on good practice for teachers who are supporting families and children who are experiencing homelessness. Teachers fulfil a constant role in children’s lives and they are the first port of call for families who are struggling. Notwithstanding their vital role, teachers cannot be expected to meet the many challenges of homelessness alone nor can they fill the vacuum caused by a lack of funding, resources and services in the system.

This document aims to highlight the reality of homelessness and its impact on children’s education as well as sharing some good practice already happening in schools. The suggestions contained within these guidelines will not suit every school context and may need to be adjusted to respond to the individual pupils in your school given your unique context.

Finally, the document and the online resources sets out some of the external agencies and supports which are available for families who are experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness.

The guidance is intended to support all school staff. The word ‘teachers’ is used interchangeably throughout the document to refer to all members of the school community e.g. Principals, HSCL teachers

¹ Scanlon & McKenna, ‘Homeworks: A Study on the Educational Needs of Children Experiencing Homelessness and Living in Emergency Accommodation’, Children’s Rights Alliance 2018

About Homelessness

Ireland is experiencing the worst homelessness crisis since official records began. There are over 10,000 people experiencing homelessness across the country. That number continues to rise and includes almost 4,000 children.

The causes of homelessness are often complex, including ‘structural factors’ like a lack of affordable housing or poverty and ‘personal factors’ like mental health issues or addiction. The rise in family homelessness over the past four years has been primarily driven by structural economic factors.

The root cause of the current homelessness crisis is a broken housing system. Ireland does not have public housing stock sufficient to meet the needs of society. In response to a chronic shortage of housing, the Government has resorted to subsidising private rented accommodation for those in need of social housing. The private rented sector is also struggling with a severe lack of supply, and families who would otherwise qualify for public housing are forced into competition with the rest of the market.

According to Focus Ireland research, the overwhelming number of families becoming homeless had their last stable accommodation in the private rented sector.² Many of these families have never experienced homelessness before.

Section 2 of the Housing Act 1988 provides the current definition of homelessness. It states that a person should be considered homeless if:

- a) There is no accommodation available which, in the opinion of the authority, he, together with any other person who normally resides with him or who might reasonably be expected to reside with him, can reasonably occupy or remain in occupation of, or
- b) He is living in a hospital, county home, night shelter or other such institution, and is so living because he has no accommodation of the kind referred to in paragraph (a), and
- c) He cannot provide accommodation from his own resources.

The Educational Welfare Service employs an inclusive definition of homelessness which includes:

- › Visible homelessness: people who are sleeping rough and/or those accommodated in emergency shelters, private emergency accommodation or shelters.
- › Hidden homelessness: people who are couch surfing and involuntarily sharing with family and friends.
- › Those at risk of homelessness: people who currently have housing but are likely to become homeless.

² Focus Ireland Insights into Family Homelessness Series

Supporting Families Experiencing Homelessness

When a family becomes homeless or think that they will lose their home, they should contact their local authority. A number of local authorities now have designated Homeless Service Units. The local authority will conduct an assessment to determine whether they meet the above definition of homelessness.

If the local authority finds that a family are homeless, there are a number of ways in which they might support them:

- › The family may be provided with emergency accommodation in a Family Hub or Supported Temporary Accommodation.
- › They may be accommodated in Private Emergency Accommodation, usually a commercial hotel.
- › They may be told to self-accommodate. This means that they must source and secure their own emergency accommodation in a commercial hotel, but that the local authority will pay for it.

Some families are not accepted as homeless by the local authority, but are in need of emergency accommodation. They might not be accepted because they do not have the requisite paper work to hand, or because their immigration status is in question. While families are trying to resolve these administrative matters, they and their children are at real risk of rough-sleeping. Local authorities will provide emergency accommodation on a 'humanitarian basis' but this is generally only for a single night at a time. Families self-accommodating may also be on night-by-night accommodation.

These families and children are particularly vulnerable. They are experiencing the trauma of having to secure accommodation each day, unsure of where they will be sleeping each night. It may take until late in the evenings to secure accommodation. Sometimes families are unable to find accommodation and may have to present to a Garda station as a place of safety. Understandably if a child is in one of these very difficult situations it will impact on their school life.

