

Play, Art, Caring

Creating Emotionally Healthy Homeless Families

by Lee Erica Elder

A lack of stability. Frequent moves. Disrupted education. Feeling unsafe. Separation from loved ones. Exposure to violence and substance abuse. Homeless children face an inordinate amount of stress and anxiety in their day-to-day lives, and as a result, are more likely to experience problems with their emotional well-being and mental health.

Throughout the country, there are organizations committed to mental health and stress-reduction for children, parents, and families experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity. They use holistic approaches to wellness and focus on assessing clients as individuals. Care is based on distinct needs rather than a one-size-fits-all solution. Whether through trauma-informed care, expressive tools and

treatments, or creative modalities, they are working to heal their communities.

The work is crucial. A recent study found that homeless high school students in New York City faced higher rates of depression and were over three times more likely to attempt suicide than their housed peers. Not only are they more likely to attempt suicide, they do so more often and more seriously (requiring medical attention) than housed teens.

Building Truly Caring Systems

Caregivers stress the need for systems of care rather than discrete solutions. This specialized work is engaging, encouraging, and humanizing. “We are all complex creatures,” says Jill Wiedemann-West, CEO of People Incorporated Mental Health Services in St. Paul, MN, which provides community mental health services, in-school and in-clinic resources for children and families, and homeless outreach for adults. “Add to that the potential of homelessness, mental illness, or chemical health issues, family issues, or trauma—it amps up the need for us to recognize the dynamic nature of the population.”

The caring system philosophy reaches back more than forty years. The impetus was a need that Pastor Harry Maghakian saw in 1969, when veterans who hung around his church had nowhere else to go. He opened up the basement doors for

Homelessness is traumatic for children and can result in a behavioral shift. Barbara Schwartz, director of the GREAT Youth and Families Program of the Housing Families organization in Malden, MA, emphasizes looking for the meaning behind a child’s behavior. For example, a child who is acting out may be a hurting child. The GREAT Youth and Families Program provides arts and expressive therapy to address the social and emotional needs of children who have experienced significant trauma.



refreshments and fellowship, in what would become a legacy of outreach. “He just thought maybe they needed a sense of community and a hot cup of coffee,” says Wiedemann-West. “Ultimately it was the roots of what People Incorporated grew into as an agency. We look at ways that as a community mental health provider, we can continue to look at the gaps that exist in our communities and try to fill those,” she says.

From sharing a cup of coffee and conversation with a stressed-out parent, to making children feel safe enough to participate in childlike activities, seemingly small interventions are layered for a powerful impact on homelessness, building hope, and an opening for more progress.

The caring system is effective in Boston, MA. “We try to look at the constellation of services that best match families’ needs without overwhelming them,” says Linda Smith, manager of behavioral health services for the family team at Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program (BHCHP.) BHCHP’s family team delivers outreach services at shelters and motels throughout the area. Families have access to individual and group therapy, with family, couple, or sibling sessions as needed. “We tailor the intervention to the needs of the family based on assessment,” says Smith. BHCHP runs clinics in downtown Boston shelters, as well as hospital and walk-in

clinics, and their behavioral health team gives medication assistance to those struggling with opioid addiction (See *Sheltering the Storm*). With these resources, they are able to service 11,000 people per year.

An essential part of creating a caring system is to take a trauma-informed approach to care. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines a trauma-informed approach as one that “realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization.”

In Washington D.C., The Homeless Children’s Playtime Project (HCPP) facilitates trauma-informed play for children aged six months to 18 years-old. Trauma-informed play focuses on providing a consistent, safe place for children to explore and grow. This regularity and consistency goes a long way toward giving the children a sense of stability. During trauma-informed play, children get to make choices about how they want to spend their time, giving them a sense of power over their world. Clear expectations and boundaries are set and children are told what will come next, building a feeling of emotional and physical safety for children who have experienced neither.

HCPP was founded in 2003 by social worker and child advocate Jamila Larson and lawyer Regina “Gina” Kline. The first iteration was a playroom with weekly activities and snacks in the Community for Creative Nonviolence (CCNV) shelter. “The vast majority of family shelters had no programs or services for children despite the myriad risk factors associated with homelessness,” says communications coordinator Melanie Hatter. “We currently serve four sites across the District: Turning Point, DASH Cornerstone Transitional Living Program, D.C. General, and the Quality Inn motel overflow shelter.”

