Module 7: Building Relationships with Families

Supporting Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness
An Interactive Learning Series for Early Childhood Professionals

Welcome!

This module is intended for professionals in Head Start, Early Head Start, and child care, including early childhood and school-age child care providers, Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Lead Agency or designated entity staff, and other key stakeholders.

Module Features

Before you get started, take a moment to review the features of this module. Select the numbered buttons on this page to learn more about each feature. When you are finished, choose "Next" to continue.

Select the **Menu** tab to:

- See a drop-down list of the module's contents
- Jump to a particular section by selecting its title
- Check your progress by selecting "Completion Status"
- Access your Certificate of Completion once you have completed all module sections

Select the **Transcript** tab to open a printable text version of this module.

Choose the **Resources** tab for a list of helpful resources.

Select the **Federal Policies** tab for links to sections of federal legislation and regulations related to family homelessness.

The **page numbers** show how many pages you have completed in a specific section, and how many you have left to complete.

Select the **"Play"** button to play the narration on each slide.

Select the **"Pause"** button to pause the narration on each slide.

Choose **"Previous"** to return to the previous slide.

Choose **"Next"** to go to the next slide.

Module Instructions

- Each module takes approximately 30 minutes to complete. You can spend as much or as little time as you like on a module, depending on your level of experience.

- If you are using your own computer, you can stop a module and come back to it later; the program will remember where you left off. However, if you are using a computer that others will also use to access the learning series, plan to finish the module in one sitting.

- Select the Transcript tab to download or print the text of the module.

- Select the Federal Policies tab for direct links to the federal legislation and regulations referenced in this module. You can bookmark these links for future reference.

- Select the Resources tab to view the full list of reference citations and helpful resources. A number at the end of a sentence indicates a reference citation.

- When you select a link within the module or through one of the tabs, the page will open in a new tab. To return to the module, select the module tab.

- When you finish all sections of this module, you can download a Certificate of Completion.

Introduction to Module 7

In this module, you will:

- Understand how the circumstances of homelessness may impact relationship-building with families
- Review the concepts of family engagement and how to take a strengths-based approach
- Learn strategies to engage families experiencing homelessness, including how to:
  - Build on the strengths of families experiencing homelessness
  - Seek ways to address specific challenges associated with homelessness
- Practice using strengths-based strategies to engage families experiencing homelessness

Family Engagement

Family engagement is an interactive process through which family members, their children, and professionals build positive and goal-oriented relationships in support of positive outcomes. It is a shared responsibility of families and professionals that requires mutual respect for the roles and strengths each has to offer. Family engagement means doing with—not doing to or for—families.

At the program level, family engagement involves parents' engagement with their children and with staff as they work together toward the goals that families choose for themselves and their children.

Early childhood and school-age child care professionals work together with families, other professionals, and community partners in ways that promote equity, inclusiveness, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness. The Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) and Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Final Rule specify requirements related to family engagement.

See Appendix A for more information about the HSPPS and CCDF.

Understanding Family Homelessness

Many factors can lead to families experiencing homelessness, including one or more of the following:

- Lack of affordable housing, eviction, or changes in housing support policies
- Poverty, often caused by low-wage employment, unemployment, and lack of education
- Challenging socio-economic situations, including national economic downturns
- Health challenges, including mental health and addiction
- Domestic violence and other traumatic events
- Natural disasters, such as floods and hurricanes
- Issues related to immigration

Review Module 2 for more information.

Family homelessness may require unique approaches to engagement, given the complex nature and challenges of homelessness. As discussed in Module 2, families experiencing homelessness have stressors that may require special attention, understanding, and sensitivity.