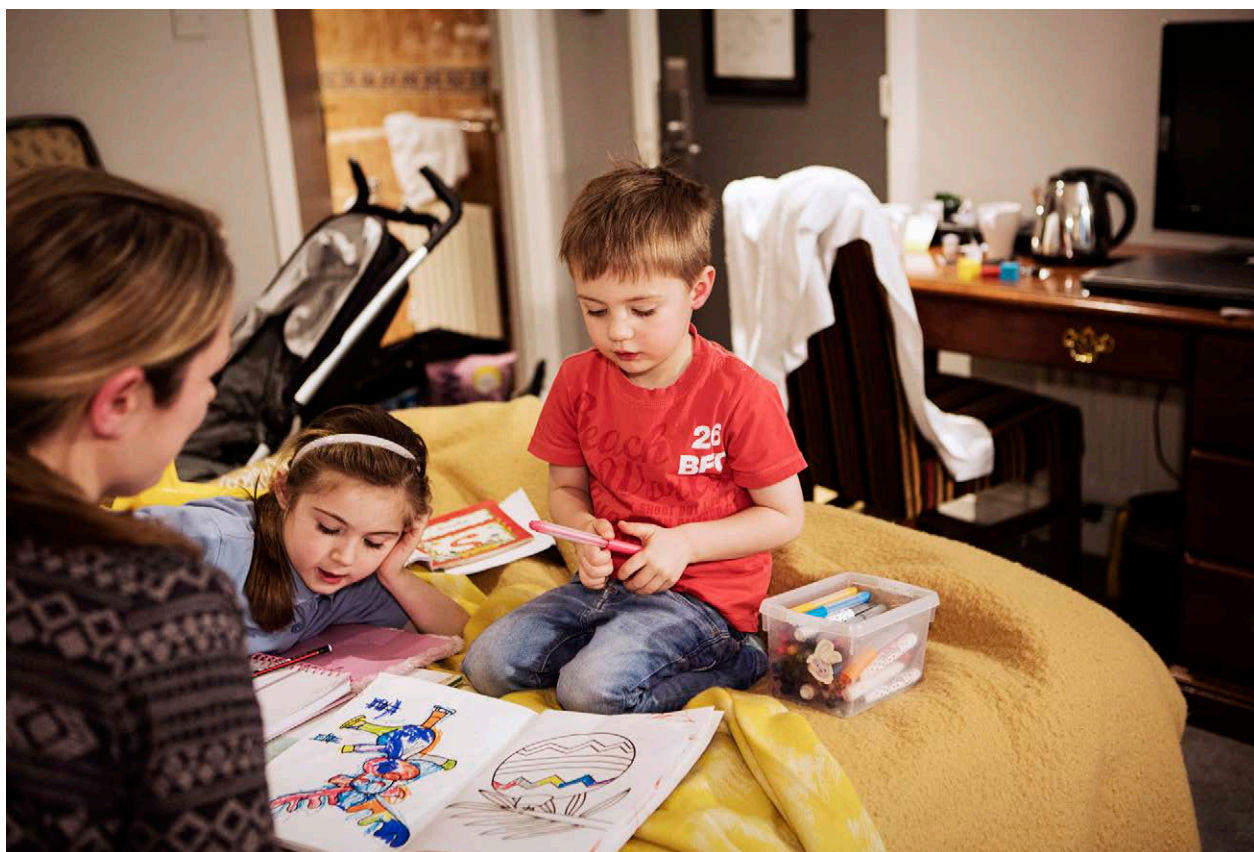
It is also worth noting that as the homelessness crisis worsens, Government responses may alter the above processes. The Family Hubs are an example of a new policy developed as a response to the primary use of commercial hotels as emergency accommodation.

To supplement this guidance document, we have developed an online resource where teachers will find links to local agencies and services that can provide support to families and children. This can be accessed via the Teacher Resource section of the Focus Ireland website: www.focusireland.ie.

The Impact of Homelessness on Education

We know from national and international research that homelessness can have a serious impact on children's education. In particular, the stress and practical difficulties of living in emergency or temporary accommodation mean that children are not arriving to school ready to learn.

