



## Supporting Families with Young Children Experiencing Homelessness: Identification and Referral Strategies

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**This California Homeless Education Technical Assistance Center (HETAC) tip sheet:**

- recommends best practices for identifying young children experiencing homelessness,
- suggests strategies for referring families with young children experiencing homelessness to supports across school and community partners,
- and links to informational and implementation resources throughout.

### Context

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Family homelessness is a growing issue in the United States, with California data showing that numbers of families with preschool- and school-age children are steadily increasing (National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE), 2024; State of California Business, Consumer Services and Housing Agency, n.d.); in fact, preschool-age children are more likely than any other age group to be staying in a homeless shelter (Gubits et al., 2015). For children age birth to 5, the poverty, trauma, and instability that often accompany homelessness are happening during [the life stage that is especially crucial for physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development](#).



And yet, participation in quality early care and education (ECE) programming shows promise for supporting positive outcomes later in life. Specifically,

- children in quality preschool programs are more likely to graduate from high school and own their own homes (Schweinhart, n.d.).
- children who participate in ECE programming are more likely to be employed full-time and have more financial assets, such as owning a car, a home, and having a savings account (Virginia Tech, 2017).
- children experiencing homelessness who attend Head Start (HS) or another high-quality, center-based ECE program score higher on tests of early reading, language, and math than children in homeless situations not attending quality ECE programming (Sucsy, 2021).
- children experiencing homelessness who attend HS programs have an increased likelihood of graduating from high school, attending college, and receiving a post-secondary degree or certification (Sucsy, 2021).

This HETAC tip sheet recommends best practices for identifying young children experiencing homelessness, suggests strategies for referring families with young children experiencing homelessness to services needed across school and community partners, and links to informational and implementation resources throughout.

### Identifying Young Children Experiencing Homelessness

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Families with young children experiencing homelessness have unique needs but also often face unique barriers to accessing help to address these needs. Identifying young children experiencing homelessness is a critical first step in ensuring that these children and their families receive the help they need to

support the children’s healthy development and support the family’s stabilization. The importance of identification is underscored by its inclusion as one of the required duties of the local educational agency (LEA) homeless education liaison<sup>1</sup> (hereafter *local liaison*) in [Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act](#). Local liaisons must ensure that children and youth experiencing homelessness are identified by school personnel through outreach and coordination activities with other entities and agencies [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(6)(A)(i); Cal. Educ. Code § 48851(a)]. The HETAC recommends the following strategies for identifying families with young children experiencing homelessness.

### Use a Housing Questionnaire

Under California Education Code § 48851, LEAs must administer a housing questionnaire (HQ) to all students annually to ensure the identification of children and youth experiencing homelessness. To support LEAs with implementing this requirement, the California Department of Education (CDE) provides a [suite of HQ resources](#), including a model HQ, guidance for understanding the purpose of the HQ and how to complete it, and an HQ frequently asked questions document.

In its HQ guidance document, CDE requires LEAs to ensure that an HQ is completed for every preschool through grade 12 student enrolling in the LEA, including children enrolling in an LEA-administered or -funded preschool program. CDE also underscores the importance of LEAs and schools asking parents, guardians, caregivers, and unaccompanied youth to include preschool-aged children living in the home on the HQ. With this in mind, LEAs should request information about preschool-aged children enrolling in the LEA in the HQ, but also are encouraged to incorporate a question asking about all preschool-aged children in the household of any school-aged children enrolling in the LEA, even if the preschool-aged children aren’t enrolling in an LEA preschool program.

### Post and Share Information Publicly

Under federal and California state law, local liaisons must ensure that information on the educational rights of children and youth experiencing homelessness, including preschool-aged children, is disseminated publicly in a manner and form understandable to unaccompanied youth<sup>2</sup> and parents and guardians of children and youth experiencing homelessness. Locations where information should be posted and disseminated include schools, shelters, public libraries, soup kitchens, and other locations that may be visited by families in homeless situations [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(6)(A)(vi); 42 U.S.C. § 11432(d)(2); Cal. Educ. Code § 48852.5(a)].

To ensure the identification of families with young children experiencing homelessness, LEAs are encouraged to post and share information specifically in places where these families may visit or receive

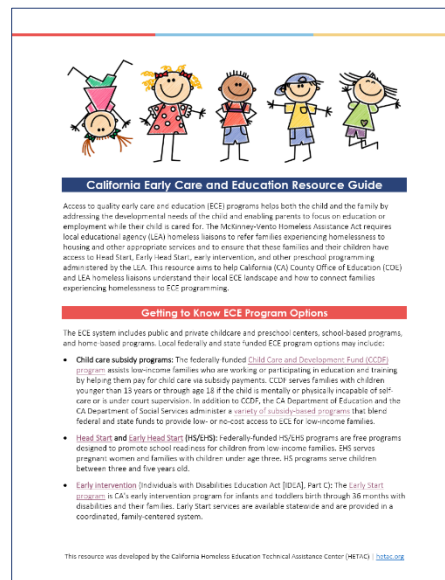
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<sup>1</sup> The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act requires local educational agencies (LEAs) to designate an appropriate staff person to serve as the LEA homeless education liaison [42 U.S.C. 11432(g)(1)(J)(ii)]. The local liaison serves as the LEA’s key homeless education contact and oversees the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act in schools throughout the LEA, including carrying out the duties of the local liaison as established in statute [42 U.S.C. 11432(g)(6)(A)].