Families may feel:

- Stress due to unmet basic needs and lack of resources to ensure a safe home environment
- Uncertain about asking for information or unclear about where to find help
- Embarrassment and discomfort when parenting without privacy, personal space, and the ability to control basic family routines
- Shame, fear of judgement, and worry about child welfare involvement
- Reluctant to form new attachments

Families may be experiencing:

- Separation from their usual social supports, including family members, friends or neighbors, community providers, and others they see often
- Barriers to stable employment and inconsistent access to child care, school, and other community services (e.g., unreliable transportation)
- Domestic violence, addiction, or other issues related to physical or mental health, such as depression or anxiety

Using a Strengths-Based Approach to Connect with Families

Using a strengths-based approach to build relationships is part of effective family engagement. Successful relationships focus on a family's strengths and a shared commitment to their child's learning and well-being. This approach benefits all families and is especially important when working with families experiencing significant stressors, including homelessness.

Families experiencing homelessness may especially benefit from engagement efforts that focus on their:

- Parenting strengths
- Passion for their child's well-being
- Aspirations to make progress toward stability

A strengths-based approach to partnering with families means:

- Acknowledging the strengths of families first

- Building shared understanding and learning from differences

- Showing openness to adapting practices based on family preferences

- Sharing decision-making

- Approaching families as equal and reciprocal partners

- Seeing families as capable of making their own change

- Striving to provide consistent and reliable support

A strengths-based approach also includes adopting a positive way of thinking or feeling about families. Using this approach with families shows them you want to work together to problem-solve.

Strong and stable relationships with families often become partnerships that are grounded in a strengths-based approach and an authentic concern and respect for each child and family.

Consider the following statements a guide for thinking about and building relationships with all families, including those experiencing homelessness. Select the checkbox next to each to learn more.

- ❑ All families have strengths.
- ❑ Families are the first and most important teachers of their children.
- ❑ Families are our partners with a critical role in their child's development.
- ❑ Families have expertise about their child and their family.
- ❑ Families' contributions are important and valuable.

See Appendix C to learn more about partnering with families experiencing homelessness.

All families have strengths.
Each family has unique strengths that can be the foundation of your discussions and partnership. Always start with strengths first, even when there are challenges.
Families are the first and most important teachers of their children.
Families are the one constant in children's lives. Children's healthy development also relies on sensitive and nurturing interactions within the family and community.
Families are our partners with a critical role in their child's development.
Families make choices every day that affect their overall well-being and their child's development and learning. These choices are rooted in their belief systems and cultural identities.
Families have expertise about their child and their family.
Families understand their children best and make important decisions for their well-being.
Families' contributions are important and valuable.
Being open to a family's suggestions and requests helps us do our best on behalf of their child. We can encourage effective partnerships when we invite families' expertise and listen to their priorities.

Building Relationships with Families Experiencing Homelessness

Families experiencing homelessness and extreme poverty face challenges beyond the natural stressors associated with raising a family. Programs and other professionals can partner with families to determine how best to be supportive.

Learn more about opportunities to support families in the following areas:

- Program Environment
- Family Partnerships
- Teaching and Learning

Select an area to explore practices you can apply in your program to build relationships with children and families experiencing homelessness.

Professionals and programs are encouraged to consider their setting, structure, and available resources before choosing a practice to implement.

Select the "Next" button once you have explored all three areas.

Program Environment: Creating a Welcoming Environment

Programs can create an environment where families are able to choose how they feel best valued and supported. Strategies to promote inclusion, access to information, and encourage a sense of belonging include:

- Providing time and supportive space for parents to have confidential conversations with service providers, or with other parents if they wish to do so
- Having materials visible and available (e.g., brochures, flyers, or posters) that generate discussion about housing needs, a greater understanding of available resources for housing and basic needs, and the rights of children and families without a stable home
- Always clearly posting information about access to emergency services and contact information
- Sharing information with providers and families about how community programs, organizations, and agencies determine eligibility for public benefits, services, and supports
- Taking away the stigma of "homelessness"
- Providing coaching and support to professionals who partner with families
- Inviting parents to share their experiences with enrollment and participation to find out which policies and practices they found helpful, supportive, or challenging
- Offering access to a washing machine and dryer, clean clothes, or food, where possible

See Appendix C to review information about coaching.