It is important to note that parents in these circumstances do everything in their power to ensure their children are attending school but even when they manage to attend the impacts of homelessness can be felt.



One family had difficulty with a long and expensive school commute and were unaware that families residing in hotels and hubs could access free public transport for essential school journeys. — Principal

Basic Needs

Often children's capacity to engage with, and participate in, education is limited when their basic needs are not being met (See Table 1). Children experiencing homelessness may be residing in accommodation that undermines their basic needs.

Teachers find it difficult to prioritise the educational needs of children who are experiencing homelessness when basic needs are not being met. Educational needs can become secondary to the pupil's emotional and mental health needs.

Children's play is significantly restricted in homeless accommodation. Play promotes healthy brain development, allows children to engage and interact with the world around them, helps them conquer fears, allows them to practice adult roles, teaches them skills such as working in groups, conflict resolution, decision-making, sharing and negotiating, allows them to move at their own pace, teaches them about their personal likes and dislikes, and helps build the confidence and resilience that they will need to face future challenges.

While schools will not be able to provide all the basic needs in place of a stable home, many schools are making efforts and small gestures to facilitate children and families where possible.

Sleep

- › Entire families may be sleeping in one room
- › It can be very difficult to maintain a sleep routine in unfamiliar surroundings
- › Emergency accommodation can be a noisy environment
- › The heating in the room may be controlled by the hotel
- › It can be challenging to deal with night terrors or waking during the night

Nutrition

- › Emergency accommodation may not have cooking or refrigeration facilities
- › Provided food may be bar food and there may be no variety
- › Families travelling to and from school may miss scheduled dining times
- › If there are cooking facilities, sometimes:
 - › food can go missing
 - › food can spoil as it has been taken out of fridge by others
 - › the food preparation area may not be left clean by others

Health and hygiene

- › Sometimes there may be no hot water or it may run out
- › There may be no laundry facilities or families may only be able to use them at a particular time
- › If there are laundry facilities:
 - › there may be long waiting times
 - › clothes/detergents may go missing
- › There may be no space to store clothes (dirty or clean)
- › Crockery and cutlery may have to be washed and bottles may have to be sterilized in a bathroom sink
- › Not all facilities have a high standard of cleanliness
- › With a lot of families residing in one place, children are more likely to get sick

Play space

- › There may be limited or no play space in emergency accommodation
- › There may be no space for crawlers, toys or storage in the accommodation
- › The provided play room may not be accessible without external staff
- › There may be no cleaning routine for play areas or broken/inappropriate equipment

Safety and security

- › In communal living situations parents may not be aware of who is living in close proximity
- › There can be increased risks of witnessing inappropriate behaviour
- › For families that have to source new accommodation each night, they may have no idea where they will be sleeping each night

Table 1: How basic needs can be impacted by homelessness

Practical suggestions for schools to support children and families in meeting their basic needs

- › Discreetly provide access to clean clothes/upcycled uniforms if required.
- › Make basic hygiene supplies available e.g. toothbrush, hairbrush.
- › Provide a nap room/quiet corner with beanbags.
- › Make nutritious snacks available in the school, particularly if there is no access to breakfast clubs/school meals.
- › Provide extra opportunities for physical activity in the yard to help alleviate the impact of not having access to recreational facilities after school.
- › If you have serious concerns about a child's welfare follow the school's child protection policy.

Engaging with parents

Parents may not want to inform the school if they are experiencing homelessness out of embarrassment or fear of judgment. Open and regular communication between home and school should ensure strong and trusting relationships are formed.

If teachers notice the below signs and are concerned about the family's living situation they should approach the parent/s and ask what the school could do to support the family.