Lakia Barnett, an HCPP parent, found relief in these resources. “I have two kids with learning disabilities, and it was really hard,” she says. “One of my sons didn’t like to be social, but when he got to Playtime, he opened up so much. It [Playtime] helped my family, because it gave me that breath to relieve myself from whatever I was going through at that time, and for other mothers there; it’s a



The Homeless Children’s Playtime Project (HCPP) provides a safe place for children to explore and grow through the use of trauma-informed play. As they play at the Turning Point facility (shown here), clear expectations and boundaries are set, building a feeling of emotional and physical safety.

lot of pressure trying to keep things normal in an atmosphere like that when you're used to being in your own home. ... Playtime has been very much a help to me in my fragile time."

Barriers to Mental Health and Wellness

Co-occurring conditions are a major barrier that must be addressed for effective interventions. Wiedemann-West from People Incorporated estimates that more than 60 percent of patients presenting primarily with mental health needs have unaddressed physical issues, as well. "The clients we serve are complex—besides mental illness or homelessness, they have health, dental, and housing needs," she says.

Children have their own considerations in mental health assessments. "It is important to start seeing children as a special population of individuals experiencing homelessness worthy of their own intervention," says Hatter of HCPP. "Creating trauma-informed shelter environments requires a significant culture-shift. It's important to offer integrated medical and behavioral healthcare, developmental assessments, parenting education and supports, and family-oriented developmental supports like play groups."

At Completely KIDS, in Omaha, Nebraska, the goal is to increase access to behavioral and mental health services for low-income students. A shelter program is a fundamental component of the organization's mission. In 2016, 89 homeless youths received afterschool services through this programming, per Bill Heaston, program manager.



People Incorporated Mental Health Services in St. Paul, Minnesota provides community mental health services, in-school and in-clinic resources for children and families, and homeless outreach for adults. An Artability class (above) is a painting class open to anyone with mental illness, not just clients.

"Throughout the year, it became evident that a greater focus on the social-emotional support of the children was needed," he says. "The trauma of homelessness can be scary, lonely, and hard to articulate. Our shelter program seeks to provide a sense of security and comfort amidst the waves of hopelessness." Free, on-site behavioral health therapy means access to services that would take weeks or months to obtain otherwise, and alleviates transportation barriers. Psycho-educational skills groups are available at various after school programs, and focus on social, emotional, and behavioral

Healing pain with furry friends

Therapy Dogs United offers comfort and an opportunity to build nurturing connections with pets to children and families experiencing homelessness throughout Northwestern Pennsylvania and Western New York.

"Therapy Dogs United offers multiple programs and provides visits to local homeless shelters, group homes, and rehabilitation centers. Our 'Courthouse Comfort Canine' program invites certified therapy dogs to the Erie County Courthouse every Monday and Wednesday to benefit children facing dependency hearings in Family Court. Studies prove a certified therapy dog can

provide comfort and support during a legal hearing by helping the child to relax and better focus. Therapy dogs provide a calming presence which helps alleviate trauma and stress. We bring our ARF (At Risk Families) Program to homeless shelters and group homes to help children deal with tough emotional times. This research-based program stresses the importance of humane treatment and compassion for animals and giving back by sharing our pets with others in need.

*—Kelly Van Zandt,
Emergency Room Mental Health Assessment and
Associate Director for Therapy Dogs United*

skills such as self-regulation, positive self-esteem, and stress reduction.

Parental engagement is key to bridging barriers. “Completely KIDS strongly values parental inclusion and involvement in healthy youth development,” says family program manager Beatriz Gonzalez. “The behavioral health therapists facilitate the Strengthening Families Parenting Program each semester,” she says. The ten-week program covers parenting skills, positive relationships, increasing family resiliency, and stress reduction. Families meet weekly for two-hour sessions where they learn, practice, and discuss skills, and share a meal.

