Finding their way home:
Children's experiences of homelessness

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The Institute of Child Protection Studies was established as a joint initiative between the Australian Catholic University and the ACT Department of Health, Housing and Community Services

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Research Team

This research project was conducted by the Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU National with funding from the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services.

The ICPS was established in 2005 to promote and enhance the safety of children, young people and families through quality research, training and community education and is a partnership between the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services (DHCS) and ACU National. Driven by a child-centred philosophy, the Institute is committed to ensuring that children remain at the centre of social policy and practice and work with governments and services to promote their interests and well-being.

The project team consisted of: Tim Moore, Debbie Noble-Carr and Dr Morag McArthur with assistance from Merrilyn Woodward, Megan Layton-Thomas and Bernadette Bryant.

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ARTWORK:

All artwork found in this report was created by the children and young people involved in the project. Where possible we have used children's own quotes to explain their meanings.

ABBREVIATIONS:

ACT   Australian Capital Territory

ACU   Australian Catholic University National

AIHW   Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

CRG   Children's Reference Group

CANFaCS   Canberra Fathers and Children's Service

DDHCS   ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services

DET   ACT Department of Education and Training

DV   Domestic Violence

ICPS   Institute of Child Protection Studies

NSWCCYP   New South Wales Commissioner for Children and Young People

OCYFS   ACT Office for Children, Youth and Family Support

SAAP   Supported Accommodation Assistance Program

NOTE:

For the purposes of this report, all participants under the age of 18 are referred to as 'children'. However, when distinguishing those participants aged over 15 years of age we refer to them as 'young people'.

1. Executive Summary

The aims and purpose of the research

The Institute of Child Protection Studies' *Children's Experiences of Homelessness* project was commissioned in 2006 by the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services in an attempt to answer the key research question:

> *What does the system need to know about how children perceive and experience homelessness in order to achieve better outcomes for homeless families?*

Unlike previous studies, the project attempted to understand the unique perspectives of children who had accompanied their parents during periods of homelessness within the ACT.

Methodology

This project adopted a qualitative, multi method approach that maximised children's engagement and elicited their views through semi-structured interviews, art activities and focus groups. These tools were developed and trialled with a children's reference group who, with a stakeholders group, provided crucial guidance to the project, particularly in regards to their appropriateness and their child-friendliness. To understand the broader context and to triangulate findings, parents and key stakeholders were also interviewed about how children experienced and were affected by family homelessness. Children's views and artwork were analysed and formed the basis of this report.

Ethical considerations

This project received ethics approval from the Australian Catholic University and was developed in a way that protected participant's privacy and confidentiality, attempted to minimise power imbalances and gave children control over their involvement in the research activities. They drew on the findings of previous research projects that focused on appropriate and responsive research as discussed in the accompanying literature review, "Engaging children in research on sensitive issues".

The sample

18 children aged 6 to 14 and 7 young people aged 15 to 21 participated in the study. Participants were recruited through homelessness, family support and youth services or by others engaged in the research project. 8 participants identified as being of Aboriginal descent, 14 were male and 11 were female. All participants had experienced homelessness as children and had accompanied their families during this period.

Children and young people had been homeless for between 4 months and 10 years with the average period of homeless being 30 months in duration. Within the sample, 21 had lived in supported accommodation, 7 in a motel or hotel, 6 in a caravan and 4 had lived rough.

Children and young people in the sample did not identify as being from a culturally or linguistically diverse background and therefore did not include migrant or refugee children.

25 adults (including 5 parents, 8 care and protection workers, 7 SAAP workers and 5 community-based workers) also participated in semi-structured interviews.

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What 'homelessness' means to children

Children in this study felt that homelessness was a subjective experience that was determined more by their level of connectedness to family and to community and the absence of fear, instability and insecurity rather than by their housing status. When housed, they stressed the importance of having adequate space, of having a sense of control over their environment, of housing stability and predictability, of feeling connected to friends and supports and to opportunities.

How children experience homelessness

Children's experiences of homelessness were often precipitated and exacerbated by parental conflict and family violence, poverty, parental alcohol or other drug misuse and other related personal and family issues.

Children's experiences were characterised by high levels of family separation; exposure to violence; poor health outcomes; feelings of stress, anxiety, loss and grief; social isolation; difficulties in attending and achieving at school and making and keeping friends. A number of young people in the sample experienced intergenerational homelessness and were now parents whose own children had accompanied them during periods of homelessness.

Though problematic, children reported that during periods of homelessness they felt connected and supported by their families and that their parents mitigated some of its negative affects. They believed that having lived through difficult times they and their families had developed an appreciation for life and a sense that they could overcome future challenges.

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Key themes and implications

To summarise our findings, we consider that workers in accommodation, health and child protection services and in schools need to be aware that when working with families experiencing homelessness:

- It is vital to connect with children and young people in their own right, engage with them as individuals, and listen to and acknowledge their stories. Children and young people may also need support to be able to talk with parents about what is happening for them, in order to help the child and also to strengthen relationships within the family.

- Children and young people need information about the events and processes affecting their lives but this should be given in a way that recognises a young person's developmental and emotional needs, their personality and wishes.

- Children from families experiencing homelessness often experience problems at school, with their health, and making and retaining friends.

- Some of the factors that are recognised as 'pathways' into family homelessness, such as parental drug and alcohol use, family violence and parental mental health issues, themselves make children more at risk during periods of homelessness. High priority should be given to supporting parents to deal with the issues contributing to their homelessness.

- Knowledge of other relevant services and supports should be strong and up-to-date, and any referrals of young people to these services need to be well supported and coordinated and take place as early as possible in the life of a problem.

- The effects of homelessness on children often persist beyond the periods of homelessness. High levels of change and insecurity in the child's life

make it important that support for the young person is sustained beyond the crisis period and preferably provided through continuing contact

- Much of the fear and distress of homelessness for the young person is the insecure and sometimes unsafe nature of their temporary housing. Safe, secure and stable accommodation must be made available as early as in the homelessness cycle as possible.

- A family's strengths and achievements should ALWAYS be recognised.

At the broader system level, it is clear that early intervention to prevent homelessness occurring in the first place (through, for example, improved communication between different areas within the Department such as housing and child protection) is vastly less damaging for the families involved and far more efficient in terms of community resources.

(Artwork by girl, aged 8)

That's where it all started, man. I was homeless for like 10 years because my Mum had nowhere to stay...If Mum had got somewhere where we could be together and she didn't have to put up with his crap then I wouldn't have ended up where I did. Yeah – my whole life's caught up with it. All the shit that's happened in my life is because of it. Everything.

(Young man, aged 21)

2. Introduction

2.1 The purpose of the research

This study was funded by the DDHCS and aims to develop an understanding of how children experience, perceive and are affected by their family's homelessness. The project was commissioned to draw together children's unique perceptions, to build on existing knowledge and to inform practice and policy within the ACT context. It was assumed that by furthering our understanding of children's experiences of homelessness, the service system and the broader community might more effectively respond to the needs of homeless children and their families.

The key research question was:

- 'What does the system need to know about how children perceive and experience homelessness in order to achieve better outcomes for homeless families?'

2.2 Scope of the research

This project was conducted within the ACT and children were recruited who had accompanied their families while homeless in that jurisdiction. Due to the transitory nature of homelessness, most of the families involved in this study had spent some time homeless in other states either before or after being homeless in the ACT. Although this report is primarily concerned with their experiences in the ACT, some of the children and young people's stories about interstate homelessness are reported.

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Targeting 'accompanying children'

Unlike the many research projects that focused on young people who had been homelessness without a parent, this project attempted to understand what life was like for children who were with their parents during periods of homelessness. Although we did speak with young people who were currently homeless or who had been homeless by themselves, we focused particularly on their periods of family homelessness as well as exploring times when they had slept rough, lived in temporary or unstable accommodation or within refuges.

2.4   Disseminating our findings

This report draws together the findings of the Children's Experiences of Homelessness project. Accompanying this report are a number of documents that present various aspects of the project each of which are available separately. They include:

- A literature review, "Engaging children in research on sensitive issues"

- A literature review, "The experiences and effects of family homelessness for children"

- A children and young person's handbook, "No place but home", a compilation of stories, artwork and photos from homeless children.

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3. Background

As part of this project, the Institute completed an extensive review of the existing literature on children's and family homelessness in Australia to inform the research. This Review is available and provides the current knowledge on children and family homelessness. What follows is a summary of the findings of the review, particularly in regards to the scope and nature of previous studies.

3.1   What we know about homeless children in Australia

Over the last decade families have been widely acknowledged as being the fastest growing group in the homeless population in Australia. Today, homeless families are estimated to make up approximately a third of Australia's homeless population (AIHW, 2006) with children who accompany a parent or guardian making up 36% (more than one in three) of all people attending SAAP services (AIHW, 2006).

Despite these figures, there has been little research conducted in Australia on family homelessness and even less that has looked at the experience and effects of homelessness from children's perspectives. Therefore, a vast amount of our knowledge comes from overseas, primarily the USA and Europe where trends of family homelessness were first noted in the early 1980s – well before family homelessness was even acknowledged in Australia.

Many of these international studies were able to link developmental delays, behavioural problems and poor educational outcomes directly to children's experiences of family homelessness (see Bassuk & Rosenberg 1990 and Molnar et al, 1991 both cited in Buckner & Bassuk, 1999:162). Even when compared to their housed peers from low socio-economic backgrounds, homeless children were found to perform worse in measures of health, social, emotional and behavioural

issues (Hausman & Hammen, 1993; Masten 1990 and Wright, 1993 both cited in Bartholomew, 1999:90-91).

It was only in 1992 that the first study into family homelessness was completed in Australia (see McCaughey, 1992). Since then, there have been only a few major research projects completed on this topic. However, they do provide some important insights into family homelessness and the impact that it has on children throughout Australia.

For example, although not talking directly to children, a Victorian study[1] confirmed that children's experiences of family homelessness in Australia seemed very similar to their European or American counterparts. Efron highlighted that homelessness has detrimental affects on children's physical, emotional, social and educational development and was able to find a direct correlation between the number of housing moves and negative effects experienced by children (Efron et al, 1996).

Other more recent reports completed in Australia (including a two year longitudinal study of 30 families conducted by Hanover Welfare Services) were also able to find a positive relationship between housing stability and an improvement in child outcomes such as health, general behaviour, family relationships, schooling and levels of social interaction (Phibbs & Young, 2004 cited in AHURI, 2004 and Kolar, 2005:5). However children were not directly included in these studies.

A further three key research reports completed on family homelessness in Australia in recent years, including Bartholomew's research completed in Victoria

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[1] Hanover's follow-up to McCaughey's research, which was completed by Efron and colleagues in 1996

in 1999 (*'A long way from home'*), Walsh's 2003 study completed in Queensland (*'More than just a roof')* and the *'Perth Aboriginal Family Homelessness Study'* completed by Roberts in 2003, all confirmed that homelessness can have serious negative impacts on children, but again they did not include children in their study samples.

These studies can also be supported by national SAAP data collection reports (AIHW 1999, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2006a-e), various SAAP review and evaluation reports (see Thomson Goodall Associates 1994; Strategic Partners, 1997 and Norris et al, 2005) and other smaller scale studies conducted within the SAAP service sector (see McNamara, 2003; Toucan Consulting, 2003; RPR Consulting, 2003 and 2005; CanFaCS, 2004; Resolve Community Consulting, 2004). Importantly, some of the small scale studies completed within and for SAAP services have also examined the experiences and effects of family homelessness from the child's perspective (see Jurak, 2003 and Edwards, 2003). Thereby making a contribution to our knowledge of how children understand, perceive and experience homelessness and what supports and strategies need to be in place for them.

Therefore, despite concerns that exist about the quality and quantity of the research that is available (a comprehensive review of which can be found in the accompanying literature review), Australian studies have highlighted the more commonly shared experiences children who accompany their families into homelessness in Australia live through.

These key common themes include how children try to manage cumulative stressors and multiple loss and grief issues, due to experiences of:

- Domestic and family violence;
- High levels of transience and mobility;

- Extended periods of homelessness; and

- Living on a day-to-day basis in a range of inappropriate, overcrowded and often unsafe temporary and emergency housing.

Australian studies have also found that as a consequence of these experiences, parents report that children are restricted or negatively affected by family homelessness in many aspects of their lives including their:

- Health and wellbeing –children often have higher than average occurrence of acute and chronic medical problems, experience developmental delays, have nutritional deficits, and reduced access to health services (see Efron et al, 1996; Nunez, 2000);

- Emotional and behavioural issues – children often experience varying degrees of grief, loss, anxiety and trauma and may act out aggressively or withdraw (see Bartholomew, 1999; Walsh 2003);

- Education – children's attendance and achievement may be disrupted during periods of instability and this may lead to early school leaving (see Strategic Partners, 1997; Nunez, 2000)

- Levels of social participation – children and families may become dislocated and lose contact with networks of support, disengage from their communities and its activities (including schooling, parenting groups and neighbourhoods (see St Luke's Anglicare, 2005; Halpenny et al 2002)

- Family relationships – are sometimes strained during periods of crisis with parents capacity to meet their children's needs reduced (see McNamara, 2003; Bahro, 1996; CanFACS, 2004)

- Future opportunities – may be affected due to poor educational outcomes, social connectedness and general health and wellbeing (Vostainis et al 1996; Bartholomew, 1999)

However, before we begin to examine and challenge some of these key themes and understandings with our own findings, it is important to outline the extent of family homelessness in Australia and describe the pathways into homelessness. This enables us to develop a shared understanding of the families and children who are currently experiencing, or are at risk of experiencing, homelessness in Australia.

3.2   The extent of family homelessness in Australia

Number of children experiencing homelessness

As stated above, more than one in three of all the people entering SAAP services across Australia are children accompanying their homeless parent or guardian. In 2004-05 this equated to 56,800 children who accompanied their parents or guardians into SAAP services with 87% of these children aged under 12 years and 44% who were 4 years of age or under (AIHW, 2006b).