The child may:

- › be regularly late for school
- › be regularly absent from school
- › appear tired, unkempt or withdrawn
- › informally talk about hubs/hotels/hostels
- › have a changed commute pattern to and from school

Table 2: Indicators that a child may be experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness



Practical suggestions for schools to support parents and families experiencing homelessness

- › If a family has recently joined the school and are living locally in emergency accommodation, they may appreciate information on local services, transport links and other supports available in the area.
- › Access to a school phone or computer can be very helpful for families that need to self-accommodate.
- › Contact details and clinic times for local politicians may be useful for families experiencing homelessness.
- › If possible, put provision in place to ensure that families who are experiencing homelessness can participate in school excursions and other events that may require financial contributions. This might involve flexible payment options or, where possible, waiving fees.
- › Hang up information posters or leave leaflets in areas which are easily accessible for all parents.
- › Consider creating a parents' space which could be used to provide information sessions for parents on how to access State and voluntary supports as well as enabling meetings with the HSCL teacher if applicable.
- › In some cases, schools are in a position to advocate on behalf of children and families. This might involve drafting letters to the local authority or other agencies.
- › Schools could appoint a key contact person for parents and pupils, or a dedicated person attached to a cluster of schools, especially where schools do not have access to the Home School Community Liaison service.
- › Liaise closely with the parents. Good communication allows schools to get a better picture of the challenges facing children. It may also allow the parent to feel more connected to the school, and this in turn is associated with increased attendance and academic achievement.



In our school, we ensure that pupils have access to basic school materials and minimize the need to carry heavy school books home as the pupil may have a long commute on public transport. — Teacher

Attendance

Good attendance at school is vital for children to develop socially, emotionally and educationally. School is where most children form the important peer bonds that will help them to develop confidence, resilience and the other skills necessary for leading healthy, happy lives. Poor school attendance at an early age can lead to disengagement with school and community, which can result in poor educational attainment and early school leaving.

School attendance is often significantly impacted by homelessness. Families are under enormous pressure living in emergency accommodation. They are often placed far away from their communities and extended support networks. Many parents want their children to remain in the same school they were in before they entered homeless accommodation, as school may be the only constant in the midst of so much upheaval. This means families may have to travel a long and unfamiliar journey to school, possibly using unreliable public transport.

Practical suggestions for schools to support pupils who struggle with attendance

- › While good timekeeping is preferred, it is important to let parents know that being late and still attending school is better than missing the whole school day.
- › It may be possible for parents to get support with school transport costs from the local community welfare officer.
- › While the infant day is shorter there may be occasions when a family struggles with two different pick-up times and a school may offer short-term, flexible arrangements.
- › Where possible, children experiencing homelessness should be offered a place in after school clubs.
- › Many schools incentivize good attendance by implementing positive strategies such as attendance awards, raffle tickets for full weeks in school or ‘beat your record’ attendance competitions. The framing of these strategies should take into account that some children’s attendance is impacted by circumstances beyond their family’s control.
- › Explore whether children can be supported through the School Completion Programme e.g. through access to after school clubs/breakfast clubs.

“ We learned a strategy in Initial Teacher Education for dealing with personal topics that may be sensitive. Use a puppet and the child assigns a set of circumstances to the puppet. For example, the puppet can talk about its home. — Teacher



Achievement

The academic achievement of students experiencing homelessness may be negatively impacted by their situation.

Teachers report that students who are homeless can struggle with the pre-requisite skills that facilitate success in school such as listening and participating in co-operative tasks. Instead pupils are often withdrawn and may display emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Several factors appear to contribute to the impact of homelessness on educational achievement including poor school attendance, lack of fulfilment of basic needs, fatigue and illness.

Early identification and intervention are critical for children at risk of homelessness. Implementing preventative and early intervention strategies to support student engagement and address individual barriers to learning is a key part of mitigating the impact of homelessness on educational attainment.

Practical suggestions to support pupils to achieve academically

- › Explore the possibility of getting educational support for the pupil to help address academic challenges arising from their living situation and the serious stress they and their families may be under. The new model for the Allocation of Special Educational Needs Teaching Resources allows schools some autonomy to allocate SEN support based on pupil need.
- › Given the number of school transfers associated with homelessness, schools can support pupils and families experiencing homelessness by facilitating the transfer of records and sharing information between schools in order to ease the transition for pupils and ensure a continuity of learning for the pupil.
- › Provide pupils with the resources and materials necessary to engage with learning. For example, a school tablet device for homework requiring online research.
- › Give the student the opportunity to start their homework during the school day as long commutes and/or inappropriate living arrangements may make it challenging to complete homework after school. If necessary, discuss possible alternative arrangements with parents to offer short-term flexibility around homework.
- › Pupils could also be supported by inclusion in afterschool/homework clubs.
- › Establish peer-tutoring and/or mentoring programmes with older pupils to help provide additional academic and social support with school and homework.
- › Provide opportunities for parental involvement by creating awareness of programmes that enable parents to better support their children in their education e.g. reading recovery.
- › Adapt the curriculum/extra-curricular activities to ensure that they are sensitive to the needs of the pupils in your class who may be experiencing homelessness e.g. be mindful of language and assumptions during the unit on Homes in Geography and when undertaking charity collections which might benefit people experiencing homelessness.