Program Environment: Staying Connected to Families

Inviting parents to contribute to the program is another way to convey respect and remind parents that they are part of the program community.

Programs can offer the following opportunities for families to stay connected even when there are barriers to being fully engaged:

Ask parents about specific ways they would like to be involved. **View the practice example.**	**Practice Example**: "You mentioned your schedule makes attending morning activities a challenge. Are there other ways you might like to be involved that fit with your schedule?"
Offer multiple ways for families to contribute to an activity or event so each family can engage in a way that works for them. **View the practice example.**	**Practice Example:** "Anna tells me that she really enjoys the stories you tell her before bed. She's also mentioned the stories to some of her friends. Would you be willing to share some of your stories with us? We would love to read them to the class."
Remind parents you consider them part of the community even when they are not able to participate. **View the practice example.**	**Practice Example:** "We are creating a board in our classroom to display pictures of all of the families who are part of our community. Next week, we are inviting families to come have their pictures taken. I know it's hard for you to get here during the day to participate in activities because of work. Would you be comfortable if we took some photos of you with John to post on our classroom wall? We are happy to take the photos when it is convenient for you."

Family Partnerships: Engaging in Sensitive Conversations

Building relationships with new families during the eligibility and enrollment process and other vulnerable times may require additional sensitivity and patience. Remember, families are likely under considerable stress and approaching the program as a stranger with an immediate challenge. It may be difficult for them to ask for help or engage in conversations that expose vulnerability.

Early childhood professionals can show sensitivity by using the following practices with new families or those already enrolled in the program:

Provide reassurance about the program's commitment to responding to the family's immediate goals and share your commitment to working with the family and problem-solving as needed. **View the practice example.**	**Practice Example** "I know finding Amal child care is your first priority so you can work. I can definitely help with that. You mentioned that you are staying with friends temporarily but would like to get a place of your own. Do you mind telling me a little bit more about your living arrangement? This will help me figure out how I can best help you with Amal's enrollment in our program."
Apply active listening skills that demonstrate compassion and respect. **View the practice example.**	**Practice Example** "I understand that you are unhappy with your living situation and are interested in changing it. It sounds like it has been difficult for your family."
Consider the questions you ask carefully. For example, ask for permission, set aside assumptions, avoid words or phrases that may cause embarrassment, and explain the reasons for your questions. **View the practice example.**	**Practice Example:** "You mentioned you are unhappy with your living situation. You came to the right place for help with that. If you would like, we may be able to connect you with help to change your living situation in addition to enrolling Jeremy in our program. May I ask you a few questions about where you live? The information you share could make a difference in what kinds of child care and services are available to you and your son."

Be available for long-term planning and program participation when parents are ready. Families experiencing homelessness are likely to focus on immediate needs and short-term goals. **View the practice example.**	**Practice Example:** "We know how much you want to find the best living situation for Marcus. If you like, we can assist you throughout the process of finding another place to live."

Families experiencing homelessness may be focused on survival and urgent issues. They need to prioritize what should be addressed first so they can make progress toward a safe and healthy living environment. Families may appear distant. It can be lengthy, demanding, and challenging for families to access supports.

See Appendix C for helpful materials to enhance communication with families.

Family Partnerships: Communicating with Families Who Are Already Enrolled

Families who are already attending programs may be more likely to share information when parents and providers have established meaningful relationships. Parents may seek support more easily if they have experienced a trusting and supportive partnership through stressful times in the past. Practices you may consider may include:

- Being available for more frequent communication and offering to talk privately
- Keeping in close contact with families through their preferred form of communication
- Sharing positive news about their child's day

Family Partnerships: Demonstrating Flexibility and Understanding

- Provide families multiple ways to submit paperwork, including by text, fax, or email.
- Accommodate requests on short notice to postpone or change the location of an appointment or home visit. A family's housing situation may be unpredictable or not offer privacy. Policies that allow flexibility to use alternative locations for outreach and home visits can create trust and safety with families.
- Work with families to identify ways to address potential barriers to program participation. For example, offer bus vouchers, clothes bins, access to diaper banks or laundry service, waivers for child care late fees, or other supports.
- Be flexible about attendance. Recognize that regular attendance may be especially difficult for families experiencing homelessness due to transportation challenges, irregular sleep space and schedules, or interruptions in familiar routines.