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reported that 2% of children, in the general population in Australia who are aged less than 5 years, experienced homelessness with their parents in 2004-5 (AIHW, 2006b). In the same year, 800 children in the ACT entered SAAP services with their parent or guardian, with 50% of these children being under 5 years of age (AIHW, 2006e).

There is little doubt that this number underestimates the number of children who experience homelessness with their parents, as many children will never enter the SAAP service system. In fact 2 in every 3 children who need support and accommodation from SAAP are turned away from homeless assistance services each day (AIHW, 2006a).

Other key information gained from SAAP data

- Indigenous Australians are substantially over-represented in SAAP services, with 23% of accompanying children presenting to SAAP with a parent or guardian who identified as being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (AIHW, 2006c).

- SAAP data shows that for many children homelessness can mean moving from living with two parents to only one (Norris et al, 2005:50).

- 86% of accompanying child support periods in SAAP are for children presenting with a female adult (predominantly their mother), 10% present with couples and 4% present with an adult male (usually their father) (AIHW, 2006b).

- In the ACT these figure are markedly different with only 59% of accompanying child support periods in SAAP being for children presenting with a female adult, 23% presenting with a couple and 17% presenting with an adult male (AIHW, 2006b).

This is more than likely a reflection of the type of SAAP services that are available in the ACT compared to the rest of Australia. For example the ACT has the only SAAP facility in Australia that has been established for sole fathers and their children (CanFACS, 2004).

3.3   Pathways into family homelessness

In Australia, families become homeless for a variety of reasons and as a result of a number of complex and often interrelated factors. In this section we will focus on the structural forces that have shown to lead families into homelessness. It is

important to note, however, that a range of personal and family issues, including parental alcohol or other drug use and mental illness, social isolation and disconnection, can also act to exacerbate these factors and reduce family's capacity to deal with adversity, making them more vulnerable to becoming homeless. A fuller discussion about the factors leading to homelessness is available in the accompanying literature review: "The experiences and effects of family homelessness for children".

Structural forces such as poverty and the severe lack of affordable housing

As with the profiles of homeless families, the pathways into homelessness for families can be complex and are many and varied. Much of the literature, particularly those articles and publications coming from within the homeless service sector, emphasises the structural issues that preclude families from being able to obtain and maintain safe and suitable housing. These structural issues can include poverty, unemployment, race and gender inequality and perhaps most importantly a severe lack of affordable housing.

In Australia, over the last two decades, high rates of poverty and unemployment, coupled with decreasing affordability of housing in the private sector, and the decreasing availability of housing in the public sector, have resulted in an increasing number of families becoming vulnerable to housing crisis or homelessness (RPR Consulting, 2003:8; Norris et al, 2005:10).

Therefore, it is thought that homelessness can now strike any family at any time. This can include families who have hitherto enjoyed long term stability for whom an accident at work, an untoward death or sudden economic misfortune can pitch a family into homelessness (Nicholson, 2006).

For other families, staying afloat and avoiding housing crisis has become a daily struggle (Bartholomew, 1999). Poverty and financial hardship, often resulting in eviction, are now among the most commonly noted causes of homelessness for families, especially homeless couples and single men (Horn, 1996; AIHW, 2006b).

In the ACT alone, just under a third of all clients with children (30.3%) provided 'eviction/previous accommodation ended' or 'financial difficulty' as the main reason why they sought assistance from SAAP services (AIHW, 2006e).

There is also another group of homeless families that have never known or experienced housing stability and for whom homelessness and poverty has become an entrenched way of life (McCaughey, 1992). Australian studies have found that for the majority of children homelessness is rarely a one off experience (for example see Bartholomew, 1999). This is significant for many reasons not the least being that children who experience significant housing instability may be at a greater risk of intergenerational homelessness (Australian Capital Territory Council for Social Service (ACTCOSS) & Morgan Disney & Associates, 2002, p 59). This group of children may be at greater risk of becoming homelessness in their adult lives.

Domestic and family violence

Discussions of domestic and family violence make up a large part of the literature on family homelessness. Along with poverty, domestic and family violence is recognised as the most common cause of family homelessness in Australia (Norris et al, 2005). In 2003-04, 66% of accompanying children in SAAP were children who accompanied a female parent or guardian escaping domestic violence (AIHW, 2005).

Therefore, for many children homelessness is inextricably linked with the resonating impacts of domestic and family violence, which can include intense feelings of 'fear, anger, guilt, sadness, shame, confusion, helplessness and despair' (Hague et al 1996 cited in Saunders, 2003). Many of these children are also forced to flee their homes suddenly and consequently experience the loss of leaving behind family members, pets, friends and personal belongings – and an uncertain future (Stone, 2003).

3.4   Increased exposure to unsafe situations

Children who experience homelessness often become more vulnerable and find themselves in potentially unsafe living situations. In addition, due to the nature of homelessness children may suffer due to the reduced capacity of parents to meet their physical and emotional needs. Children who become homeless are also more visible to services and are under closer scrutiny. Because of this children may come to the attention of child protection services. The relationship that homeless families have with the child protection system in Australia is an under-researched area. No national data exists to enable an examination of how many children who experience homelessness with their families also end up having some form of child protection intervention or vice versa.

Child protection intervention with homeless families is partly due to the strong correlation between personal factors (such as domestic and family violence, mental health issues and drug and alcohol abuse) and the existence of family homelessness. However there is a view that social support systems (ie housing, family support and income security) in Australia fail vulnerable families leading to homelessness and increased intervention from child protection authorities (Bartholomew, 1999, St Luke's Anglicare 2005). There is also some evidence that concludes that child protection intervention can lead to increased homelessness for families (St Luke's Anglicare, 2005). (See Literature Review for further details).

Families perceived real fear about child protection intervention particularly the fear that their children will be removed. This poses a significant barrier for families and children to engage with support services (Resolve Community Consulting, 2004, Bartholomew 1996, Walsh, 2003; RPR Consulting 2005, Kolar, 2004). Appendix C provides a summary of interviews carried out with a small sample of child protection workers in the ACT to explore their construction of homelessness as a child protection issue.

(Photo by girl, aged 8)

"My Mum and my Dad had a big fight and me and my sister we got a bit upset and we started running and I went to hide.

And then Dad came and got [my sister] and Mummy put me in the car, and [my sister] jumped out the window and Mum catched her.

 And then we got to go to Mummy's place, but I thought Dad was a bit upset, and I got a bit upset, but we didn't go back to where Daddy was"

(Girl, aged 7)

4. The project

4.1 Our research approach

As stated above, there has been limited attention to exploring children's own experiences of homelessness. To develop this understanding we have taken a qualitative approach to the research project. Broadly, qualitative research describes research that focuses on how individuals and groups view and understand the world and construct meaning out of their experiences. With its emphasis on understanding complex, interrelated and / or changing phenomena qualitative research seeks to gain deeper knowledge of lived experiences. This approach does not aim to develop statistically valid samples, or to find statistical support for hypotheses but rather to explore the full multi-dimensional, dynamic picture of the subject of study – in this case homelessness (see Liamputang 2005, Denzin 2000).

4.2 Engaging children in research about sensitive issues

Over the past 20 years, researchers across the globe have argued that to best understand the unique views and experiences of children, time must be spent actively involving them and engaging them in research about issues that affect their lives. Rather than eliciting their needs and views through adult conduits charged with gathering, translating and then promoting children's voices, such commentators argue that researchers must develop methodologies that enable children to participate directly in a sensitive, ethical and effective way (Bessell 2006).

The project design attempted to reflect both our philosophical position (that children should be at the centre of all processes that affect their lives) and the

growing body of evidence that suggests that participatory research can elicit richer and more responsive data for analysis.

Where possible, the research team engaged children in ways that not only allowed for effective gathering of data but also provided them with valuable, worthwhile and enjoyable experiences. Rather than being viewed as pure research subjects, the research team viewed children as active partners within the research process.

4.3   Ethical research with children

Ethics approval is required for all research carried out under the auspice of Australian Catholic University (ACU National) to ensure that "the conduct of research protects the welfare and rights of all human participants in research and ensures the principles of integrity, respect for persons, beneficence and justice are upheld".   Ethics approval was both sought and granted from the University. Encapsulated in and additional to the ethics process, the research team attempted to respond to a range of ethical issues relating to engaging children in research:

Protection of children

One of the fundamental considerations of ethical research regards the protection of research subjects' physical, social and psychological well-being (Laws & Mann, 2004, pp29-30). The main purpose of this research project was to talk to children and young people who had experienced homelessness and potentially had been exposed to traumatic life events. With a large number experiencing poverty and exclusion and many having witnessed violence, it was imperative that the project be developed in a way that did not further traumatise them through the process. As a result, the team worked with a Children's Reference Group and an Adults' Working Group (discussed below) to construct the methodology and tailor specific questions so that difficult issues were raised sensitively.

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Before interviews, in line with ethical research principles, researchers explained the process and ensured that children and young people knew that their involvement in the project was voluntary and that they could stop at any time – particularly if they found something distressing. This was reiterated through the interviews and other activities. Follow up support was also made available to children and families by research staff.

Consent and assent

In an attempt to protect children, researchers are required to obtain parental consent for children's involvement in research. However the issue of who should give consent is disputed (Milling-Kinnard 1985). One view sees parents giving consent as a necessary requirement to ensure that children's involvement in research is understood and in their best interests. However it may be argued that unless the child is also able to decide whether they participate in research processes, how they are involved and what issues they are happy to explore, researchers can act to disempower and discredit children. It is important, therefore, for researchers to work with children and to make it clear with them that they have the same rights in research as their adult peers.

In this study, children were given information before engaging in the research process that aimed at informing them about their rights and to elicit their assent. This accompanied a parent's consent form. On meeting children, researchers also assisted participants in understanding what they were being asked to do and their right to participate in a way that they felt most comfortable. This was encapsulated in the Children's Rights page - developed for the research - which was discussed

with children prior to their interview. Each child then completed an assent form that was based on one developed by the NSWCCYP (included in Attachment

Privacy

It has been argued that as research subjects, children should be afforded the same rights to privacy as others (Mauthner 1997, p 18). As such, the research team needed to consider how children's privacy might be upheld – even when it was contrary to their parent's wishes. In this project, children and young people were given the option of participating in the presence of their parents or not. In a number of cases (n=3), children chose to have their parents with them while their interview was conducted.

Confidentiality

As well as addressing privacy issues, ethical researchers need to consider issues of confidentiality (Save the Children 2001, p39). Due to the sensitive nature of the discussions, children and young people were assured that everything they shared with researchers remained confidential and that they would not be identified as having participated in the project. In some instances, quotes and stories were de-identified while others were not used so that children could remain anonymous.

Limits to Confidentiality

When working with vulnerable groups such as homeless children, it is important that issues of child welfare be considered. In instances of child abuse or neglect, confidentiality may need to be breached when children's safety and wellbeing are at risk (NSWCCYP 2005, p22). The decision to keep children's safety as paramount during the research process meant there were limits to the confidentiality we could promise. If any instances of abuse were disclosed during

the research process the researchers would respond by reporting concerns to Care and Protection, or by making referrals to appropriate services to provide support. Each child and young person and their parent/s were informed about this protocol and signed a consent form to this effect. The Children's Reference Group supported this principle and helped researchers develop an explanation of the principle that other children would understand. However it is noted that no child or young person disclosed ongoing abuse during the research process.

Addressing power imbalances

Ethical research attempts to address the power imbalances that exist within adult – child relationships in an attempt to ensure that children feel that they can respond honestly to inquiries rather than answering questions in a way that they believe adults want them to (NSWCCYP 2005, p31). In this project, researchers worked with the Children's Reference Group to develop ways to help children feel more engaged in the process, to feel as though their views were being taken seriously and that they had control over the research project.

By sitting down with children, by using child friendly tools, by letting children take the lead with interviews and provide their own narrative and by constantly clarifying their responses, the research team was able to make children feel comfortable and more engaged in the process. Children were also responsible for the tape recording of interviews and were able to chose what parts would be recorded and those that would not. Children enjoyed this control and, on a number of occasions, stopped the tape recorder during interviews.

Reflexivity

To ensure that their processes are ethically appropriate, it is critical that researchers constantly reflect on how they develop and conduct their research projects (Mason and Urquhart, 2001). In particular when working with children, researchers must critique their approach, the use of research tools and their capacity to accurately analyse the data to ensure that what they understand children's responses mean correlate with what children actually mean. In addition, they must seek feedback from children and from other key players in children's lives to ensure that processes are child-friendly and adequately respond to their need for privacy, confidentiality and protection.

To ensure a reflexive process we utilised a number of methods. Firstly we drew on the evidence from the literature to inform how best to engage children on sensitive issues and to ensure the tools used were appropriate and effective with children. We also worked closely with the Children's Reference Group who helped develop the interview guide, the children's day activity plan (discussed in the next section) provided feedback on the proposed tools and the interview process. Finally researchers intermittently debriefed each other and critically reflected on how processes might be improved. Because interviews and activities were semi-structured, researchers were able to modify the interview questions and tools in response to children's feedback.

4.3   Development of the project and research tools

Review of the Literature

Before developing its tools, the research team conducted an extensive review of the literature to inform how children might be engaged in the project. In addition to a focus on ethical considerations, as discussed above, we used the literature to identify methods that ensured child-centred and participative approaches.

A series of tools were identified from the previous research. These were discussed with the Children's Reference Group and Project Advisory Group. before final decisions were made.

For further detail on best practice see the literature review, "Engaging children in research on sensitive issues" which accompanies this report.

Children's Reference Group

As mentioned above there is a critique of how children are often excluded from research processes that explore their lives. To minimise this exclusion, we invited children to participate in a reference group for the life of the project. The aim was to provide us with a greater idea of how children, themselves, wanted to be asked about their experiences of homelessness, to provide feedback on proposed research tools and to assist the researchers in understanding children's views.