Mental Health

Living in homelessness means that children may live with economic and material disadvantage, experience a loss of relationships and socialisation, and often hide feelings of shame, sadness and fear. Some children and families may choose to hide the fact that they are homeless from friends and family members.

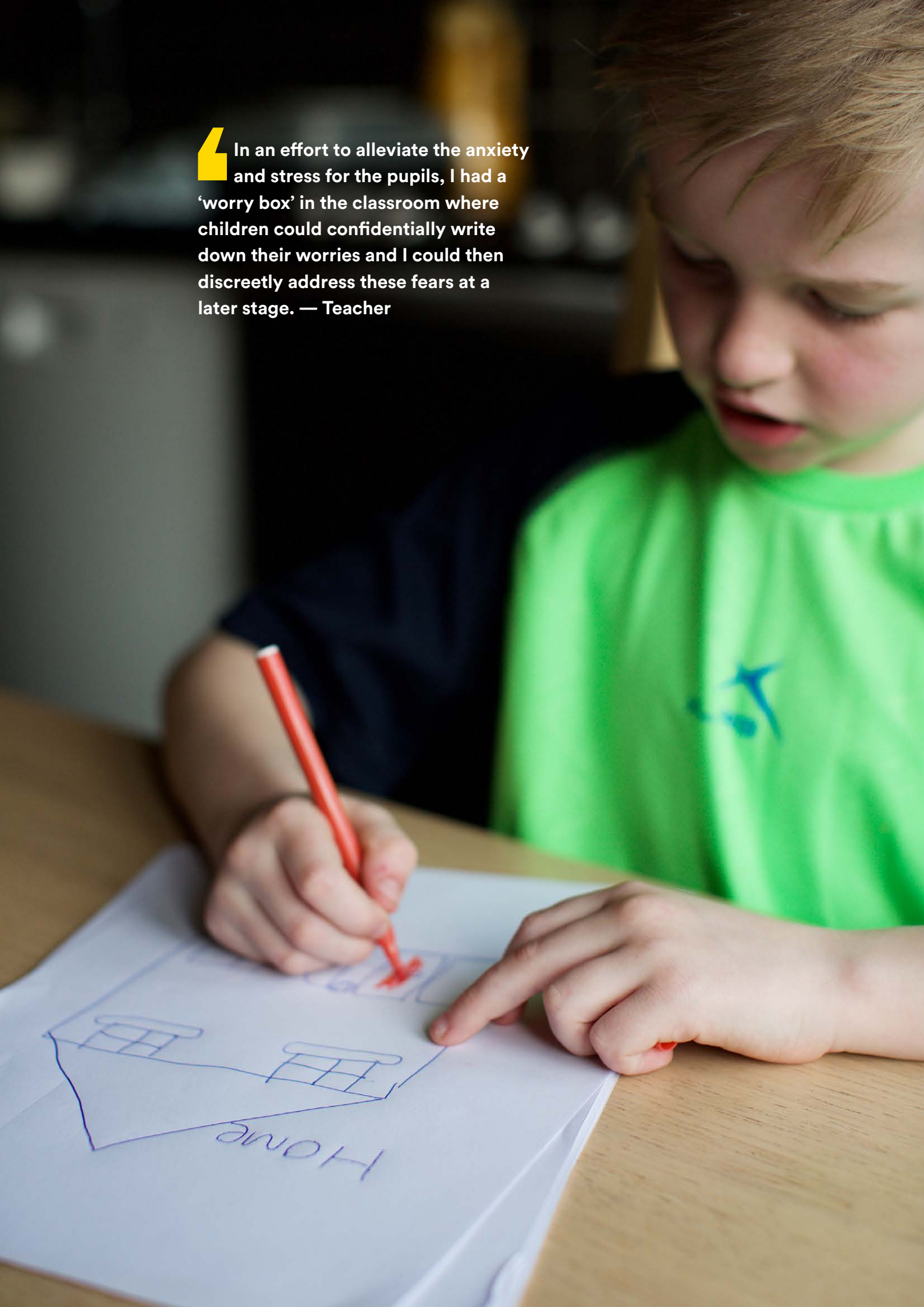
Children may experience a number of different mental health issues, including anxiety; depression; emotional and behavioural issues; eating disorders and suicidal and self-harming behaviours.