Hatter from HCPP stresses the need to support parents navigating difficult systems. “Since most family shelters are far from ‘service-rich’ environments for families, motivating parents to access the often bureaucratic and under-resourced mental health system outside of the shelter is challenging,” she says. “The stigma of treating a mental health condition, transportation, insurance barriers, and the energy that it takes to face painful issues often requires superhuman strength that can be difficult for parents in crisis to summon.” HCCP’s evidence-based parenting course helps reduce stress and introduces critical communication techniques.

Entrenched stigma, trauma, and prolonged loss accompany homelessness. “I’ve been around long enough that I’ve seen intergenerational homelessness,” says Smith, who has worked



Homeless children have their own considerations when it comes to mental health and therefore need their own unique homelessness interventions, such as the trauma-informed play groups at the Homeless Children’s Playtime Project (HCPP) in Washington, DC.

at BHCHP for 20 years and practiced counseling for thirty. “At the shelter end, there are other kinds of things that go along with the experience of homelessness—you lose your home, then you’re moving and living with all these people that you don’t know. You often have to change schools, you lose your pets, you lose your toys, sometimes your pediatrician. So many losses—that’s very difficult.”

Shame is a huge barrier to receiving treatment. “The families feel ashamed and blame themselves,” says Barbara Schwartz, director of the GREAT Youth and Families Program of the Housing Families organization in Malden, MA. “Healing takes a long time. What looks like a bad or acting out child, is a hurting child. What looks like a shut down child is a scared child. What looks like a kid who isn’t trying might be someone who is emotionally overwhelmed. Look for the meaning of the behavior and assume the best of the child and you’ll have more success,” she says. Housing Families offers children—preschool aged through teens—counseling and therapeutic groups. “We also offer parent counseling, parenting groups, raising a reader, yoga and relaxation, and men’s and women’s therapy groups,” says Schwartz.

Healing Trauma Through Art

Part of looking at the whole person is using modalities that facilitate connection. This is essential for children who don’t have the language adults do to express feelings. Creative outlets cultivate positive experiences, making relationship dynamics more fluid and empathetic. “With children in particular we find that utilizing expressive arts is an easy



The GREAT Youth and Families Program provides a safe space for children and youth. Along with counseling and art therapy, they also offer homework help and afterschool tutoring to help children improve in school and build skills for future success.

way to tap into what’s going on with them and for us to help them express it,” says Smith from BHCHP. A board certified and registered art therapist, she’s rarely without a bag of puppets and toys and uses dance and music play. She recalls a mother-daughter relationship transformed by creativity. They lived in a shelter and mom was a legally blind domestic violence victim. She’d stopped attending individual therapy, so Smith tried the family route. “I shifted my work to pull mom into gaining empathy around the child’s issues because mom was kind of stuck in her own. When we cultivated the wonderful expressive side of the child, through dancing, sculpture, and singing, mom became involved and grew to appreciate her child in a different way. This created a stronger bond between the two of them and helped validate the child.”

HCPP staff is trained to infuse therapeutic principles into healing play. “Sometimes we might notice a child playing ‘eviction’ with a dollhouse or acting out a domestic violence scene,” says Hatter. “We are able to follow-up with parents who might not be aware of what their children are struggling with and provide necessary referrals or support. We offer yoga, art projects, and fun opportunities for expression and physical exercise critical for stress reduction and promoting healthy child development,” she says. Here’s a portion of a speech from a participant whose behavior was positively impacted by the program:

My name is “Carly.” I just turned fifteen years old last week. I currently live at DC General and I’ve lived there off and on since I was seven years old. Living at DC General is very stressful and complicated but I know God has a big surprise for me one day. I never planned to live this way but I have no control over things that come into my life. I do have control over how I choose to handle those situations and I try my best to stay calm and respectful.

Our rooms are nothing like the homes you have and the only fun we get to have is when we go to playtime. The teen night volunteers brighten up our days! They care about teens like us. They help us get through very hard situations, literally! Thanks to my family who does the best they can, thanks to the volunteers and playtime for taking the time out to be there for all of us.