Teaching and Learning: Fostering Children's Well-Being and Learning

Families may be particularly concerned about the effects of homelessness on their child's well-being and learning. Professionals can work with parents to create some stability and relief for children experiencing stress. Programs can use the following strategies to respond to families' hopes and concerns for their child:

Discuss the shared goal of the family's well-being and their child's healthy development and learning. **View the practice example.**	**Practice Example:** "You mentioned that you are looking for child care so that you can work. You'd also like a program that can be your partner in helping Olivia get ready for kindergarten next year."
Share observations of positive interactions between the family and their child. **View the practice example**	**Practice Example:** "I noticed how Miranda begins to smile as soon as she sees you walking through the door. "
Listen to the family's goals and discuss any concerns they may have for their child. Due to urgent stressors and time pressures, parents experiencing homelessness may have heightened concerns about their children's well-being and vulnerability. **View the practice example.**	**Practice Example:** "You mentioned that you don't want Felix to take a nap during the day because you're concerned it may be interfering with his sleep at night. Let's try your suggestion to have Felix play quietly by himself during nap time to see if that helps him sleep better at night. We can check in next week to see if his sleeping has improved."
Reassure parents that children are in a safe and caring environment. At the same time, avoid minimizing any fears or concerns. Dismissing a family's worries may imply that you don't value or trust their judgment. **View the practice example.**	**Practice Example:** "Ms. Sanchez, you mentioned you would like Beatriz to be in a safe place with caring teachers and children her own age. How about I give you a tour of our program? You can see the classrooms and the playground and even meet some of the staff to make sure we are a good fit for you and *Beatriz."*

Observe and comment on positive interactions between the parent and their child. Reaffirm the importance of this relationship and seek the parents' expertise whenever possible. **View the practice example.**	**Practice Example:** "I've noticed that Amanda has begun to tell stories as she flips through books. She likes to use different voices as she talks. I've seen you do this with her before you leave for work. You are really inspiring her to enjoy books and reading."
Create times for children to receive extra attention, get additional rest, or to help with a special project. Build on the family's passion for their child by sharing positive anecdotes, celebrating strengths, and partnering to provide additional support. **View the practice example.**	**Practice Example:** **"**Prak told a friend to stop poking him today. He knows the words to use to let someone know he doesn't like something."
Encourage parents to engage in simple activities such as playing, hugging, rocking, walking, and jumping. Daily caretaking routines like dressing, eating, and getting ready for bed are also chances for connection and learning. Reaffirm that positive interactions and experiences with parents and other people are more important to healthy development and learning than toys and other activities, which may require a fee. **View the practice example.**	**Practice Example:** Grace tells us she has been practicing special dances she learned from her grandmother. She even showed the other children how to do some of the steps. It is clear that spending time with her grandmother is helping Grace learn new skills. Imitating her grandmother is a sign of healthy development.
Share ideas for simple ways families can engage children in learning at home, such as telling stories, singing, dancing, counting objects, and naming colors.	

Building Relationships with Families Experiencing Homelessness: Summary

As professionals, we have the chance to strengthen relationships with families through program areas that include program environment, family partnerships, and teaching and learning.

It is important that families experiencing homelessness see your program as a source of support. Programs can partner with parents to minimize the daily stress and uncertainty that may be a result of homelessness.

Partnering with Families to Minimize Stress

Offering material help such as clothing, food, and transportation can be helpful. Demonstrating flexibility and understanding may remove additional stress and help parents feel less isolated and overwhelmed. Depending on the availability of resources and the program's structure, professionals can connect families with community partners and help with access to services. Programs can also introduce parents to other families who have offered to provide peer support and help broaden families' support network.