Workers within the homelessness sector were asked to approach families to participate in the reference group, they gave them a brochure about the purpose and the nature of the group and invited them to contact the research team if they wished to participate[2]. Six children from three families were involved in the reference group. Both parents and children consented to their children's involvement and parents were kept informed of the group's progress.

At two workshops, the children's reference group worked with the research team to develop a greater understanding of how children prefer to be consulted about sensitive issues and to clarify the research question. At the first workshop,

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[2] This brochure was written in consultation and with advice from an 11 year old boy who was known to the research team.

children were asked how researchers might make a child feel comfortable, how to make a space child-friendly, and on how adults might show that they are listening to and respecting the views of children. They also provided strategies on how researchers might respond if children became upset throughout the research process.

Children in the reference group emphasised the need to build rapport with children before asking them about their homelessness. They suggested that researchers spend some time introducing themselves to children, finding out what they liked to do, sharing a joke and reinforcing that their involvement was special and well-regarded by the researchers.

Children also stressed the importance of using child-friendly language, activities and information. They thought that researchers shouldn't attempt to 'educate' children or to ask them about things that they could not fully understand or answer. They thought that it was 'alright' for researchers to 'ask hard questions' but to make sure that this was done sensitively. They also stressed that researchers shouldn't challenge or judge children's responses to questions but be respectful of their views.

Children felt that it was important that researchers treated the interviews as confidential but said that it was 'OK' for them to talk to others if they were worried that they 'weren't safe', 'weren't being looked after properly' or if something bad had happened 'like an adult has been touching them down there or something like that – that person should be found out''.

A number of children suggested that children should be able to say whatever they wanted 'even it might hurt someone else'. They argued that in the research

process children needed to feel able to express their feelings and views without having to worry about how others, particularly adults, felt about their responses.

From these recommendations and from learning gleaned from the literature, the research team developed an interview schedule and other tools to engage children in the project.

At the second workshop, children were then asked for feedback on the structure of the proposed research tools. This was primarily achieved by trialling the various games, discussions and one-on-one activities with the children before seeking feedback.

After modifying the interview design, children were interviewed by one of the researchers. Some days later, they were then contacted by another member of the team and were asked about how the interview had been conducted, the effectiveness and 'child-friendliness' of the tools and the personal style of the interviewer. From this feedback tools were then modified before being used with other children.

We consider that the children's reference group played an integral part in the development of the project and provided invaluable advice and expertise that helped guide and direct the research process. A number of activities and tools were significantly changed after feedback from the children was sought. For example, the 'rights activity' developed for the children's activity day was devised by one of the child advisors and proved to be one of the more engaging tools used.

In addition, the Children's Reference Group provided an opportunity for the researchers to learn about engaging children effectively. For example, it soon

became apparent that some of the organised activities took longer and were more engaging than others and that it was important to intersperse fun activities amongst the more 'serious' discussions to maximise children's attention and enjoyment.

Other children who participated in the project also seemed to be less anxious about their involvement after hearing that it had been developed with assistance from children who had similar experiences to themselves.

Project Advisory Group

As well as working with the Children's Reference Group, we were aided by an advisory group made up of key stakeholders including staff from the Office of Children, Youth and Family Support (DDHCS), ACT Housing (DDHCS), Student Support Services (DET), ACT Children's Plan (ACT Health), workers from ACT SAAP, family support services and colleagues from the ANU and the ACU.

The project advisory group worked with the research team to clarify research aims and to devise a recruitment process to ensure that a broad sample of children was engaged in the project. The group also advised us not to not specifically target Indigenous children but to ensure that methods adopted were culturally appropriate. Narrative approaches that were sensitive to diverse groups of children proved to be critical in the success of the project.

(Photo by girl, aged 7)

Kids should be asked about stuff that's got to do with them… They can tell you stuff you'd never think of – cos you're not a kid…

(Children's Reference Group)

4.4 Data collection methods

The project comprised two parts: one that focused on children and young people who had experienced homelessness and another that focused on their parents, workers and other key people in services that work with homeless families.

PART ONE: TALKING TO CHILDREN

The literature on children's engagement in research emphasises the importance of providing children with a range of ways through which they might engage with researchers and research projects. The importance of building rapport and confidence, of spending time with children to elicit their views and to ensure that these views are accurately understood and reported have all shown to be imperative in the research process. (see Mason and Urquhart, 2001).

Realising this, the research team developed a range of tools through which children might engage within the process. Children were given the opportunity to participate in three activities including a one-on-one interview, a peer-based 'Children's Activity Day', and a photo task.. Twenty five children participated in a one-on-one interview, 9 in the Children's Activity Day and 8 with the photo project. A summary of each of these activities follows.

Interviews

This project attempted to elicit the views and experiences of children and young people of varying ages with varying capabilities, interests and skills. As a result, the interview schedule we used focused around a number of key themes while allowing for different methods of participation dependent on the child's abilities and interests.

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Children were also given the choice of where to be interviewed (some interviews were conducted in homes, others at the University, or in neutral community buildings (such as Youth Centres and Community Houses).

The interview schedule, open-ended questions and prompts were developed to enable children to tell their own narrative or story in their own words. However, having a range of task-based activities and other tools or methods available during the interview was extremely useful. The tools that were developed or modified for use in the interviews included:

- *'Interview Guide'* – this allowed children to follow the interview format and process and also gave them some warning on what themes, issues or questions would be explored. The interview guide was used by some of the children to draw or doodle on as the interview proceeded. At the front of the interview guide was *a 'rights page'* that was used by researchers at the start of all the interviews to explain to children what their rights were when participating in the project.

- *'Talking Cards'* – were used to engage children in the research project and included a set of sentences that children and young people might complete. Cards with sentences such as "the best holiday I ever went on…", "if I could have any super power I'd…" and "the thing I'm most proud of is…" were placed face down on a table. Children and researchers chose one or two of the cards each and answered the questions. The cards were used to build rapport between researcher and participant but often gave the researcher some insight into the child and their views.

- *Clay faces* – were purchased for the project and were given to children to sculpt during the interviews. Children enjoyed playing with the faces and, in a number of instances, used them to express their feelings about

different experiences by shaping the clay to match their emotions. Children enjoyed this non-direct approach to discussing feelings.

- *Family Portraits* – where children drew or painted pictures of their families were used to engage children in regards to their family characteristics and to begin a discussion about the family's experience of homelessness, strengths and cohesion. Many of the children enjoyed drawing and appeared to be more comfortable in discussing issues while distracted by the process. Researchers often drew their own pictures at the same time as the children – which appeared to make children feel more at ease. Researchers praised the children for their drawings and affirmed their participation.

- *Timelines* – were used to gain an understanding of the child's experiences of homelessness in relation to their age and other significant events in their lives. Children were asked to mark a line and draw on it the different houses they had lived in – above the line for those places they had liked and below it for those that they didn't. The timelines were used to explore how children felt about different periods in their lives sometimes by getting children to draw symbols representing their emotions or by talking through the issues. In some instances, children opted not to draw and directed the researcher to draw instead.

- *A home for us* - was an activity where children were asked to list (or draw) things that they would like in a home for their family. Children spoke not only about material possessions, but also about the house's layout, where it was situated in terms of other significant places and how the family would interact within it.

- *Worksheets* – were sometimes used if children found it hard to describe how they felt about certain themes or issues. For example, a list would be drawn up with 'good things' and 'bad things' about 'moving'. Some children were

more able to come up with points to add to the list, rather than just talking about issues.

- Children were asked what they would do if they were their *Principal for a day* and what things about their school they would change for children who were homeless. This allowed children to be creative and to think about how their experiences might have been better if schools had responded differently. With some children, this kind of questioning was repeated where they were asked what they would do if they were *Prime Minister for a day*.

- Children were also asked to give *Advice for other children* who were experiencing the same issues as they had encountered. This was particularly in regard to children's time in schools but also while they were in refuges. Children enjoyed coming up with strategies for others and felt positive about using their experiences to assist others.

- Children were also asked how they might *provide support to other children*. For example many children talked about what they would do to help a new person at their school. Others talked about how support could be provided in refuges for other children.

- *Support hands* – were used to identify what supports children and their families were receiving. This activity, which is popular in assertive behaviour programs, entails children tracing their hands and then noting 5 different people who help them in their lives. A number of the children found this to be a difficult task often only identifying one or two family members who supported them.

- *Dreams for family, for children and for the future* were each used to explore children's hopes and aspirations as well as eliciting the changes they thought were necessary to better support families who were experiencing homelessness. All interviews concluded with such questions because

members of the children's reference group felt it was important to end on 'a good note' and also allow children to be hopeful. In the case of the young people who were parents, researchers asked them what their hopes and dreams were for their children and for their relationship with them.

Photo Activity

At the interview, children were asked whether they wanted to participate in a photo activity. Those who chose to participate were given a disposable camera and were asked to take photos of:

- places they felt safe
- places they felt special or 'special things'
- places that were 'kid friendly'
- places where they felt they belonged
- what makes a house a home.

The cameras were collected and the film was processed. Children who took the photos were then given a copy and when possible, talked about the images and their meanings. Children then chose which photos they wanted researchers to include in the project and which they would like not to be used. Copies of the photos were also made available to participants.

Children's Activity Day

A follow-up 'activity day' was conducted to draw out some of the major themes and to explore some concepts and issues that proved to more difficult to elicit from the one-on-one interviews (such as how to provide appropriate support to children). The activity day was conducted with a group of children aged 6 to 14. On the day, 9 children participated in a range of activities including:

- *Rights Cards* – children were given a series of cards on which statements relating to the 12 "Rights of Children in Research" were written. Some of the statements reflected one of the twelve rights (ie "Children should be engaged in decisions that affect their lives), while others contradicted the rights (ie "If children aren't happy with something they should be put up with it and shut up") and a third group were somewhat reflective (ie "Children should be able to say whatever they like even if it hurts others"). Children were asked to determine whether they believed that the statement was "right", "wrong" or "kinda right but kinda wrong". As a group they then rewrote those that were "wrong" or "kinda right but kinda wrong" to reflect how they understood the related right and how they thought children should be treated.

- *A home for me* – children chose to create a home for their families either by using paddle pop sticks, plasticine or as a painting or drawing. Children sat in groups with a researcher and discussed their creations as they worked. Children and researchers asked each other questions – particularly when working on the same project (in the case of paddle-pop stick houses). The whole group then sat together and shared their projects and identified key themes and characteristics.

- *Jumping Jellyfish* and *Wanted Posters* – children spread out across the room and pretended that they were jellyfish scattered along the shoreline. A volunteer was taken outside, blindfolded and then returned to the group to navigate their way through the jellyfish who were making bubble noises. The children were asked what 'jellyfish' (ie problems, challenges and issues) homeless families faced before the activity was repeated, this time with a child assisting their blindfolded peer through the beach. Children were then asked about what supports they had in their lives and what made a supportive adult. They completed "wanted" posters where they drew

someone that was a support for them and listed the characteristics they would look for in a support person.

4.5   Data analysis

As can be seen from the discussion above a number of different tools were used to collect the data at a variety of different data collection points. This section provides a brief overview of how the data was analysed in this project. As a qualitative research project we were concerned to uncover and explore what children thought and felt about their experiences of homelessness. Data analysis provides ways of discerning, examining, comparing and contrasting, and interpreting meaningful patterns or themes (Silverman, 1997).

In qualitative research, data collection and data analysis tend to happen concurrently, with new analytic steps informing the process of additional data collection and new data informing the analytic processes. We have described in some detail the processes involved in the development of the research in consultation with the children from the reference group and the changes that were made as a result. We have also discussed how we regularly checked out our conclusions with the children along the way.

We also relied on the general approach of constant 'comparison'. This strategy involves taking one piece of data (one interview, one statement, one theme) and comparing it with all others that may be similar or different in order to develop conceptualisations of the possible relations between various pieces of data. For example, by comparing the accounts of two different children who had a similar experience, we used analytical questions like: why is this different from that, how are these two related and what might explain the differences?

We also used a number of strategies to make sure the findings are rigorous and systematic. Some of these strategies were discussed in respect to our general research approach; however, they were also used to ensure credible conclusions can be drawn. These included:

- Multiple sources of data (i.e. involving participants in more than one data collection activity), involving others (parents, other stakeholders) making comparisons with previous research.

- Hearing the voice of the researched: in this case ensuring what children say is central to the design and conclusions of the research

- Reflexivity: practices that allow for the critical reflection of how the researcher contributes to the construction of meanings in the research process e.g. peer debriefing, children's reference group

Steps in data analysis

As can be seen from the discussion of the research process there was a broad range of data sources for this project. Two steps were taken in the preliminary analysis of the data. Firstly the taped interviews were partially transcribed and each child or young person's story was recorded. This is a method to increase the reliability of the research enabling the evidence to be accessible to other investigators (Yin, 1984, Strauss and Corbin, 1998, May, 1997).

The second step was to carry out a content analysis of the data. This involves identifying coherent and important examples, themes, and patterns in the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This was done using a combination of methods:

- The use of the previous research propositions developed from the literature to sensitize the analysis. This meant looking for particular data to answer the research questions.

- A close examination of the data, particularly the interview transcripts, to allow common themes to emerge. Employing some of the methods of grounded theory allowed concepts, themes and categories to emerge from the data rather than either being imposed or overlooked in the analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Darlington and Scott, 2002; Minichiello et al, 2000).

