

Working with Parents and Families

McKinney-Vento and Parental Rights

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

Challenges in Working with Homeless Parents

Homelessness puts parents under inordinate stress. While most parents experiencing homelessness are cooperative and trust that school administrators, teachers, and staff have the best interest of their children in mind, some may be uncooperative and even confrontational. As a representative of your school, it is important to keep this in mind as you seek to build their trust and empower them to collaboratively increase their children's success in school.

Working with Parents Who Have Experienced Trauma

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

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

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

Typical trauma responses include:

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

Developing Rapport through Communication

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

- Keep impersonal communication, such as letters and emails, to a minimum; conduct face-to-face or video conference conversations whenever possible.
- Provide a welcoming environment.
- Conduct sensitive conversations in a private and comfortable place.
- Avoid using the word “homeless” and other charged and judgmental language.
- Talk to them about their living situation; be sensitive and discreet.
- Ask them about their needs. A good question to ask is, “How may we be of assistance to you and your family? What would be helpful for you now?”
- Assure them that their children are welcome in your school and that you have their best interest in mind.
- Empower and encourage parents; discuss solutions to challenges with them.
- Discuss things about which they feel positive.
- Listen! Listen! Listen!
- Be aware of your own triggers. Notice when you are having a reaction to what the parent, guardian, or youth is saying and continue being present for them. Make sure you are always putting the needs of the family and youth first.

Strategies for Working Together

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

Challenges and Strategies for Working with Homeless Parents

Challenges	Considerations	Strategies
Parents and their children have unmet basic needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Parents may be new to an area and do not know what resources are available.This may be the first time a family or youth has experienced financial instability and they might not know how to navigate social services systems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Encourage parents to advise you of their needs and assure them that you are willing to link them with available services. Make sure they know you are a resource they can come to whenever they have a need, not just at the initial assessment.Provide an updated list of community resources and contacts to parents.Keep a few donations on hand, such as hygiene items, grocery gift cards, snacks, and folders to store student records. Solicit donations through community partnerships.Use public transportation tokens to assist parents with getting to agencies from your office.
Parents are mistrustful and confrontational.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Parents may have become disillusioned by agencies in the "helping" field.Parents may fear having their children taken away.Parents are passionate about getting what is best for their children and may feel any means justifies the end.Parents may lack diplomacy skills.Parents may bring a history of bad school experiences to their meeting with you.Parents may have experienced trauma and may react with aggressive behavior.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Be honest and respectful in dealing with parents and understand that building trust takes time.Acknowledge parents' fear and worries. Make sure you are being supportive, not dismissive.Be clear about resources that are available through the LEA and those available through other organizations.Center conversations on what is best for their children while acknowledging their passion.Discuss concrete solutions for what their children need and ways these solutions can be implemented; establish a tone of thinking things through together.Model good communication behavior by remaining calm and respectful; keep the conversation focused and moving toward solutions.If the conversation gets out of hand, set boundaries; if necessary "take five" or set a time to continue the discussion later.

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

- Parents may not have space or supplies in their temporary living circumstances to help their children with educational activities.
- Parents may be so overwhelmed that they are emotionally unavailable to their children.

- Reinforce the importance of regular attendance and school stability; ask parents to inform you if they plan to move and ensure they understand their children's right to remain in the school of origin and receive transportation.
- Model good parenting skills when you meet with parents; note something positive that their child did in school or some talent that their child is exhibiting; discuss good disciplinary practices that they can provide at home to reinforce improving behavior at school when needed.
- Send notes home with the children frequently about something positive they did in school.
- Provide parents with supplies to assist their children in their temporary living space or provide space either before or after school for the parent to work with children on homework or school activities.
- Provide a space at school for children to keep school or project supplies where possible.
- Invite parents to participate in parent groups at the school, such as the Parent Teacher Association.

Tips for Navigating Challenging Conversations

Conversations about a family's housing situation can be tense, uncomfortable or invasive. The tip sheet below provides trauma-sensitive strategies and conversation starters you will encounter with students, families and LEA staff.

