

How to Talk About Homelessness

By Betsy Brown Braun on Jan.06, 2015

Betsy Brown Braun, Best- Selling Author, Parent Educator, Child Development and Behavior Specialist. Local to LA. Offers private practice, in person, phone, Skype, face time, goggle + available anytime anywhere. Check out her website for more information: Parenting Pathways. Inc.
www.bestybrowbraun.com

With ever increasing numbers of homeless in our cities, it is not surprising that young children are asking questions. Whether it is someone in the street asking each car for money, someone pushing a cart overflowing with possessions, or a person forlornly propped up against a building, children notice anything that is different (as do we all, frankly). They work hard to understand and make sense of the world they encounter. As they grow and mature, more of the world comes into focus and is scrutinized.

It is important to understand that homelessness is not a “loaded” issue for the child...yet. His questions about a homeless person usually stem from genuine curiosity. That person doesn't fall into any of the categories of people with whom he is familiar. He is not passing judgment; he is wondering. The young child's initial impression is heavily influenced by the parent's affect, actions, and responses to his questions. And it is by observation of the parent that the child first gets his cues about how to react and feel. So, as you answer your child's questions, be aware of the attitude you may be projecting.

Homelessness, when someone doesn't have a home—a place to sleep, for meals, and in which to keep his belongings—can be unsettling and even frightening to a child. Younger children will wonder where the person's family is, why there is no one to help him. Many will go to a place of worry about themselves and if they will ever not have a home. Worries grow after hearing that the person doesn't have enough money to have a home. The child wonders if his own family has enough money.

If the homeless person behaves strangely or erratically, indicating that s/he may be mentally unstable or have severe emotional problems, the child's curiosity (and sometimes fear) intensify. When there is an unpleasant odor or an obvious lack of physical hygiene, there are more questions. Why does she look like that? Why is he acting like that? Is he dangerous? Are we safe? Explaining mental illness is both tricky and important.

While a parent needs to answer the child's questions honestly, I believe it is also important that our answers show compassion. Homelessness is not a crime, it is a problem. In your answers and attitude you will be modeling the empathy on which our society depends.

Here are some answers to use as starting points in explaining and discussing homelessness with your child who has raised the question. Your responses should be honest, short, and speak to the child's question. No more and no less.

1. *A person who is homeless has no place to sleep, to eat, to shower and keep himself clean, or to keep his belongings. He has no home.*

2. *Usually, the homeless person doesn't have family or friends who can help him. (This concept is particularly difficult for the young child to grasp as he can't even imagine not living with a mommy or daddy.)*
3. *For grown-ups, having a home costs money. A homeless person is an adult who doesn't have the money he needs to own a house or rent an apartment or to buy food.*
4. *There are many reasons that a person doesn't have money. Usually it is because the he doesn't have a job. (With older children this may lead into a discussion about the ways that people get jobs.)*
5. *Mental illness is when a person's brain is not working the way it is supposed to. Just like people have problems with their bodies, sometimes a person has a problem with his brain. (It is important, for the sake of the child, to add that it is not common to have those kinds of problems. Most people do not have mental illness.)*

And here is a caveat: Sometimes parents attempt to use homeless people as an example of what could happen to the child if ...

...if he doesn't stay in school,

...if he doesn't go to college,

...if he doesn't get a good job,

...if he uses drugs, etc... (Seriously, I have heard this!)

This is a bad idea, and it is not necessarily true. If a parent is going to use homelessness to cultivate feelings and action, empathy and ways to help should be at the top of the list, not fear mongering.

- See more at: <http://betsybrownbraun.com/2015/01/06/how-to-talk-about-homelessness/#sthash.fZ3vSaly.dpuf>