- To increase the validity of the conclusions, wherever possible (unless otherwise stated) the children and young people discussed the themes and conclusions. Previous research and other data (interviews with adults) when available and appropriate were also used to support the conclusions reached (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).
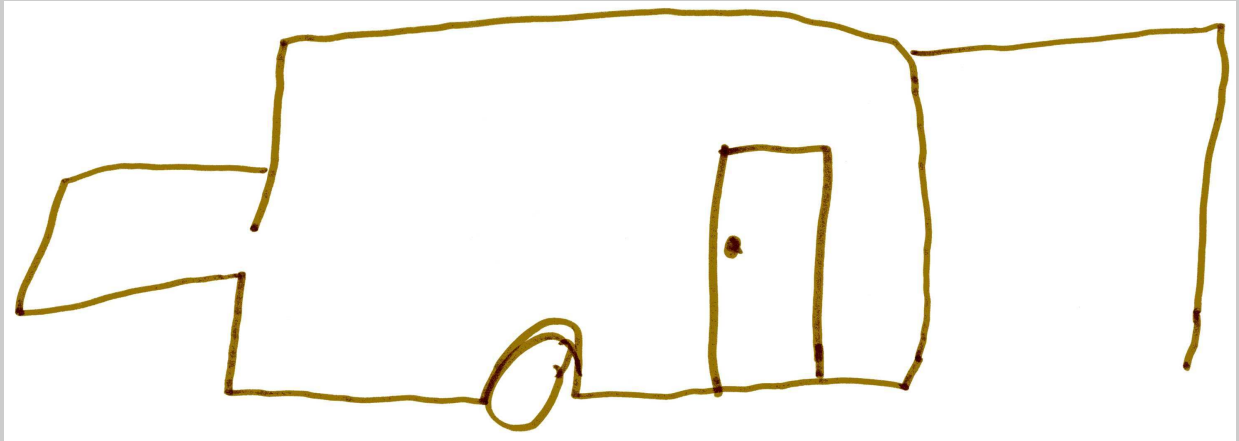
I liked doing all the drawings. That was one of the best things. I drew pictures of my family (my Mum and my brothers and sister) and the caravan that we stayed in. It was easy to draw all of these things

(boy, aged 6)

4.6   How were families recruited?

Previous studies focusing on homeless children in Australia have primarily targeted those in families affected by domestic violence and / or within SAAP services. In an attempt to broaden the sample, children were recruited using a combination of purposeful convenience and snowball sampling techniques.

Children and young people in this research project were initially recruited through homelessness, family support and children's services. Workers at these organisations were contacted through email discussion lists, at sector forums and through word of mouth. They were provided with a letter explaining the project and were asked to speak to potential families and encourage them to contact the research team if they would like more information. Significant time was spent contacting services, explaining the project and how families would be engaged within it to build worker's confidence in the project and to gain their support. In some cases worker interviews were conducted during the first phase of the data collection period in an effort to build worker's enthusiasm and support for the project.

Parents who chose to participate in the project were given a letter to explain the research process and how their child would be engaged in the study (see appendix 10.7). If they agreed that their child could participate, parents were given a 'Children's Info Pack" which explained the research project to children and invited them to participate. Parents were encouraged to either read the CIP with their children or to allow the child's worker to do the same to ensure that the child was fully aware of what would be expected of them and how they would be supported. Both parents and children were asked to fill in a consent form that was

forwarded to the research team or to agree for a worker to contact the research team with their details.

In some cases, where young people were aged over 14 years, were clients of services in their own right and were not currently connected to their families, a parent's consent form was not completed.

Due to initial difficulties in recruiting participants, we attended a centre-based youth service where young people known to the service who had experienced homelessness as children were referred by one of the attending youth workers. The team also contacted a number of youth homelessness services that had identified young people who might be eligible for the research project. These young people were provided with an information sheet and, if aged over 14 years, were provided with a consent form to complete. A number of the young people involved in the study then encouraged other young people at the service, or from within their own networks to participate in the research.

Local press networks were also informed about the project and a number of newspaper, radio and television articles were aired. Although members of the public contacted the research team with ideas on how homeless children might be letter supported in the ACT, no referrals resulted from these articles.

Figure 1: Referral Source
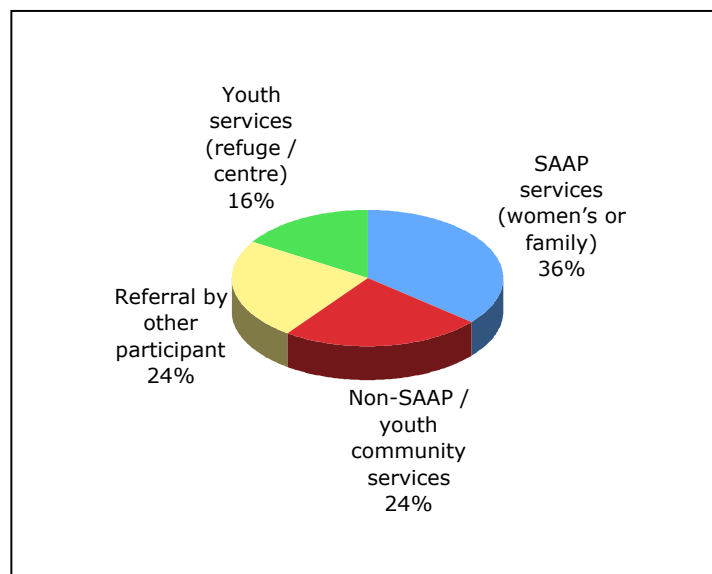
In recognition of their skills and insights and at the advice of the children's reference group, each child and young person was remunerated for their involvement for each research activity. In most cases this was a voucher to the local shopping centre although a number opted to spend money at a different location.

4.7   Profile of participants in the study

Age and Gender

Twenty five children and young people participated in this study, including 11 girls and 14 boys. The age range of participants was 6 to 21 years with two thirds of participants being under the age of 14.

Eight young people aged 15 to 21 were involved in the project (comprising two young people who were currently homeless with their families and 6 who reflected on their experiences of family homelessness when they were children).

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Cultural background

8 of the children and young people in this study identified as having an Aboriginal background. One child reported that one of their parents was born overseas. None of the children identified as being a Torres Strait Islander or having a culturally or linguistically diverse background.

It is important to note that on the advice of the Adults Reference Group, children from Aboriginal communities were not purposively recruited for this study. Instead, like their peers, Aboriginal children were referred by mainstream services and programs or by other families participating in the research.

Length of time homeless

Children in this project had experienced varying degrees of homelessness and for varying periods. Within the sample, children's estimations of the duration of their family's homelessness ranged from around four months to over 10 years with the average duration being over 30 months in duration. Accordingly, over half of children and young people reported being homeless for more than a quarter of their lives.

It is important to note that these estimates were made through the use of timelines and in sharing stories of periods of homelessness and of being housed. As a number of children, particularly those who had been quite young, found it difficult to be specific about different homeless experiences, these approximations may over or underestimate their actual lived experience.

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Figure 2: Perceived extent of Homelessness (age and length of time homeless)
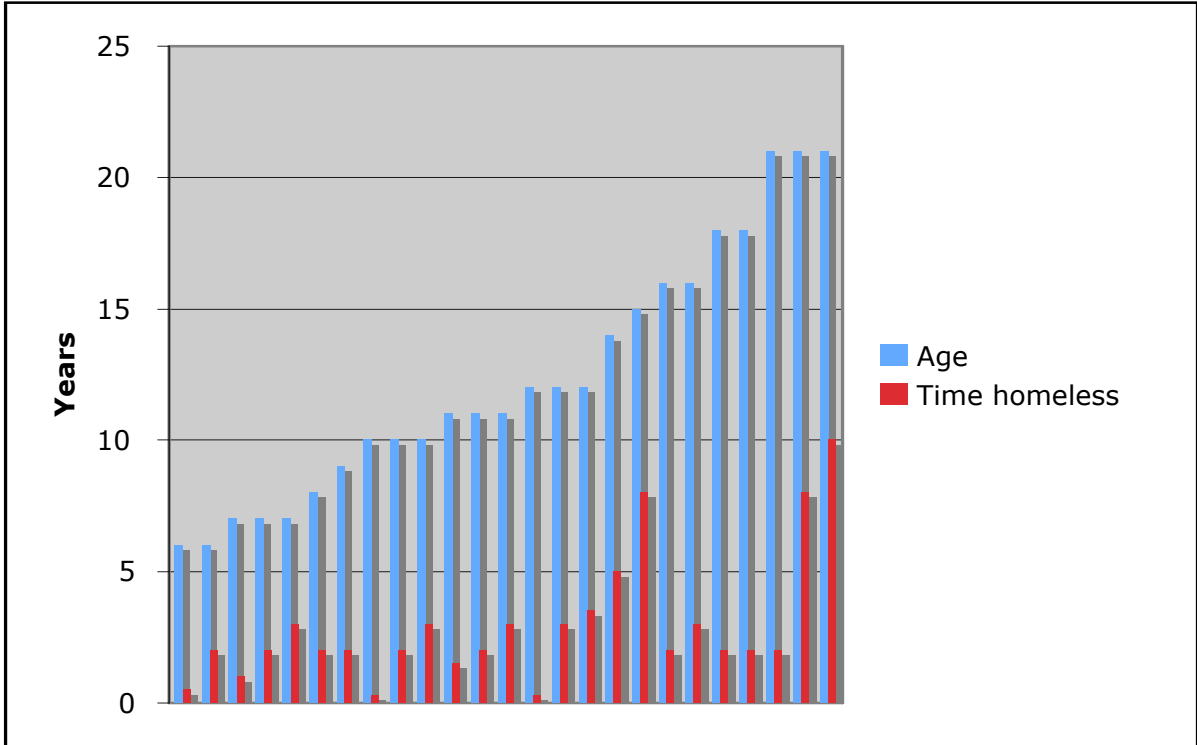
Family makeup

Children and young people from 15 families participated in this project. Children and young people in this sample had been homeless with a single mother (n=19), a single father (n=5) or another relative (n=1). Sixteen of the children were accompanied by one or two siblings.

Nature of homelessness

Within this sample, 21 of the children and young people had lived in supported accommodation, 7 had stayed in a hotel or motel, 6 in a caravan and 4 had 'lived rough'. Many of the children and young people also identified that they had stayed

with other people in temporary and / or overcrowded accommodation and in hostile or unsafe places.

Limitations and the sample

This study relied heavily on the service system to identify, recruit and support family's involvement with the research process. As such, children who were not currently supported by organisations did not participate in the project. Nor did children whose workers believed would be unable or unwilling to participate and those whose parents were reluctant for their children to be involved. This process of gate-keeping may have restricted some children's involvement in the study.

As noted, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds also did not participate in the study although, anecdotally, many workers believed that the number of children from refugee communities who were experiencing homelessness had grown over the past five years. We actively approach specialised services and communities seeking involvement but no families came forward. We believe that further research needs to be conducted to better appreciate the needs and experiences of these children.

PART TWO: INTERVIEWING PARENTS AND OTHER KEY STAKEHOLDERS

To further understand how homelessness affects children and young people, we also conducted interviews with parents and other key stakeholders. These semi-structured interviews focused on how families had become and experience their homelessness, the impacts that homelessness can have on children and families, current service responses and gaps and strategies for better responding to children during periods of housing crisis.

Throughout this report, parent and stakeholder views have been included when they help to explain or progress children's ideas and in the last section which discusses the implications of the project's findings. More detailed responses have been summarised and included in Appendices 10.1-3. We have deliberately placed them as an appendix so as not to distract from the key aim of the research – that of hearing directly children and young people's voice.

Profile of adult participant

When families were recruited for the study, parents were given the option of participating in a one-on-one interview. Parents who consented to participate were asked about their experiences of homelessness and how they believed being homeless had affected their children.

Workers from refuges, homelessness services and community programs were also invited to participate in the study and were recruited through local e-lists and service forums. Consenting workers were interviewed about their services, the way that they had supported homeless families, the challenges and barriers they believed kept them from working with children and the ways they believed the service system could be improved to support homeless families. During interviews, workers were asked to provide examples and case studies of families with whom they had worked and positive outcomes they had achieved. (The interview schedules can be found in the Appendices 10.5-6).

Care and Protection workers were also interviewed using a modified interview schedule that aimed to elicit their views about the relationship between family homelessness and child protection. (Interview schedule Appendix 10.8). Workers were recruited through their work teams with the support of team leaders.

Table 1: Profile of Adult Participants

PARTICIPANT	TOTAL
PARENTS	5
CARE & PROTECTION WORKERS	8
COMMUNITY HEALTH	1
COMMUNITY WORKERS	1
COUNSELLORS / PSYCHOLOGISTS	1
SAAP WORKERS	7
TEACHERS	2
TOTAL	**25**

When we were homeless it felt like we had nothing. We had no grounding – no grounding in my life. It doesn't matter if I haven't got no food or if my life is going to shit – I can come in and shut the doors and the world can stay out there (Parent)

5. How children perceive 'home' & being 'homeless'

Although numerous researchers have attempted to define what it means to be homeless there continues to be debate within academic literature and at social policy and service system levels about how we should understand and respond to it (Heintjes 2005). Missing from the debate is a discussion about how children themselves understand homelessness and what implications these understandings have on how we respond to family homelessness and homeless children.

Homelessness has traditionally been understood in regards to a family's accommodation. People are seen as being homeless when they do not have stable or appropriate housing and they are considered 'housed' when they have shelter.

Children in this study, however, understood homelessness quite differently. Though they valued stable accommodation, they generally felt that having security of relationships with family members, feeling safe and secure and being protected from violent and unsafe situations were more important. In fact, many felt that they were not 'homeless' while living on the streets, in temporary accommodation or in unsuitable dwellings because they felt protected by their parents and families and trusted them for support.

Conversely, children often felt as though they were not 'at home' in public housing, supported accommodation or other shelter when they were exposed to violence, when they felt isolated from others and when they had no control their space or environment.

As such, homelessness was not about being 'houseless' and being 'housed' did not always make children feel as though they were 'at home'. Instead, being homeless

was about feeling unsafe, about being disconnected from supports and not having a sense of security or place.

Children and young people felt that they were 'at home' when they:
- were with, connected to and supported by family
- were safe and felt safe
- had space and things of their own, and a sense of ownership and control over their environment and their lives
- had a sense of permanence and predictability
- felt 'normal' and 'fitted in' with peers, at school and in communities
- felt connected to supports and communities.

Each of these themes is discussed in more detail below.

5.1   Being with, connected to and supported by family

Families play an integral part in the lives of homeless children and young people.