The Challenge	When asked about a current address or living situation, the family gives only vague or generalized answers.
Why It's Challenging	This is challenging because liaisons and/or LEA staff need specific housing information to make informed decisions about McKinney-Vento eligibility. Vague answers may be misinterpreted as a "false story," leading someone to make an incorrect determination. Additionally, a family may feel under attack or become upset by numerous clarifying questions.
Trauma-Sensitive Strategies	If you need more information from a family about their housing situation, first explain why you need housing details before you ask any additional questions. You may also want to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invite the family to speak with you in a private setting. Avoid talking at the front desk or registration counter. Explain your position/role and intentions. For example, "I am the McKinney-Vento liaison, and my job is to connect students in temporary housing with educational supports and services." Be clear about the goal of the conversation. Make clear that you are not trying to get them in trouble, but rather, want to ensure they receive all services they are eligible for.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid the word “homeless.” Instead, talk about a temporary housing arrangement.
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The Challenge	A family's housing situation seems to be fixed and regular, but you need to know if it is also adequate.
Why It's Challenging	This is challenging because questions about housing adequacy can feel particularly uncomfortable and intrusive. Adequacy conversations are also challenging because families may be nervous that information shared about housing will result in a report to the County Children and Youth Agency (CCY).
Trauma-Sensitive Strategies	<p>It is important to take a very sensitive approach to this type of conversation. Before asking any questions about the adequacy of the housing arrangement, begin the conversation by reminding the family that students living in temporary housing situations have special education rights, which may be beneficial to the student and his/her family. Reassure them that your questions are intended to connect the student with appropriate supports and services.</p> <p>Additionally, you may want to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the concept of “fixed, regular, and adequate” as it relates to McKinney-Vento protections. Note that the word “protection” may help put a family at ease. • Give examples of “inadequate housing” instead of asking direct questions. You can list examples like “multiple children sharing one bed” or “not having a working kitchen” and then ask the family if any of those examples apply to them. You may also try asking, “do you feel comfortable telling me more about that,” rather than asking direct questions. • If appropriate, let the family know that inadequate housing is not the same as child abuse or neglect.

	<p>Mandatory reporting laws for suspected child abuse and neglect are different from McKinney-Vento eligibility determinations. If the family is concerned about a call to child protective services (CCY), reiterate that the purpose of determining eligibility under McKinney- Vento is to connect students with appropriate services and protections.</p>
The Challenge	<p>A family has been living at the same address for more than a year and you are unsure if the housing should still be considered temporary.</p>
Why It's Challenging	<p>This is challenging because revisiting a McKinney-Vento eligibility determination may feel like an awkward "investigation" or worse, could be re-traumatizing for the family.</p> <p>It may also be challenging if you believe that a family's temporary housing situation has become permanent, but the family disagrees.</p>
Trauma-Sensitive Strategies	<p>As a best practice, we suggest that schools check in with families at the end of each school year about their housing status. By having annual McKinney-Vento eligibility conversations in the spring, you can limit disruption for students and schools in the fall. A few suggestions for having this conversation include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let the family know at the time of initial identification that you plan to follow up at the end of the school year. Having a plan in place will make it seem less like an "investigation." • Have any follow-up conversations WELL BEFORE August! If you believe the family's situation is now permanent, talk to the family in May or June about making a smooth transition to the local school. Make sure that the student starts the next school year off on the right foot (and in the right school) by connecting the family to the enrollment office at the new school, transferring records, etc. • To the extent possible, have end-of-year conversations with ALL families who have been identified as living in temporary housing. Let them know that this is routine practice in the LEA to avoid having families feel like they are being singled out.

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The Challenge	The student or family seems to be telling a different version of their housing story to the liaison versus the school principal or enrollment secretary.
Why It's Challenging	This is challenging because variations in housing explanations/descriptions can raise a red flag for school or LEA staff about the authenticity of the story.
Trauma-Sensitive Strategies	<p>For some families, a temporary housing situation can be a very sensitive issue. Depending on whom they are speaking with, a family may change or omit details of the story out of fear, shame, or embarrassment. When having a housing conversation, a few suggestions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When possible, a person who already has a relationship with the family should lead the conversation. This may reduce anxiety and unnecessary repetition of difficult stories. • Before asking the family about their housing situation, assure them that your questions are meant to determine what services may be available to their children under McKinney-Vento. Remind the family that you are not trying to get them in trouble. • If appropriate, let the family know that inadequate housing is not the same as child abuse or neglect. If the family is concerned about a call to child protective services, reiterate that the purpose of determining eligibility under McKinney-Vento is to connect students with appropriate services and protections. • Explain your position/role and intentions. For example, "I am the McKinney-Vento liaison and my job is to connect students in temporary housing with educational supports and services."