Free Arts in Los Angeles is boosting self-worth and reducing stress for more than 22,000 youth. They offer a variety of art programs for children experiencing homelessness or living in transitional housing. Their courthouse program provides a supportive arts space and distraction for kids during morning and afternoon court sessions, five days a week, servicing up to sixty children per day. The volunteer mentorship program, which works in eight-week sessions, relies on art to break down walls built by trauma and other stressors. “We do art with intention,” says programs manager Karol Hernandez. Every project has an empowering theme. Afterwards, mentors debrief the kids and ask stimulating questions about the art.

Hernandez worked with a young boy named King, about five or six years old, who was staying in an area where a body was discovered. For a dream catcher art project, the children were told to draw a favorite dream. King confided that he only had nightmares. She asked him to imagine a good dream and shared one of hers—featuring cotton candy clouds and gumball grass. He was inspired and agreed to try. A volunteer helped him step-by-step—putting on beads, weaving yarn, and attaching feathers. He asked Hernandez if she was sure it would capture his nightmares. She told him to believe, the way he believed in her, to stay positive, and he would have good dreams. By the end of the module, he gave staff a thank you card and said he couldn’t wait for the next session. Hernandez says children are in awe of the consistency of

Kids from the Housing Families Program share their thoughts and experiences:

“In group I learned to talk about feelings.”

“I learned that you aren’t the only one with problems.”

“I like myself more because I don’t feel alone.”

“In counseling I learned that I’m special.”

“I fight and argue less since I’ve been in group.”



Fun opportunities for expression are critical for stress reduction and promoting healthy child development according to the Homeless Children's Playtime Project (HCPP). Healing play can happen anywhere, including a Quality Inn motel overflow shelter (above).

these relationships. Kids have thrown markers at her on bad days and were surprised that she returned. "I'm still here," she told them. "I'm not going to give up."

Self-Care for Caregivers

Caregivers have a responsibility to prioritize their own emotional wellness. Nowhere is the old airline metaphor of putting on your own oxygen mask first more applicable than when dealing with a fragile population. "Our program encourages staff to do self-care," says Schwartz of Housing Families. "I encourage everyone as a counselor to do their own therapy and figure out a self-care routine. The only way we can do our best work is when we are our best selves."

Caregivers are adamant that supervision, discussion, and feedback happen regularly. "Helping people doesn't mean fixing them or having results right away," says Schwartz. "When counseling someone, I used to beat myself up over a stupid thing I said, and now I just say, 'did I deem care and gentleness? Was I present?' I often talk to my interns about

what they can and can't control. Give the person control of their lives rather than telling them what to do. Offer different ways to reduce stress because there isn't one way that everyone is comfortable with. Offer support and childcare so parents can take care of themselves and take advantage of opportunities for stress reduction."

Facing the Future

In an uncertain political climate, clients are afraid. Fear is especially palpable for immigrants questioning their safety and futures. They don't know what will happen to impact their ability to seek services. This worry adds another layer of trauma to assess and heal.

Yet, the future is bright. People Incorporated is one of six pilot sites in Minnesota for a new initiative called the Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic (CCBHC)—a program of SAMHSA—offering behavioral, chemical, and physical health care. "These are opportunities to bring individuals receiving services in our system or with similar providers into an environment where we can look at the whole person and all their needs," says Wiedemann-West. Providers will assess living situations, support services, transportation, and other factors impacting mental wellness. "I'm excited about the data that will come out of this two-year pilot project and what we'll learn about best practices for working with this population," she says.

Conclusion

Despite uncertainties, there is hope. This vulnerable population is resilient, as are the programs dedicated to eradicating their pain. "I think what's most important is that we come with a sense of hope," says Smith. "If you do not bring hope to the table with the families, it doesn't matter what fancy intervention you use. You're not going to get anywhere." ■

Resources

People Incorporated Mental Health Services www.peopleincorporated.org ■ Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program <https://www.bhchp.org/> ■ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration <https://www.samhsa.gov/> ■ The Homeless Children's Playtime Project <https://www.samhsa.gov/> ■ Community for Creative Nonviolence <http://www.theccnv.org/> ■ Completely KIDS <https://completelykids.org/> ■ Housing Families <https://housingfamilies.org/> ■ Free Arts <http://www.freearts.org/> ■ Therapy Dogs United <http://www.therapydogsunited.org/> ■ Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic <https://mn.gov/dhs/media/news/?id=1053-270163>.