In this study, it was usually due to issues facing parents and the family (such as domestic violence, parental separation and poverty) that led children into homelessness. In addition, it was their parent's capacity to protect and care for their children that appeared to mitigate the affects that homelessness had on their lives.

Although much of the literature focuses on how homelessness affects family relationships negatively, this study clearly showed that having family and being closely connected to and supported by them were both highly valued and seen as integral to children's sense of 'being at home'. Children and young people felt that families were a protective factor, providing them with a sense of security and support even when facing difficult and often traumatic episodes:
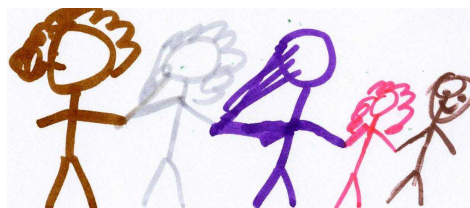
I think my family is really great. We stick together no matter what. (Boy, aged 10)

[The best thing about my family is] that they're staying with me and keeping me safe (Girl, aged 7)

I don't think I suffered as much because I was with my Mum. Yeah, life was hard but it would've been worse if she wasn't around (Young man, aged 21)

Children in this study stressed the importance of family and felt that a house was only a home if it was shared with other family members and was where they shared positive experiences together:

Home for me is probably the place where I have lived with my sisters and had good times (Young man, aged 18)

Living with my Mum has been when I am happiest… [home] is more about the people there than the house (Young man, aged 18)

I think it was good because I had comfort. I could sleep better at night knowing my Mum was there (Boy, aged 10)

It was better when we were living together to me, it was better because I liked it more, everyone living together … I would like to see my Dad all of the time (Boy, aged 6)

One young person suggested that the reason she felt safe during periods of homelessness was because she was with her family and because she trusted that her mother would keep her safe:

Being homeless and moving a lot didn't really worry me much, because my Mum moved around when she was younger too when she left home. She said 'I've been through this sort of thing before' so I wasn't worried because she's been through it before… she knew what she was doing' (Young woman, aged 15)

Pets:

Many of the children in this project identified their pets as members of their families and felt that they were not 'at home' until they had their pets living with them. It appeared that this was not only about children wanting to have an animal companion but also because it represented some stability for children who associated having pets as staying somewhere permanent:

[In my family there's] My five fish, my pet speedy, my pet max, and flick and um, I'm sure there's another one – no that's all of them." Do you have any people in your family? "Oh yeah – my brother, two sisters and my Mum." (Boy, aged 9)

Having a pet means that you're going to stay there for a while cos you can't have pets if its only a short term thing. Kids know that because they're pretty smart. That's why I always wanted a dog (Young man, aged 14)

A number of the younger children also felt that their pets gave them support and were friends to them when they felt alone. Many valued the fact that they could

talk to their pets about anything and that they cheered them up when they were sad:

> *If you have an animal you can talk to the animal and they will always just listen and not say things like "you're ugly" and stuff (Boy, aged 11)*

(Photo by boy, aged 11)

[My dog] will go get the ball and he'll bring it over to you to play. You roll the ball to him and he rolls it back. Sometimes you play tug-a-war with the socks. And then you feel better (Girl, aged 6).

Many children recalled the sadness they felt when they had to leave their pets behind but were excited about being able to have animals when their families found somewhere stable to live. 'Home', for many children, was a place where they could have pets.

5.2 Being and feeling safe

Children and young people believed strongly that homes should be safe places in which they were protected from violence, from people who hurt or bullied them and from the fear associated with not knowing what was happening in their lives. As mentioned, having family around helped children feel safer during stressful periods but, ultimately, children felt that homes were places where things to be feared and protected from were absent.

Many of the children and young people stressed the importance of feeling safe and believed that to be a home they needed to feel secure. Usually this entailed being protected by parents or by not sharing with potentially hostile or aggressive people.

Maybe – it was a safe place – that's pretty important.. somewhere safe (Boy, aged 11)

Feeling safe is the most important. You've gotta know that things are gonna be ok for everyone or you like stress out majorly. And its not just about you, man, you gotta know that the people who are important to you are ok too that your Mum's not gonna get bashed or something. You're not at home unless you have that (Young man, aged 15)

5.3 Having space and things of their own

Children and young people in this study stressed the importance of having special things of their own: including toys, photos, artwork and other possessions. Leaving these things behind when becoming homeless or in moving from one form of accommodation to another was quite stressful for children, with many expressing some grief and loss. The children in this sample, therefore, felt that they were home when their possessions were returned to them:

Most of my toys and my stuff that I like and my whole life was packed in this storage unit…it was all in the storage unit… this is the first house that I have had all these things back - they were in storage because for a very long [time], quite a few moves…lots of toys I liked were in there, stuff that bring back my memories… (Boy, aged 6)

[This is] Monkey. He is special… Sometimes when [I'm] sad [I] cuddle him (Boy, aged 10)

As well as having possessions, most of the younger children emphasised the importance of having large spaces within which to live. Big bedrooms, large living areas, backyards big enough to have trampolines and to ride bikes and front yards and streets to play sports were all identified as being important for children. Many felt that having space meant being able to spread out and to not always be 'on top of each other':
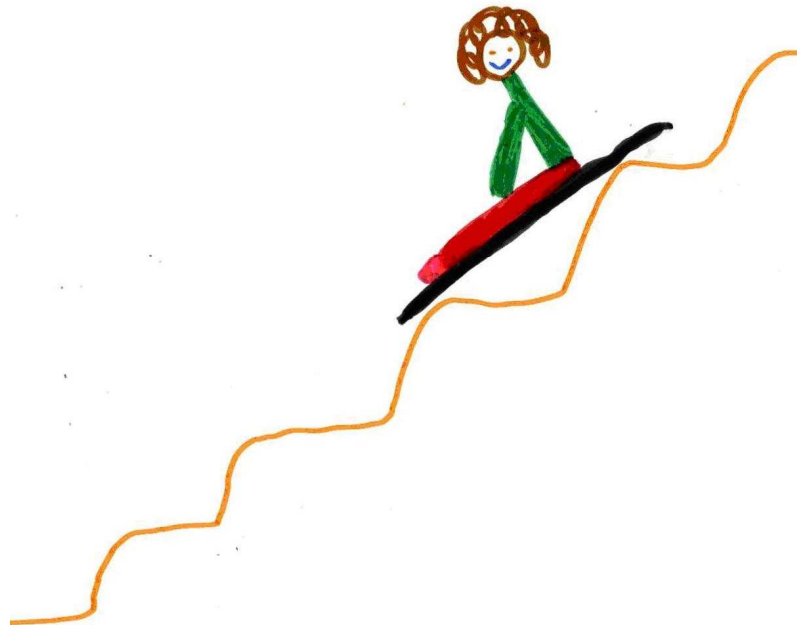
There's so much space! The stairs are great, you can surfboard down them. The first time I went down the board got stuck in a hole and I ran into the window…

The best thing is that there's two toilets. If we're downstairs then we go to that one. If we're upstairs then we go to that one. Except if there's someone in it – then we have to go to the other one – real quick!" (Girl, aged 7)

Having big houses also meant that children were able to have rooms of their own which they could fill with their own toys, equipment and other personal belongings:

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[A home is…] when you have your own room and you know you're there to stay. You've got your toys and everything's yours except if you've got the same room as your brother then some things are your brother's (Boy, aged 6)

Space in supported accommodation

Children and young people often complained that their families did not have enough space when living in supported accommodation. In most instances, children shared a single room with the rest of their families (sometimes up to 5 people) and reported that they generally found this uncomfortable:

We had one room for all of us. Sometimes when it got hot we stayed downstairs on the fold out sofa but most of the time we were in the same room. We stayed in the same room otherwise we wouldn't've been able to get to sleep because we'd be too afraid. I think we were there for a few months (Boy, aged 10)

We were all in the same room – in bunks. It was good because I had the top bunk. It was squishy for Mum because she had to sleep in the same bed with [my sister] (Girl, aged 12)

One of the most common issues that children raised in regards to their time living in supported accommodation was having to share their space with others. Some of the children recalled times when they had met new friends and where they felt somehow connected to other families experiencing similar challenges to them, but overwhelmingly children reported that living with other families was a stressful experience.

It sucked because we weren't given any space and you were always scared of the other kids and parents there (Young man, aged 21).

Sharing space was also an issue for some children when their belongings were stolen or damaged or used without permission:

If you put something nice of yours in the fridge everyone else would eat it and take it (Boy, aged 12)

To avoid conflict, many of the children and young people reported that, wherever possible, they would keep to themselves.

5.4 Having a sense of permanence and predictability

Previous studies confirm that homeless children often experience high levels of mobility. Escaping domestic violence, having to move from one form of unstable accommodation to another and rotating through the supported accommodation system often mean that children move regularly and experience considerable confusion and fear about their futures (Strategic Partners, 1997, p10).

The experiences of children and young people in this study confirmed the literature, having moved to different accommodation an average of 5 times with 6 children and young people having moved more than 8 times during their lives:

Table 2: Number of housing moves

Number of moves	N
1-2 moves	2
4-5 moves	11
6-7 moves	6
8-10 moves	4
More than 10 moves	2

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A number of the children in this study saw positives in their moving, particularly when they relocated to somewhere where their conditions were better, safer or more comfortable than before:

> *You can get a chance of getting a place that you like better (Boy, aged 6).*

> *It was kinda good and bad. It was good because my Mum was safe but we had to leave all that good stuff behind. We didn't have anything much when we left. (Boy, aged 12)*

> *It was fun – having the experience of living everywhere (Girl, aged 11)*

Some of the children in this study, particularly those who were quite young, talked about their homelessness as being 'an adventure' or as 'a holiday'. They said that they had enjoyed staying in caravan parks and recalled that it was fun having pools and playgrounds and living with lots of other children:

> *I'd just run around there, they got us some bouncy balls and we would bounce them… eating chips… and they had a coke machine and we had a playground there… It was pretty good (Boy, aged 10)*

This appeared to be the case for children who were well supported within their family units and who were not exposed to or aware of the issues surrounding their homelessness. Many of these children did not perceive themselves as being homeless when living in unstable accommodation with others. This was primarily because they trusted their parents and felt safe in their charge.

However, almost all of children and young people valued stability and hoped for some permanency in their home lives. Ultimately, they wanted their 'home' to be

the last place where they were to live, for their homelessness to end and for their families to settle down.

> *We are moving to find some houses that we can actually live in for until the end of the world (Girl, aged 8)*

Parents agreed with the children and suggested that this aspect of having a home was often underestimated:

> *Homelessness is a big thing and… you feel like you're lost. You don't know what to do every day – but you have no direction… When people get a home they start to cry with the happiness – they're so grateful… It means so much to have a home – you can't underestimate it (Parent)*

5.5 Having a sense of ownership and control over their environment and their lives

Children asserted that 'having a home' was about having a sense of permanency, of stability and security. Putting artwork on the walls, setting up furniture and being able to unpack personal belongings were all considered necessary if children and young people were to feel at home. One young woman likened moving home to returning from a holiday. While away, people lived out of suitcases and were not able to personalise their surroundings but, on returning home, were surrounded by their belongings and felt more secure as a result:

> *Mainly you've sort of like settled down, you've got everything in place and you're like comfortable. Like here is home because we have all our artwork up, we've got our stereo and everything set up and everything is put away (Young woman, aged 15)*

One boy in the study felt that having a garden was important to him as he could dig holes and have plants and watch them grow. This again appeared to be connected to his need for a sense of stability and ownership of his surroundings.

See those pots – one of them is mine. I like to help with the garden – to see things grow. I used to play behind the bush. I digged dirt and that (Boy, aged 6)

Children also valued routine and a sense of predictability – both of which were difficult to achieve when living in supported or otherwise unstable accommodation. They believed that having routine helped them and their families feel more comfortable:

> *You didn't feel safe [at the refuge] because you never knew who was going to be there and you never knew what was going to happen next. No one told us what was going on and Mum didn't either so you were always ready to just move again (Young woman, aged 21)*

It was harder to get on with Dad [when we didn't have our own place] because we were not in a good routine and Dad was sometimes away from his other kids would make him sad (Boy, aged 12)

One young person felt that he sometimes enjoyed not having this predictability on the streets but that it also made him feel uncomfortable while another felt it kept her family from being stable:

When you've got nowhere to live you sort of get this good feeling and this bad feeling, it's like where am I going to go tonight, what am I going to eat, and then I can do whatever I want, I can go wherever I want, live wherever I like (Young man, aged 16)

Because we didn't know if we were staying for one night or for a week or for months we could never get settled (Young woman, aged 21)

5.5   Feeling 'normal'

Children and young people were also asked about what would make an 'ideal' or 'perfect' home for them. Many of the children wanted to have big backyards with lots of play equipment. Others wanted to have the latest entertainment equipment such as x-boxes, play stations, dvds, surround stereo systems and computers – often in their own rooms and in shared living areas:

Bigger with a bigger shed, bigger back yard. I'd have a little garden, a big garden and a middle sized garden. A trampoline, a pool that's stuck in the ground. Some plants in a pot… a dog, a cat that's not crazy… and a big screen TV, a big heater for winter. A big bookshelf because I like books" (Girl, aged 6)

(Photo by girl, aged 10)

The research team was quite puzzled by the apparent materialism of the children and young people in the sample. However, a number of the parents and workers interviewed suggested that children often believed that 'normal' children had all these possessions and that unless they had them they felt embarrassed and ashamed and didn't like having friends visit them. One parent related:

> *The kids, I think, want all that stuff because they think that other kids have all that stuff and they don't want to be different or be embarrassed or get teased because they're poor. That's a big thing for homeless kids and kids with nothing – they think they need stuff so that they can feel normal and have friends over without feeling embarrassed (Parent)*

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When describing an 'ideal home', children at the Activity Day talked about wanting somewhere that was warm and inviting for others. One child drew a picture of Telstra tower and stated that he wished that he lived there because it had good views but, more importantly, because *"lots of people go [there]… lots of visitors" (Boy, aged 6)*

Though children, young people and parents all valued having an inviting home, many felt that places where they lived in the past were not welcoming to others. One parent bought a cake and special coffee for her interview with a researcher and said:

> *I like having people here – entertaining people. Because I've never been able to do that much (Parent)*

One young person, however shared his experiences of exclusion and stressed the negative aspects of being alone:

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I remember I couldn't tell people where I lived, who I lived with… as a child, like you really want people to come over and play and I really couldn't have anyone come over and play… that was the start of my path downwards (Young man, aged 18)

As we will see in section 6.10, a number of children in this study reported that they did not tell their friends or teachers at school about things that were going on at home because they didn't want to be treated differently to their peers. Children therefore appreciated the attempts that workers and others made to ensure that they didn't miss out on 'normal' family activities such as birthdays and others celebrations:

We got these Easter eggs because it was Easter and because my Mum was too scared to go outside she couldn't get us eggs but we got up and there were eggs on the table. We got it from this woman who had a white car like ours (Boy, aged 11)

We got to have our birthdays and stuff there. There was this one time when we got a Teddy for free (Boy, aged 9).