<sup>2</sup> The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines *unaccompanied youth* as “a homeless child or youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian” [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(6)]. This includes unaccompanied youth who may be pregnant or parenting a young child. Download the HETAC’s [Unaccompanied Youth: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Students Experiencing Homelessness on Their Own](#) for more information on identifying and serving unaccompanied youth.

services. Local liaisons are encouraged to connect with a variety of local ECE providers to ensure that relevant public awareness materials are posted and shared with families receiving ECE services. Consider the following resources for generating greater awareness among educators, ECE providers and other community partners, and families with young children experiencing homelessness:

- [\*\*You Can Enroll in School! posters:\*\*](#) CDE provides educational rights posters in [English](#) and a [variety of other languages](#) common across California to support LEAs in meeting the statutory requirement to disseminate information publicly.
- [\*\*California Early Care and Education Resource Guide:\*\*](#) This HETAC resource, available in English and Spanish, outlines key California ECE programs and shares information with local liaisons and community partners on how to connect families experiencing homelessness to these programs.
- [\*\*Local Early Care and Education Programs: A Resource for Families in Transition:\*\*](#) This HETAC resource, available in English and Spanish, outlines key California ECE programs and shares information with parents and caregivers about how to help their children access these programs. This resource can be customized to the local community context.
- [\*\*Potential Indicators of Homelessness:\*\*](#) This SchoolHouse Connection flyer shares common signs of homelessness and links to additional information.



## Provide Training for Educators

Under federal and California state law, local liaisons must provide professional development to educators working with children and youth experiencing homelessness at least annually [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(6)(A)(ix); Cal. Educ. Code 48852.5]. By providing training specifically on the needs of families with young children experiencing homelessness, local liaisons help equip educators to support the identification of preschool-aged children in homeless situations and take next steps to address the unique needs of these children and their families. Recommended topics for trainings focused on families with young children experiencing homelessness include

- understanding the [effects of homelessness and mobility on the physical and mental health and development of young children](#);
- understanding the unique needs of and challenges faced by these families;
- conducting effective outreach and public awareness activities to ensure the identification of these families;
- recognizing common signs of homelessness among families with young children;
- understanding ECE and other services available to address these families' needs; and
- next steps to take when working with a young child or family who may be experiencing homelessness, including making a referral to the local liaison for formal identification and connection to additional resources.

The HETAC provides trainings and resources on supporting families with young children experiencing homelessness. Visit the HETAC's [Early Care and Education for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness webpage](#) and [Training and Events webpage](#) to learn more.

## Collaborate with Community Partners

Collaboration across school and community partners, particularly ECE programs, is not only well-founded given that these partners often serve the same families and can respond more effectively by working together; it is also statutorily mandated.

- **School requirements:** The McKinney-Vento Act requires local liaisons to ensure that families experiencing homelessness receive referrals to appropriate school- and community-based services, including ECE services provided by LEA-administered preschool programs, Early Head Start (EHS) and HS programs, and early intervention services under part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(6)(A); Cal. Educ. Code § 48851.5].
- **Head Start program requirements:** EHS and HS programs provide comprehensive developmental services, including health, nutritional, educational, social and other services, to economically disadvantaged preschool children and their families. [The Head Start Act](#), which uses the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness, requires EHS and HS programs to make specific efforts to actively locate and recruit children experiencing homelessness into EHS and HS programming (45 C.F.R. § 1302.13).
- **Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) program requirements:** The CCDF program provides financial assistance to low-income families to help pay for child care. The CCDF program is overseen at the state level by a CCDF Lead Agency. The [Child Care and Development Block Grant \(CCDBG\) Act](#), which uses the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness, requires Lead Agencies to conduct specific outreach to families experiencing homelessness and to provide training and technical assistance to Lead Agency staff and early care providers about identifying and serving families experiencing homelessness (45 C.F.R. § 98.51).
- **Special education program requirements:** IDEA establishes that children with disabilities are entitled to receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) and have access to tailored special education supports that address their individual needs. Preschool-aged children with disabilities are served under IDEA Part C (birth to age 2) and Part B (ages 3 to 21). IDEA's child find provisions require that all children with disabilities, including young children experiencing homelessness, are identified, located, and evaluated for special education services [34 C.F.R. § 300.111(a)(1)(i); 34 C.F.R. § 303.302(b)(1)(ii)].

