



Exploring Early Childhood During Periods of Family Homelessness: Parenting Strategies and the Role of the Shelter

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Introduction

2.5 million children were homeless in America in 2013 compared to 1.2 million in 2007 (Bassuk et al., 2014). Among them, 1,266,605 were under six years old (AFC, 2016).

Children's early experiences with their environments and caregivers have long-term consequences such that stressful experiences beget future risk while nurturing experiences may not (Sroufe et al., 2010).

Homeless episodes during early childhood are stressful and pose unique health, academic, and developmental risks (Bassuk et al., 2014; Buckner et al., 2001, David et al., 2011).

Thus, it is important to investigate how homeless shelters and the families they serve meet the needs of young children.

Method

We used a **case study design** (Yin, 2009) to explore young children's experiences within one family shelter. This design allowed us to integrate data from diverse sources to fully describe the meaning of homelessness for young children.

Case Study of Family Shelter

Participant	Measure
15 Mothers 1 Father	Semi-structured interview Protective Factors Survey (Friends, 2008) Demographics Survey
15 Children < 6 years	DP-3 (Alpern, 2007) Participant observation
5 Staff	Semi-structured interview
1 Shelter	ECERS –R (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005)

R1: What strategies do parents of young children use to meet their needs while they are homeless?

Parents who live in shelter **network with each other** to find resources.

"I've already told a couple people here to go out there. Cuz actually Lydia... she uh. I told her about it and she went out and...got diapers, wipes, clothes, and everything for the kids."

Parents consult with **family members** who have been homeless.

"As a kid I had also been here once before. Once or twice...with my mom."

Parents use **prior experiences** to navigate homeless episodes.

"I kinda already knew what was coming on. Because Tanner, he is my favorite night guy, and he was workin'"

Parents use **technology** such as smart phones to find resources.

"I just actually...here. I downloaded this new app. I'll show you. It's called MyLNK. I can find whatever I need here...see!"

R2: What is the shelter's role in supporting resilience among families?

Some areas of the shelter accommodate children better than others. For instance, mothers struggle to keep their children safe with sleep arrangements in the family room on the left whereas the "daycare room" on the right is more suited to children's needs.



Staff use **technology** to find resources for families.

"We spend a lot of time um, getting on the internet, looking up who does what, and then we make lists of phone numbers."

Staff **identify** resources for families to contact.

"Then as far as just referring people to these resources, we basically just give them the phone number or we look them up...um personally for myself, I like to have people make the phone calls on their own. I'll give you the number and I'll give you the means to get there. But I want you to make your own phone calls and find out your own needs."

Resources to **care for children** are the most requested.

"Most of the time that someone comes in here needing outside things, besides from here, um are looking for their kids."

Discussion

- We found indicators of **risk and resilience** within our sample. Importantly, all parents signified their desire for *"something better"* and articulated strategies to get it despite significant barriers.
- Families come to homelessness with strengths that could be bolstered through community-supported intervention.
- Community supported intervention fits within a **social-ecological framework of resilience** (Ungar et al., 2013) where resilient qualities are measured not within individuals, but within social ecologies.

Implications:

- Families use informal and family networks coupled with technology to meet their needs. As such, investing directly in families while also strengthening services within the shelter might be ways to "skill-up" parents as they achieve self-sufficiency.
- For parents, access to technology within the shelter might accelerate their path to self-sufficiency.
- For the shelter, establishing a partnership with high-quality community childcare providers could mitigate the stress of shelter living for young children.

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