Schools can be safe havens for children experiencing homelessness providing much needed stability, support and socialisation. Perhaps it is for this reason that parents are reluctant to move their children from their school when they are displaced to another area and instead opt for arduous and long journeys. This shows that parents are committed to maintaining the stability of school life and ensuring the continuity of learning for the child.

Practical ways for schools to support the mental health of children living in homeless accommodation

- › Help children to understand, manage and express their emotions as this will help them develop healthy coping mechanisms.
- › Create and maintain routines – children living in homeless accommodation lack consistency and routine in their everyday lives.
- › Encourage children's interests – this will help them feel more confident and develop resilience skills.
- › Allow additional time for play and recreation. If possible, incorporate physical activity and exercise into the daily routine – exercise strengthens and re-organises the brain to make it more resilient to stress.
- › Young children may not have the language development to enable them to communicate their concerns. Monitoring of play and general interactions may provide some insight into wellbeing needs.
- › Consider practicing mindfulness, meditation or yoga with students.
- › Support parents to foster positive parenting practices, including non-coercive discipline, clear expectations, and tangible incentives.
- › Understandably, parents themselves may be under increased stress dealing with the disruptions associated with homelessness. It may be useful to share information about local mental health support services.
- › Supporting pupils who are experiencing homelessness can also take its toll on a teacher's mental health and resilience. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) offers an Employee Assistance and Wellbeing Programme (EAP) for teachers and school staff which includes a free confidential service accessible by means of a free phone 1800 411 057.

📌 In an effort to alleviate the anxiety and stress for the pupils, I had a 'worry box' in the classroom where children could confidentially write down their worries and I could then discreetly address these fears at a later stage. — Teacher



Transitions

Children who are experiencing homelessness may have to change schools unexpectedly and perhaps more than once. Obtaining previous school records and helping pupils manage transitions to a new school are key factors in ensuring continuity of learning.³

School transitions may significantly hinder children's continuity of education and disrupt their social relationships with classmates and friends. In this regard, it is important that efforts are made to bridge the gap between schools if a child is forced to move. Where possible, schools may support students to continue to remain enrolled in their current school thereby minimizing disruption of the learning progress and offering a sense of stability.

Practical suggestions for schools to support pupils who are transitioning to a new school

- › Develop an orientation process that is sensitive to the needs of families affected by homelessness and which can be offered to any newly arrived children and families.
- › Where possible, enroll a pupil without delay and actively assist with obtaining information from the transferring school.
- › When a former student is moving to another school, be available to consult with the new school regarding the pupil's learning and support needs.
- › Sharing relevant records and background information will add stability to the child's life and ensure continuity in their academic journey.
- › When enrolling new students be aware of the sensitivities that families may have about sharing information about their circumstances.
- › Discuss with parents and pupils the practices that are used within the school setting for protecting privacy.
- › To ensure a clear information flow and improve tracking of students, follow up on transfers shortly after a student leaves or arrives at a school.
- › Younger children will benefit from reassurance and reinforcement of school routines to enable them to feel a sense of safety and security.
- › Arrange for a buddy system for new students to ensure that they have peer support.
- › Provide access to the library and to computers and printers.

³ Scanlon & McKenna, 'Homeworks: A Study on the Educational Needs of Children Experiencing Homelessness and Living in Emergency Accommodation', Children's Rights Alliance 2018

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Challenging homelessness. Changing lives.