Children also recalled, with some warmth, the attempts of workers and others to make their spaces feel more 'normal' and 'homely':

The workers would make really nice cookies – they were like grandma cookies – and that would make you feel better (Girl, aged 12)

5.6   Feeling connected to their communities and its opportunities

For a number of children, home was about being connected to their local communities, to feeling like they 'fitted in' and that they had friends and other supports around them:

the best thing about that place was we were good friends with the people who lived behind us, we removed part of the fence so that we could go from one place to the other easily (Young woman, aged 15)

To feel connected to their communities, children and young people also commented that it was important to be close to their schools, to shopping centres and to kid-friendly places such as parks. For one young boy, an ideal house was within a community where *'the shops are close, not walking distance, but close enough to drive (Boy, aged 6)'*

Many shared that the most difficult aspect of moving was having to leave their schools, their friends and the local communities and felt that if there was a way for them to remain connected to these people and places that their moving wouldn't be as traumatic. Workers, including a child counsellor, believed that this connection was the greatest need and the most important therapeutic goal for homeless children.

Some of the children reported that not having transport was a significant issue for them and often kept their families from participating in community life. Although they realised that there was public transport available, not having enough money to pay for tickets meant that many felt trapped:

if we couldn't even afford to have somewhere to stay how could we afford to be able to go places? (Girl, aged 12)

It was hell because we had to walk everywhere because we didn't have a car (Girl, aged 12)

They believed that to reduce their isolation, to remain connected to their support networks and to improve their situation they needed support to access transport.

(Photo by boy, aged 10)

Home is somewhere safe…that's pretty important

(Boy, aged 11)

6. How children experience homelessness

As well as attempting to better understand children's perceptions of homelessness, we were interested to know how children experienced their homelessness and how they felt their experiences affected them in the short and longer term. This section attempts to identify the key themes arising from the children's interviews in regards to these aspects of family homelessness.

Before drawing out these common themes it is important to note that through the interview process it became quite clear to us that children experience their homelessness quite differently and that children in similar circumstances often felt the affects of homelessness in different ways. In fact, it appeared that even children from the same families had very different recollections and responses to periods of instability and that these often varied depending not only on the age of the child, but on the way that they related to their families, what roles they believed they assumed in their families and how much information they were provided during their homelessness. In this section, therefore, we will attempt to highlight key messages from children and, where possible, account for the divergent views.

Homelessness as one of a number of issues affecting children

Children in this study identified that a number of issues affected their families before, during and after their homelessness which either caused or were caused by their family's experiences and which exacerbated some of the negative affects of their situation. Although not clearly stated by many of the children in their interviews, it was obvious that the factors that led to the families in our study becoming homeless were often complex and involved in a range of factors. Those

most commonly identified included family conflict (n=15), parental alcohol or other drug use and/or mental illness (n=11) and parental separation and family breakdown (n=19). In addition, many children and young people felt that their families were affected by poverty.

In other studies, these issues have been primarily explored as factors affecting the family's pathway into homelessness. In this study, however, children stressed that these factors played a part not only in children becoming homeless but seemed to exacerbate their family's situation, affect their parent's capacity to deal with the challenges associated with homelessness and to maintain housing stability when acquired.

6.1   Parental conflict and domestic violence

At each stage of their homeless experience, children recalled episodes when they had been exposed to violence. Fourteen of the children identified that domestic violence had led to their first experience of homelessness and almost all of the children talked about times when they had been exposed to violence on the streets, in refuges and in other accommodation. It appeared that older children and young people were more affected by their domestic violence than younger children though each recalled instances of violence within their families.

In families where there were multiple siblings, older children identified more strongly with the domestic violence and were generally more concerned about their parent who was the victim of abuse than their younger siblings. These children and young people were particularly distressed when their families were directly involved in the violence, either due to domestic violence or in altercations in refuges, on the streets or in unstable accommodation.

Some of the children escaping domestic violence recalled having to stand between a violent adult and the rest of their family, keeping them safe and out of harm's way. They felt that they were not safe while having to assume such roles:

> *When Dad was laying into her, I'd stand in between them to stop her from being hurt. I had to protect her from him (Young man, aged 21)*

> *When I was in Year 5 and 6, I remember my Mum used to get drunk with her friends and she'd have fights with her boyfriends. And there was this one time when one of her boyfriends was being a smart ass and threatening us and that and I got him in the corner and I picked up a cricket bat and hit him on the knees and he woke up in the morning and he said "it feels like I've been hit by a baseball bat" and I said "Nah man, it was a cricket bat and I hit you in the knees". It was that stuff with protecting my Mum (Young man, aged 18)*

One young man resented having to take on this role, particularly when his mother would not leave her abusive relationship or protect him from her partner's abuse. He also felt that his mother did not fully appreciate the role he assumed in supporting her and betrayed when she did not attempt to make life better for them both:

> *I was getting aggressive with my Mum because she kept saying "I'm going to go, I'm going to leave him, I'm over him hitting me" but then when the time came around to go she wouldn't leave. I got sick of standing up for her and she wouldn't then stick up for me when he hit back and I went "I'm sick of this shit, I've gotta leave here (Young man, aged 21)*

Safety on the streets and in unstable accommodation

It is concerning that the majority of families, including those who had left home to escape domestic violence, encountered further violence when living on the streets, in public housing and in temporary accommodation. One young woman recalled an incident when her mother was attacked whilst they were staying in a caravan behind a friend's house:

> *This was the first fight that I had seen my Mum in outside of the family, so it was pretty scary. [There was] a lot of yelling and Mum cut her hand and it was bleeding… I was worried about my Mum… I kinda knew that all the fights that had happened before were going to be resolved because they were with my Grandmother. This time, I didn't know what was going to happen and that was scary (Young woman, aged 15)*

Children reported stressful and scary experiences where they feared for their safety and that of their parents. Unlike in situations where domestic violence was confined to the family home and seemed somewhat predictable, children felt particularly anxious when they saw their parents be victims of other forms of violence:

> *In the next room a guy was bashing up his partner, we then saw another incident in the car part when he hit her in the face – it was really violent… It was the first time that I had heard someone beating someone else up – yeah I was scared (Young woman, aged 15).*

This lack of predictability meant that children often felt a level of anxiety that affected their emotional wellbeing.:

It was scary living on the street. I was scared we'd get bashed or something. People had always been at our house cos Mum would have parties and people'd come and take drugs so I wasn't that scared of people but it was different in the car (Young man, aged 14)

One place was really scary – we lived in the garage of this guy – he was drunk and banging on the door, he started getting really angry. I was really scared (Young woman, aged 15)

Children also reported feeling anxious when they were exposed to violence in the local surroundings regardless of whether their families were involved:

It wasn't a good place for us. People were always having fights and screaming and stuff. There were always fires everywhere (Boy, aged 10)

Safety and refuges

Many of the children and young people who had stayed in a refuge reflected that they felt afraid and uncomfortable during their stay. For many, this was because strangers who were in crisis constantly confronted them:

I didn't feel safe. There was this boy there who said that he wanted to be my boyfriend and he would always hang around me. He said he wanted to be the boyfriend for all the girls who were living here. I was 7 and he was like 17. It was creepy (Girl, aged 12).

We stayed in the same room otherwise we wouldn't've been able to get to sleep because we were too afraid. I think we were there for a few weeks (Boy, aged 10)

Many of the children remembered not sleeping well and believed that this was because of the stress of living in a refuge coupled with the lack of stability and security they experienced when they had nowhere to stay.

Older children and young people also reported that their own fear was exacerbated by their concern for parents and siblings. It appeared that for many, the children's level of worry correlated directly with their parent's perceived ability to cope with stressful situations.

Each of the parents we interviewed reported that it was this continued exposure to violence and violent behaviours that led them to decide to leave refuges and move to less stable accommodation or onto the streets. Two of the mothers felt that the violence they experienced in the refuge system was similar to or lesser than that which they had experienced in their abusive relationship and chose to return home to their violent partner rather than continue to expose their children to violence:

> *I took off – back to the abuse. I was there for 3 weeks but it was awful. I went back to the abusive relationship because it seemed better for me and the kids. I felt as vulnerable and unsafe as when I was in that relationship (Parent)*

6.2   Family separation

As seen in section 5, children placed great value on family stability. Because of this, it is understandable that family separation was probably the most significant issue for many of the children and young people in this study. Each had been separated from parts of their family before or during their experience of homelessness, often due to domestic violence (n=14) or family breakdown (n=10). Most often children found this separation to be traumatic.

Table 3: Family Separation

Separation before or during homelessness	N	%
Parental separation – domestic violence	14	56%
Parental separation – relationship breakdown	10	40%
Step-siblings live with other parent	8	32%
Child lives with other relative	3	12%
Older siblings had grown up and moved away	2	8%
Family abuse	2	8%

In families that had been separated, children expressed the wish for their families to be reunited and felt that their home had been more complete when they lived together. Many felt a sense of loss and were worried about their other family members. One boy drew a picture of his mother and his siblings on one side of a page and on the other his father standing alone and remarked:

> *I didn't get to see my Dad. It was sad we were over here and it felt like my Dad was way away like over there or something. I'll draw him over here…. He doesn't really have that much fingers! I shouldn't really be smiling though [in the picture]… I was still happy – but not much, not as much as if Dad were there (Boy, aged 9)*

Throughout the interviews, children and young people remembered fondly the happy times they had shared together and expressed the hope that their families might one day be reunited. The same boy was asked what it was like seeing his father again. He drew a face in the middle of the page with a smile that extended half way across the page:

That's a big smile because I was so happy (Boy, aged 9)

Another child shared a dream where her family was reunited:
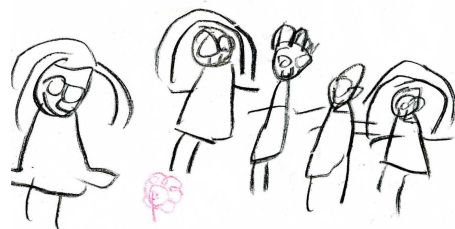
I have a big dream, it was when me and my father went walking and we fell asleep and then my Mum came and we can be with all my family again (Girl, aged 7)

Although most of the separation that occurred was for family reasons, a number of young people, parents and workers reported that children had been separated from their families due to structures and policies put in place by homelessness services and the broader service system. One mother shared her distress when told that her young son could not stay with her at a women's service. Another young man remembered having to sleep on the streets when he was 12 years old while his mother accessed a rehabilitation service.

They wouldn't let me stay. I wanted to be with her but they wouldn't let me. I lied and told Mum I had found somewhere to stay so she'd like stay at the place but I was sleeping in the carpark. When she found out she left. She probably would've anyway but maybe if we could've been together it would've worked out better (Young man, aged 21)

One young father also shared having to stay at a different refuge to his partner and their newborn child and the distress this caused:

> *They wouldn't let me stay with them. I had to get a place on the other side of Canberra so I spent my whole life on the buses trying to get to see them and it really hurt that I couldn't be with my kids. It was fucked cos they didn't see how important it was [for us to be together] or how much it hurt me to be away. I was so desperate to be with them… And they did nothing to help us. If I didn't love em I would've given up (Young man, aged 21)*

6.3 Parental alcohol or other drug use and mental illness

Children and young people believed that their parent's alcohol or other drug use had led to their first experience of homelessness. Seven children and young people talked about how parental drug use had led to them to being evicted for not paying their rent. In one case, a young person shared that his mother who had been a heroin user had taken her children and moved away from the local area and cut ties with her peer network so that she would not be tempted to start using again. One family reported moving out of semi-stable accommodation to avoid involvement in the care and protection system.

Once homeless, children reported that their parent's alcohol or other drug use either exacerbated their situation while parents reported that their ability to adequately care for their children was lessened when under the influence. One young man reported that he and his mother would inject heroin together when he was 13 and living in the back of a car in Canberra.

A number of children with parents with a drug issue reported feeling responsible for their parent and talked about destroying drug paraphernalia or for helping

their parent 'keep clean'. One 11 year old, for example, explained an incident when he got really mad and destroyed all of his Mum's 'bad stuff' by throwing them in the fire. When asked what he destroyed he said 'needles and bottles and other stuff'.

Four of the young people in the sample felt that their parent's drug use had influenced their own drug use. It is not clear as to whether there was any causality between their parents use, their homelessness and their own drug use but it appeared that young people's drug use began and increased during periods of instability and that their parent's use affected their early experimentation and their early views about drug use:

> *Another thing – was because my Mum was alcoholic – when she caught me smoking pot …. and like dealing pot… she went off head and she kicked all my friends out and then it turned out I just had to give her a bag of leaf to shut her up. I was like 12 or 13 – and I knew that I could give her stuff and she wouldn't care anymore – just as long as she got something out of it. And that was the thing – if my Mum wasn't an alcoholic that wouldn't have gone on. So that's why I started smoking and drinking with my mates because I saw her doing it and got the idea to mix this with that – damaging ourselves. Like I see it now that's what it was (Young man, aged 18)*

In three cases, young people had used illicit drugs with other family members and, as seen, led to and prolonged their homelessness. However, each of the young parents who had previously used decided to quit their drug use at the birth of their child, stating that they wanted to be good parents for their children and to protect them from their experiences.