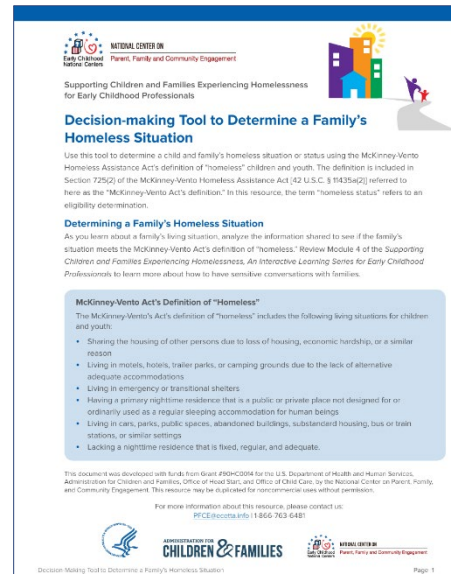
Consider the following strategies for school and community partners work together to identify families with young children experiencing homelessness.

- **Sharing resources:** School and community partners can share resources about their respective programs to increase awareness among program staff and the families they serve about assistance available to families with young children experiencing homelessness.
- **Trainings and events:** School and community partners can provide training to their respective program staff, including through jointly planned and offered learning events, to ensure that staff recognize the signs of homelessness among families with young children, are aware of the ECE and other services available to these families, and know what next steps to take when a family is identified. Local liaisons and ECE program staff also can consider jointly planning and hosting enrollment and resource fairs where they share about their respective service offerings.
- **Intake procedures:** School and community partners can work together to review their intake procedures to ensure that intake questionnaires ask families about their housing status and identify the unique needs of families experiencing homelessness as a first step to connecting the family to tailored supports.

- **Bidirectional referral protocols:** School and community partners can collaborate to establish clear and simple protocols for referring families experiencing homelessness via a “warm hand-off” to a full array of supports provided by schools, ECE providers, and other community partners. See the *Referring Families* section below for more information and implementation resources.

Consider the following resources for strengthening collaboration across schools, ECE providers, and other community partners.

- **[School-Community Partnerships Toolkit:](#)** The HETAC’s *School-Community Partnerships Toolkit* aims to support schools and community agencies in building mutually beneficial, stable, and responsive partnerships that benefit partner agencies and the children, youth, and families they serve.
- **[Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness:](#)** This HeadStart.gov webpage links to eligibility, recruitment, selection, enrollment, and attendance strategies and resources for supporting families experiencing homelessness in Head Start and CCDF programs. Programs may wish to view the free [Supporting Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness 8-module training series](#), including [Module 5: Identifying and Reaching Out to Families Experiencing Homelessness](#).
- **[Decision-making Tool to Determine a Family’s Homeless Situation:](#)** This resource from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS) National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement offers ECE providers a practical tool for determining whether a family with young children meets the definition of homelessness.
- **[Policies and Procedures to Increase Access to ECE Services for Homeless Children and Families:](#)** This webpage from the HHS Office of Early Childhood Development shares recommended policies and practices, including recommendations specific to Head Start and CCDF providers, for ensuring access to ECE programs for families experiencing homelessness.



## Referring Families with Young Children Experiencing Homelessness to ECE Programs

Once a family with young children experiencing homelessness is identified, referring these families to additional supports can help leverage partner networks to ensure the provision of comprehensive assistance. Consider the following resources for establishing and implementing a simple and clear referral protocol across schools, ECE providers, and other community partners the provide a variety of housing and wraparound services to families experiencing homelessness:

- **[School-Community Partnerships Toolkit:](#)** The HETAC’s *School-Community Partnerships Toolkit* includes multiple informational and practical resources, including a school-community partner inventory for identifying and organizing information about partner agencies.
- **[Child Care Resource and Referral organizations \(CCR&Rs\):](#)** Local CCR&Rs serve as a resource hub for connecting families with affordable and high-quality child care in the community.
- **[Referring Young Children to Early Childhood Development Programs: Checklist for Homeless Liaisons:](#)** This SchoolHouse Connection resource provides a checklist of strategies and tools for ensuring that

young children experiencing homelessness and their families are identified and connected with needed assistance. Checklist materials include recommended best practices, program contacts and locator tools, and a Head Start referral app.

By working together, schools and community partners help ensure that families with young children experiencing homelessness are identified as a first step to connecting these families to the comprehensive supports they need to achieve stability and promote the healthy physical and cognitive development of their children.

## Additional Information

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For additional information on early care and education for children experiencing homelessness, visit the [HETAC Early Care and Education for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness webpage](#) or download the [CDE Responsive Early Education for Young Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness resource](#).

## References

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