Providers should keep in mind that parents want the best for their child and family and may be doing the very best they can in that moment. Using a strengths-based approach without negative assumptions or judgment increases the chances of developing a trusting relationship that a family finds helpful and supportive.

Completion Status

To complete Module 7, review all sections listed below. If a section is not checked, use the Menu tab to return to and complete that section. Once all sections are checked, select the "Next" button to continue to your Certificate of Completion.

- ✓ Introduction
- ✓ Family Engagement
- ✓ Understanding Family Homelessness
- ✓ Using a Strengths-Based Approach to Connect with Families
- ✓ Building Relationships with Families Experiencing Homelessness
- ✓ Partnering with Families to Minimize Stress

Certificate of Completion

Congratulations! You have completed Module 7: Building Relationships with Families.

To access your certificate, select the "Open Your Certificate" button. A PDF document will open in a separate tab. Enter your name and the date on the certificate. Print or save the certificate to your computer.

Appendix A: Federal Legislation and Regulations Related to Family Homelessness

Federal Legislation and Regulations Related to Family Homelessness	
McKinney-Vento Definition of Homeless Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act	https://nche.ed.gov/mckinney-vento-definition/
Child Care and Development Fund Reauthorization	https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/ccdf-reauthorization
McKinney-Vento Law Into Practice Brief Series Supporting Homeless Children and Youth with Disabilities: Legislative Provisions in the McKinney-Vento Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act	https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/idea.pdf
Head Start Program Performance Standards	https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii
Program Operations, 45 CFR § 1302	
Eligibility, Recruitment, Selection, Enrollment, and Attendance, 45 CFR § 1302(A)	https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-subpart-eligibility-recruitment-selection-enrollment-attendance
Determining community strengths, needs, and resources, 45 CFR § 1302.11	https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-11-determining-community-strengths-needs-resources
Determining, verifying, and documenting eligibility, 45 CFR § 1302.12	https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-12-determining-verifying-documenting-eligibility
Recruitment of children, 45 CFR § 1302.13	https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-13-recruitment-children
Selection process, 45 CFR § 1302.14	https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-14-selection-process
Enrollment, 45 CFR § 1302.15	https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-15-enrollment
Attendance, 45 CFR § 1302.16	https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-16-attendance
Family and Community Engagement Program Services, 45 CFR § 1302(E)	https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-subpart-e-family-community-engagement-program-services
Community partnerships and coordination with other early childhood and education programs, 45 CFR § 1302.53	https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-53-community-partnerships-coordination-other-early-childhood-education
Transition Services, 45 CFR § 1302 (G)	
Transitions between programs, 45 CFR § 1302.72 (a)	https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-subpart-g-transition-services
Definitions, 45 CFR § 1305	
Terms, 45 CFR § 1305.2	https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1305-2-terms

Appendix B: The McKinney-Vento Definition of Homeless

The McKinney-Vento Definition of Homeless

Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (per Title IX, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act) defines homeless as follows:
 	
The term "homeless children and youths"--
 	
   A. means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (within the meaning of section 103(a)(1)); and
 	
   B. includes--
     (i) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals;* (ii) children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (within the meaning of section 103(a)(2)(C)); (iii) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and (iv) migratory children (as such term is defined in section 1309 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).
 	
     *Per Title IX, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act, "awaiting foster care placement" was removed from the definition of homeless on December 10, 2016; the only exception to his removal is that "covered states" have until December 10, 2017 to remove "awaiting foster care placement" from their definition of homeless.
 	
View the full text of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act:
https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title42/chapter119/subchapter6/partB&edition=prelim

Appendix C: Resources

Handouts
Building Relationships with Families Experiencing Homelessness: Program-Level Strategies
Supporting Professionals Who Support Families: The Parallel Process
Reflection and Planning Tool for Partnering with Families Experiencing Homelessness