In one case, however, the young person felt that his father's use did not affect his capacity to care for his child:

I used to go into my Dad's toilet and there were waters and needles and that… I never realised why he went off about it until later. It was alright because Dad gave me everything I needed like food and stuff and he looked after me and he hid it when I found out and where it went - I never knew (Young man, aged 19)

Four children identified that their parent suffered from a mental illness and that their parent had been unable to manage the home and had either been evicted or given up their tenancy as a result. Many of the children and young people also reported that their parents were often overwhelmed by fear, anxiety and depression during periods of homelessness. Children reported that their parents' mental health affected their own – believing that if their parents were feeling anxious or afraid they did also. Others reported that they often did not share their own concerns and fears with their parents so that they would not 'be something else she has to worry about'. As such, a parent's mental health directly affected their children's capacity to share and seek assistance.

6.4   Financial instability and 'missing out'

The correlation between poverty and homelessness is well documented and was supported by children and young people in this study who reported that their families often became homeless because there was not enough money to pay for rent.

In this study, however, many of the children and young people reported that poverty continued to affect their families even after securing stable accommodation and some form of income (be it a parent's job or Centrelink payments). For many, this was because they had left behind or had lost essentials such as furniture, clothing and electrical goods when they had first become

homeless or had them broken or stolen during these periods. As such, families had to 'start from scratch' and often found it incredibly difficult to afford the costs of day-to-day living while recovering other essentials.

In addition, it appeared that parents tried to replace 'special things' that children had left behind including toys, bikes and games and other essentials such as school materials. Again these purchases appeared to place parents into significant debt which in turn threatened their financial stability.

The effects of this instability were sometimes long-lasting. One young person who had been homeless with his family and then had become homeless by himself said that although he had a job he still owed significant amounts of money for fines he had accrued for catching public transport in NSW without a ticket:

> *I had me bag stolen. And the ticket inspectors give me a ticket and then I'm upset because I've lost me bag and I go off and rip up the ticket and then they give me a ticket for littering (Young man, aged 21)*

He said that he had recently bought a fridge for his family but that this had been repossessed by a debt agency because he had not paid fines from when he was 14, 7 years ago:

> *They just came in and took it. I was a kid on the streets with nothing and they fined me. Then I worked hard to get back on my feet and what do they do? Come in and fuck it up again by taking all my stuff. When am I going to get a break? (Young man, aged 21)*

How homelessness affects children

6.5   Finding strengths during difficult times

This study and previous research has highlighted that children's experiences of homelessness are characterised by negative experiences such as violence and loss and grief. Such issues can have many unintended negative consequences for their current and future wellbeing. However, it is important to note that many of the children and young people in our study demonstrated and shared positive aspects associated with their homelessness. These included a strengthening of family relationships, experiencing new and different things and growing as individuals and families through their experiences.

Growing through adversity and developing an appreciation for life:
Children and young people in this study often reflected that they and their families had grown through the adversity they experienced. Having coped with stressful situations and overcome significant hardship many believed that they and other family members would be able to deal with future challenges:

> *I think we've dealt with a lot as a family and we got through it and I think I can cope with a lot more stuff because I know I got through other stuff (Young woman, aged 21)*

> *I've been through much I reckon I can handle a lot more than other people (Young man, aged 18)*

This growth is aptly encapsulated in a 9 year old boy's account of his mother's fear of spiders:

> *I think we moved into this other house that had stairs and there was this big spider once and it was that big and every morning it was on the door and we all used to be creeped*

out because only at night it moved and we didn't know where it was in the morning. And one time it was in Mum's room on the cupboard door and she was like 'aaargh' because it was there and she couldn't get changed. But my Mum would've if she is like she is now because she likes spiders now. She's tougher now that she's had to do stuff like leave Dad and make a new home and stuff (Boy, aged 9)

Many of the participants, particularly those who were older or who had had an opportunity to reflect on their experience reported that they were more appreciative of things and of people's situations. Having been exposed to significant challenges, many felt they could also put other day-to-day problems into perspective in a way that they felt their peers may not:

Having the experience of being in the refuge as a young child was good – because it gives me perspective. [When other young people are complaining about their situations] I'm like 'well you've got electricity, hot water a roof over your head'… It kind of keeps me honest because most people are like 'it's so easy to live out of home' and I'm like 'yeah right'. I would probably say it is one of the good lessons Mum has given us as young children. We might not have liked it at the time, but I look back on it now and I am kind of grateful for what happened. (Young man, aged 18)

Family relationships and cohesion

Previous studies have examined how family homelessness acts to limit parent's capacity to meet their children needs and broader family cohesiveness (for example see Bahro, 1999; Walsh, 2003; Kolar, 2004; and Resolve Community Consulting, 2004). Some children from our study made reference to their parents being extremely stressed during their homelessness but that this had eased after stable housing was found:

My Mum was stressed out heaps of the time and um it made us a bit upset and um a bit upset [while we were homeless]… [but now that we've got somewhere to stay] she's not as stressed out as much (Boy, aged 11)

However many had great confidence in their parent's capacity and that believed having lived through difficult times affirmed this confidence. They also valued the fact that their families had stayed relatively intact and that 'they stuck together' during difficult times:

I think I appreciate things more now. I think we've dealt with a lot as a family and we got through it and I think [we] can cope with a lot more stuff because I know we got through other stuff (Young woman, aged 21)

Therefore, for the children in our study parents provided a strong support base and the experience of family homelessness seemed to only strengthen the level of trust and overall relationship that they had with their parents.

6.6 Health and wellbeing

As part of the interviews, children and young people were asked about how they felt their experience of homelessness had affected their general health and wellbeing. Younger children found this question difficult to answer – either because they could not remember what their health was like during these periods or because they had nothing to compare their health status with. Some of the younger children may have also found terms such as 'health', 'sickness', and 'being unwell' as being too abstract to fully understand. However, participants did feel that their homelessness had affected their nutrition and their general health.

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Poor Nutrition

Good nutrition appeared a significant issue for a number of families in this study. Participants suggest that they were not able to eat regularly and did not always have nutritious food available to them:

> *When we were on the streets [as a family] we were all sick and we weren't eating properly. We were scabbing money from people for food and we never had anything good to eat. (Young man, aged 21)*

> *Not being settled meant that everything was always on the go so maybe we didn't have proper food (Young woman, aged 21)*

Parents concurred and suggested that as a result, their children either lost weight or became overweight after eating unhealthy food:

> *[My daughter] didn't talk very much and she didn't eat… [My son] was eating more and he was emotional (Parent)*

> *We've eaten out of back of Woolworths bins. We've lived on that – so have the kids. That had to affect the kid's health – but there was nothing I could do (Parent)*

Some of the young people recalled that because their parents were in crisis or because they were not around they had to cook for themselves:

> *I was on a pretty poor diet as a kid. [When living in temporary housing] I used to make my own lunch. After school most kids come home and have afternoon tea and a solid dinner but I never ever had that. It was like catch and kill – whatever you can find you eat it (Young man, aged 18)*

This supports the findings of some previous Australian and international studies that have linked children's poor dietary health to their experience of homelessness (see for example Drennan & Stern in Hutchinson 1999 and Bartholomew, 1999). Some studies have also found that children's poor diets while homeless have led to a increase in both malnutrition and obesity (US Department of Agriculture in Nunez 2000, p61; Wood et al in Efron et al 1996, p25).

Other physical conditions

As well as having poor nutrition, some young people recalled having other health concerns while homeless, including a range of respiratory problems and dental problems. Some children and young people identified that these conditions occurred during their homelessness, while others felt that they had longer-term impacts:

> *I used to get sick constantly – I had pneumonia. It was better when we got more stable accommodation (Young woman, aged 16)*

> *I didn't eat properly and my brother was always sick. He had like asthma and didn't breathe that good. We always had a cold and were tired (Young man, aged 14)*

> *My teeth were always bad because I wasn't eating proper and they were all bad. I had to get most of em taken out (Young man, aged 18)*

Although only a small number of children in this study identified such poor health outcomes, many previous studies found that homeless children are more likely to suffer from a range of chronic and acute medical conditions including asthma, respiratory tract, gastrointestinal and ear infections, dental problems and conditions that lead to higher rates of emergency room use and hospitalisation (see Efron et al, 1996, Hutchinson, 1999, Nunez, 2000 and Halpenny et al, 2002).

6.7   Emotional & behavioural impacts

Most of the children also reported that they had difficulty sleeping when in unsafe accommodation and within refuges:

We were pretty sick and always like tired because you can never sleep properly (Boy, aged 11)

We called [the refuge] 'the haunted house': people get scared at night, they think there's a ghost up there, but it's really just people up there [on the second storey of the house]…especially at midnight it's really scary (Girl, aged 7)

The impacts of these events were often long-lasting with a number of children and young people being affected even after they had secured stable accommodation. Three of the children in the study reported bedwetting. Other children responded by acting out and being generally aggressive. This was an issue for those children who were at school – particularly when teachers were unaware of the precipitating factors. Children talked about getting into fights with others, being disobedient with teachers and feeling generally angry. One young man felt angry about his father's violence and believed that this had a long-lasting impact on his emotional health:

I just had so much anger about how could Dad betray me… I just fell apart and I became a real angry person (Young man, aged 18)

Two siblings described how they each coped with homelessness:

I was scared for my Mum (Boy, aged 12)

[He] is just a bit of a drama queen sometimes, I don't worry about as much as him (Girl, aged 10)

She just puts herself in this frame where she just blacks out and doesn't want to know – like sometimes she gets upset she just sits there and goes [blank] and you [call out her name] and she just goes [doesn't hear and/ or acknowledge it (Boy, aged 12)

A number of the young people reported that because of their childhood experiences and the long-lasting impacts, they had contemplated suicide, while others felt depressed or believed that they 'were going mad':

I've been pretty mad at times. You just sit there inside your own head… you could sit there for days and days and not do anything and you just figure out what you're going to do, and you figure nothing out… Homelessness is not something I would wish upon anyone, cause it could drive a person mad (Young man, aged 16)

The experiences of these children and young people in our study were not surprising. Previous studies have consistently shown that children can suffer from a range of emotional problems and / or behavioural difficulties as a result of trying to manage the various stressors during their homelessness. One study found that as many as 38% of children from homeless families have disorders of clinical significance (Vostanis, 1999).

As will be discussed in the next section, the young people felt that the emotional impacts of homelessness also affected their relationships, often keeping them from making and maintaining friendships and partners.

6.8   Social participation and belonging

As highlighted in a number of the other sections of this report, one of the most significant affects of homelessness for children was their loss of friends, family and a sense of community. This finding is consistent with the literature that suggests that:

> *Homelessness is a state in which people are not only excluded from basic shelter, but also from security, a place to belong, intimate relationships, neighbours, and all of the benefits of having a place to call one's own (Talbot in St Luke's Anglicare 2005, p17).*

Most children in this study reported that they had to leave friends behind when they became homeless and were upset that, in most cases, they did not have the opportunity to say 'goodbye'. Others reported that they were disappointed that they had not been able to keep in touch with their peers or to re-engage them when they were stable. Children expressed feelings of loss and grief and wished that they had been supported to restore relationships.

Having moved houses, children reported often feeling socially excluded and found it difficult to make and keep good friends with whom they could build long-lasting relationships. This exclusion appeared to be compounded by a fear of being discriminated against at school and concerns that others would look down on them because of their family's position.

A large number of children in this study felt that they didn't have many friends and that they often felt lonely. Many wished that schools could help them make friends and that services could help them stay connected with those they had left behind when moving into homelessness. Assistance with transport was seen as essential in this regard.

Workers and parents asserted the value of children being able to participate in extra curricular activities at schools and activities such as sports teams. Children thought that such activities were important too, with one boy saying that he never felt as connected to his family as when they cheered him on at his football games:

> *I feel most like a family when my Mum and [my sister] call out my name from the sidelines. Here [in the picture] they are screaming out 'Go for it' – and there's my Mum all proud - that's when I know we're a family! (Boy, aged 12)*
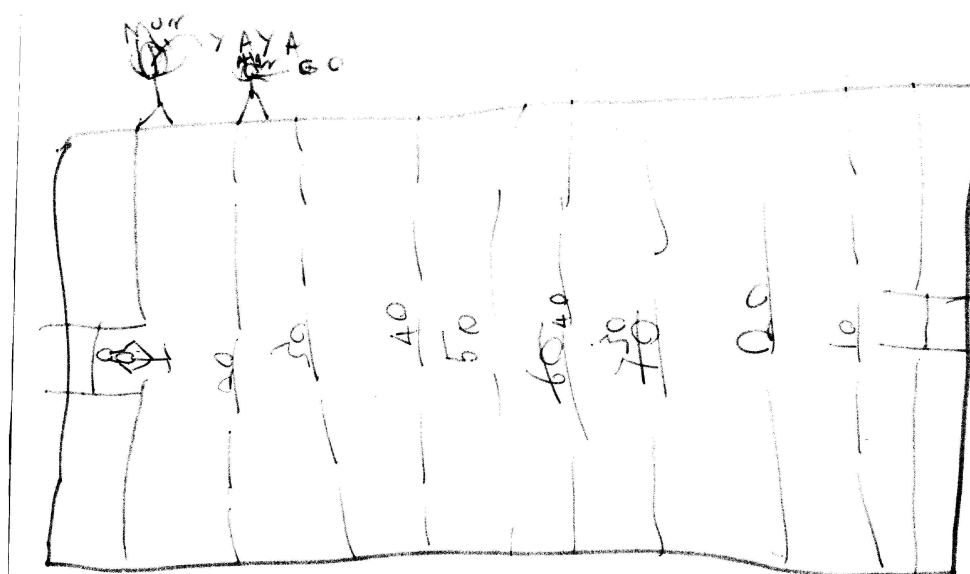
Having spaces where friends felt welcome and owning things that other children had and valued (such as good toys, entertainment systems, bikes and play equipment) were also seen as important for children who were concerned that without them they would be ostracised from their peers. Workers agreed with children by suggesting that services needed to provide families with not only basic living needs but also things that helped children feel 'normal'.