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The Challenge	A family shows up at a school to enroll their student but does not have any documentation
Why It's Challenging	This is challenging because front-line school staff may not be aware of the right to immediate enrollment without documentation under the McKinney-Vento Act and may mistakenly turn families away. Making matters more challenging, families may also be unaware of McKinney-Vento protections causing them to avoid or delay school enrollment for their children
Trauma-Sensitive Strategies	<p>Make sure all front-line school staff are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trained to recognize the signs of homelessness, • Understand the basic protections for families in temporary housing • Recognize that the safest place for a child or youth is to be in school. <p>When a family comes to a school to enroll, the staff should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have every new student (family) fill out a housing questionnaire upon enrollment. This will give staff an immediate clue as to the family's housing status. • Do not ask if the family is homeless. If needed, use phrases like "housing status" or "temporary living situation" instead. • If the family is temporarily housed, enroll the student immediately and refer the family to the LEA's McKinney-Vento liaison. Remember that "immediately" means same day, regardless of what documentation the family can or cannot produce.

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The Challenge	An unaccompanied youth shows up at a school or enrollment office without any paperwork wanting to “sign up for school.”
Why It's Challenging	This is challenging because schools are often nervous about enrolling a student without parental permission. It is also challenging because unaccompanied youth may not be upfront about their reasons for leaving home.
Trauma-Sensitive Strategies	<p>Make sure all school staff are trained and understand that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most youths leave home because of significant family dysfunction and abuse, not because they do not like their parent's rules. Most youth who have left home, especially those who stay away from home for a long time, have fled abusive homes. They may not tell you what has happened to them, but studies of unaccompanied youth have found that 20-50% were sexually abused in their homes and 40-60% were physically abused. • The safest place for a student to be is in school. Whatever the background story is, it is always preferable, and indeed required by law, for unaccompanied youth to be immediately enrolled in school. <p>A few suggestions for having an effective conversation with an unaccompanied youth include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start the conversation by focusing on the student's strengths. • Make sure the unaccompanied youth knows that they can either stay in their same school and get transportation back to that school or immediately enroll in the local school. Oftentimes youth do not know that they can stay in the same school if they are temporarily living outside of the LEA boundaries. If the youth does decide to stay in the same school, make sure that the youth is connected with the LEA's McKinney-Vento liaison and that transportation is arranged. • Make the student feel welcome by stressing partnership over power. For example, you might tell the student, “We want to help you be successful in school. Let's work together to make sure you can get here on time each day.” • Take steps to connect the youth with services in the

	<p>school community and beyond. Without parental support, an unaccompanied youth may rely on support and services from the community. Talk to the youth about any available tutoring/mentoring programs or other after-school activities. Also, try to talk to the student about his/her needs and make appropriate referrals</p>
Challenge	<p>A student who is temporarily housed is exhibiting challenging behavior in school and/or is repeatedly absent</p>
Why It's Challenging	<p>This is challenging because school staff may see negative behavior and/or frequent absences as "attention seeking," "intentionally defiant," or "apathetic." Any of these labels can cause friction between students and staff and impede school success.</p>
Trauma-Sensitive Strategies	<p>When working with a student in temporary housing, keep in mind that losing one's home can be traumatic. In some cases, the student may be contending with chronic stress caused by the instability of being homeless and additional factors such as substance abuse on the part of the parent(s), untreated mental illness on the part of the parent(s), or domestic violence. Chronic stress and trauma have a very real effect on a student's brain, body, and behavior. When talking with a student, be sure to use trauma-sensitive strategies including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start any conversation by pointing out a strength before discussing a problem. For example, "I noticed that you did a great job following instructions in math class yesterday. What do you think helped you do that and how can we do that again today?" • Make the student feel safe and supported. Make sure an adult in the school community is regularly checking in with the student. Practice active listening and emphasize partnership over power. Avoid causing shame or blame, and be very clear about expectations. • Help other school-based staff understand the impact of trauma and provide professional development on trauma sensitivity.