Reflecting back on their lives, many of the young people felt that their homelessness has continued to affect their relationships and their sense of connection to others. One young man believed that people did not understand how he dealt with issues and often left him when they found out about his problems or thought he was trying to push them away:

It's affected my relationships with other people. Frustration – you get frustration a lot and the other person sees it and says "see you later". I don't take tablets – I look after myself. So me sitting there not saying anything – that's me taking time for myself, trying to deal with it. But the person who cares for you takes it personally and thinks you're trying to block them out (Young man, aged 21)

He also shared that it was difficult for him to understand how other families operated and felt upset when he realised how much he had missed out on. He said that he wasn't necessarily jealous of others but needed them to realise that it was difficult for him to cope when the things that he had missed out on were 'in his face':

It's hard because they don't understand why you get upset when you hear them on the phone. You say "I find it hard when you're sitting there talking to your mother on the phone. And your mother sends you this and that". I don't get nothing from my family and it gets me upset because I don't have anyone like that. And you get upset because I'm upset and I don't wanna talk about it. It takes its toll man. (Young man, aged 21)

A number of young people felt that they found it difficult to trust people because they had been let down in the past. Often they reported that friends, family and workers had made promises they had not kept, had looked down on them and their situation or had broken their confidence:

It takes a while for us to trust people. If you've been hurt or if people have promised you stuff in the past and never done what they said they'd do then you think 'fuck it – why would I trust anyone again'. It hurts when people let you down so you tell everyone to piss off so you don't get hurt again (Young man, aged 14)

I can't trust people. Because I've always been let down. Even by my family. They've turned their back on me. So I can't trust people. I'm always helping people out but when I need help they just walk away. I'm jack of being let down. (Young man, aged 21)

6.9   Schooling and education

Children and young people in the study placed great value on their schooling – not only because they enjoyed learning and socialising with peers but also because they believed that it gave them some stability particularly when their home lives or circumstances were chaotic:

Schools can help kids by being safe and its somewhere you know what's going to happen next. That's good for kids (Boy, aged 10)

Schools also proved to be a 'safe place' for many of the children and young people. While there, children felt shielded from the violence, the uncertainty and the fear that they had experienced in the other spheres of their lives and believed that schools had worked hard to make sure that they were safe for all:

there is no dangerous things on the playground, not even syringes, because they put lasers on the playground, they don't want anybody to get killed there, nobody gets hurt (Girl, aged 8)

Children and young people also valued going to school because it provided them with a sense of normality. This sense of normality appeared not only to be one of

the reasons why children wanted to go to school but also one of the key reasons why children often did not share their situation with teachers and others. Many children feared that if they shared their families' circumstances they would be treated differently, given unwanted attention or, in some cases, looked down upon for their family's predicament.

Children explained that being embarrassed about their situation or how their homes looked kept them from seeking support. Others were instructed by parents to not let people at school know what was happening at home for fear of being taken from their families:

> *They didn't know because you don't tell them because it's like too embarrassing (Boy, aged 6)*

> *Mum didn't want people at school to know where we were living so I didn't got to school all the time (Young man, aged 14)*

> *I dunno if schools can help. They might tell Family Services and then you would get taken away and put in a [youth] refuge and I know people who've been in the refuges and they say it sux - they'd rather be on the streets or being bashed or whatever [than being in a youth refuge]. (Young man, aged 14)*

Although they felt reluctant to seek assistance, some of the children felt that schools should identify and then support families who were homeless. They believed that having someone at school that knew their situation would be useful because they would understand their behaviours and help them if needed. They did however argue that it was important that children and families should have the choice as to whether they would tell their stories and with whom they would share them:

*It should be up to the student whether they let their teacher know their circumstances –
because it depends if you like them or not (Young woman, aged 15)*

*Teachers would know that someone was homeless because they wouldn't have a school
bag or a lunch box or a hat (Boy, aged 6).*

Attendance and achievement

Homelessness has been found to severely restrict children's access to, and full
participation in the education system. The literature suggests that the main
obstacle that homeless children appear to face is the high level of mobility
experienced by their families and the consequent disruptions this causes to their
schooling (Efron et al, 1996, Bahro, 1996, Edwards, 2003).

In this study, most children had moved schools during their periods of
homelessness with 11 moving to new schools more than 3 times.

Although the number of school moves appears to be high, it is important to note
that in many cases the number of school moves is significantly lower than the
number of times children moved houses during this period:

Figure 3: Relationship between housing and school moves
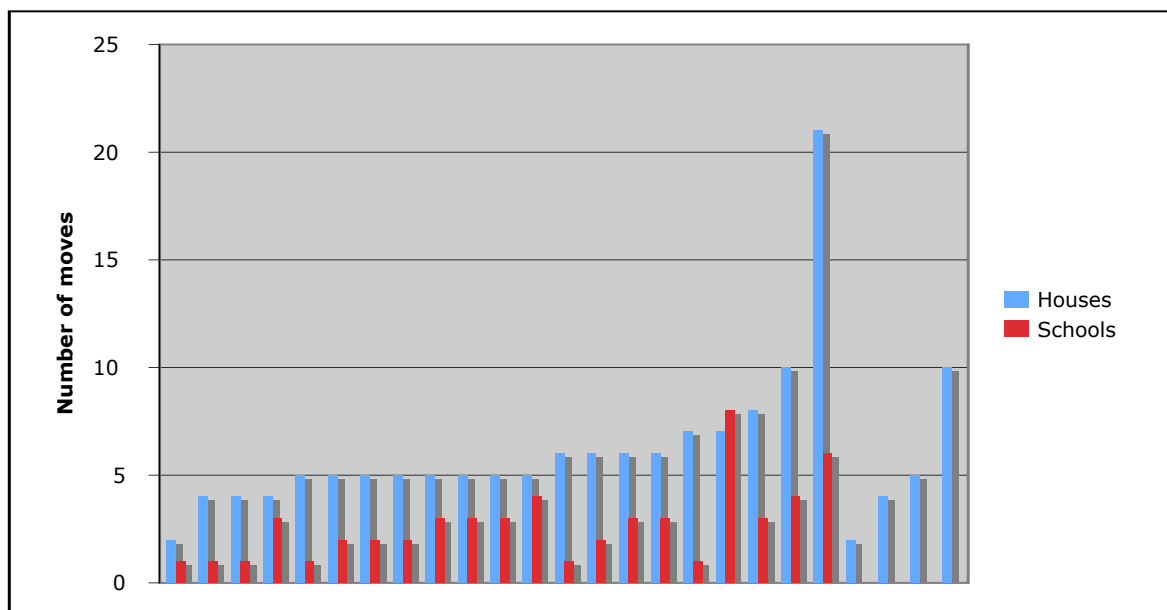
As well as moving, children felt that while homeless they missed significant periods of education, particularly when parents struggled to find a school that would enrol them late in the school year. As a result, some children missed up to 9 months of education at any one time in their life:

> *When I was with Mum, [I] missed about 6 weeks in the whole school year because we used to be somewhere and it would be too hard for me to get to school (Boy, aged 12)*

> *We didn't go to school because Mum couldn't find anywhere for us to go (Girl, aged 12)*

> *This year I missed out on the whole first term of school because we hadn't found a home yet and it is a really strict area code and they barely even let me in – with just the postcode for the post office box because they couldn't give the [refuge's] address out (Young woman, aged 15)*

Within the literature, writers argue that it can take between 4 and 6 months for children to recover academically from a change of school (Walsh, 2003, p10). Children in this study shared the frustrations of having to 'catch up' on work, on feeling constantly behind their peers and on never learning important skills:

> *Every time we moved we move just before we started maths and I could do pluses and subtractions but I never learnt how to do times tables. I didn't learn till I was in year 4 and the teachers tried to help me but I never really caught up (Girl, aged 12)*

> *That was hard. At school I always had to learn new things and try to catch up with everyone but I didn't always (Boy, aged 11)*

As will be discussed later, the challenges of finding and reconnecting positively to schooling appeared to be too great for four young people who left school early.

Fitting in and making friends

Moving to new schools often meant that children had to constantly make new friends. This was an issue not only because there were extended periods during which children felt they were alone but also because children felt that it was difficult to develop close relationships with peers when their stays at school were short:

> *I lost friends moving a few times. Mum didn't want people at school to know where we were living so I didn't go to school all the time and I wasn't allowed to talk to my old friends because Mum owed people money and she didn't want anyone knowing where she was (Young man, aged 14)*

It was kinda annoying changing. Most of the time I didn't really have any friends and when I made them I had to leave. (Boy, aged 11)

For me making friends was really hard… I really missed my friends and my school. I remember leaving it thinking 'I don't want to leave, don't make me leave' (Young woman, aged 16)

I'm not sure if I would have more friends, but probably closer friends (Young woman, aged 15)

The ease at which children slotted into new classes and made new friends appeared to vary greatly depending on the age of the child. For many of the younger children, fitting in to new schools felt like a long and difficult process. However, when the children were asked how long it took them to make new friends they said: "it took ages – it must have been like a whole week". When children over 12 years moved to new schools, the length of time to make new friends and to feel comfortable with their new environment was appreciably longer - sometimes taking up to a year to achieve.

Fitting into new schools appeared also to be reliant on the school having an inviting culture and the role that teachers played in welcoming new students into the school. Children valued teachers who were understanding, who helped them 'fit in' to the classroom and to deal with difficult situations when they arose:

My teacher helped me make some new friends and said 'welcome to our class'. That helped (Boy, aged 11)

It was kind-of good that [my teacher] knew, because I wasn't working very good because I was doing other things,. If she didn't know he would make me work and get angry and things. It was a bit easier for me (Girl, aged 12).

In a few cases, however, children and young people shared painful experiences when teachers and schools had acted to further isolate and upset them:

Some of the teachers used to look down on me – the school had a really good reputation and they would sort of look down on you and think 'you don't belong here' and 'what are you doing here – you're not worthy enough' (Young man, aged 18)

I hated school because I didn't get along and when I had to move from one school to another it was just so much trouble. I hated it there and to make it worse I had a bad teacher 2 years in a row. And she used to make fun of me in front of everyone. I used to make myself physically sick so I wouldn't have to go (Young woman, aged 16)

Early school leaving

Four young people in this study reported that their homelessness had led to their early school leaving. One young person left school when he was 9, another when he was 11 and another when he was 12 years old:

When Mum pulled me out of school [when I was 11] I didn't care because I was always getting in trouble [anyway]. I can't read that well now and I'm not that good at maths but I don't think I'm dumb I just missed out on too much (Young man, aged 14)

My Mum didn't really give a crap [about school] and because she didn't really care about stuff I thought 'what's the point of going to school'. I was like in year 6 and… I thought 'why go if Mum doesn't care?' so I stopped going (Young man, aged 18)

From when I was homeless with my Mum till now I've never been at school. From when Mum took me out of school, when I was like 9, I've never been back… I'd missed too much and I was looking after my Mum so I wouldn't go anyway… So I can't read that well and I can add up and stuff but I'm not that great at stuff... Of course it affected my life – and it was all because I stopped and we moved out" (Young man, aged 21)

Each of these young men had been homeless for more than 4 years – during which time they had left their schools. One young woman had spent a similar amount of time homeless but had continued her education nonetheless.

Of these four young people, two had attempted to return to school and one reported that he was still currently engaged in an alternate education program that where he was making good progress. He reported that learning in a flexible environment where he was not criticised or looked down upon due to his poor academic history was important to him.

6.10   Intergenerational homelessness

Strong anecdotal evidence exists within the Australia to support the notion that if you experience homelessness as a child with your family, you are more likely to experience homelessness yourself as an adult and when you have your own children. Interviews with children and young people, parents and workers for our study confirmed that this phenomenon, known as 'intergenerational homelessness' is also apparent within the ACT.

Five of the young people and one parent in this study reported that they had both experienced homelessness both as children and then again as parents with their own accompanying children. Although their experiences varied greatly, each of the participants felt that their homeless experience as children often coupled with

their parent's inability to provide for them had led to subsequent periods of homelessness, including those spent with their own children:

> *"That's where it all started, man. I was homeless for like 10 years because my Mum had nowhere to stay. Yeah, she went back to my stepfather's but I couldn't do it. If Mum had got somewhere where we could be together and she didn't have to put up with his crap then I wouldn't've ended up where I did. Yeah – my whole life's caught up with it. All the shit that's happened in my life is because of it. Everything. (Young man, aged 21)*

Some of the young people believed that this was because they lived in poverty and weren't able to rely on parents for financial support like other young people their age. Others felt that they had not learnt parenting skills from their own parents and this had affected their capacity to maintain stable accommodation for their children.

All of the young parents who had experienced homelessness as children felt that they were motivated to ensure that their children were not exposed to the violence, drug use and fear that they experienced while homeless and that this commitment to providing for their children had driven them to find accommodation and to be the best parents they could be:

> *I wanna protect my kids… from what I had to go through. That's number one. I'm going to look after them and my girlfriend so they're safe. That's number one (Young man, aged 21)*

> *I know what I was like as a child… I don't want him to go through that. I'm going to use all my strategies to help him grow up. I'm going to try my best. Give him stuff I never got (Young man, aged 18)*

My dream is that I'm a good Mum for my child. I want to give them everything and keep them from going through anything tough. If some guy treats me bad I'll just leave and take them with me and keep away (Young woman, aged 21)

Each of the young parents had made significant changes to their lives so that they could provide their children with the childhood they believe children deserve. Two of the young men reported that they had given up their drug habit and had disconnected themselves from old friends and networks that were entrenched in the drug culture. One young man had agreed to move out of his home so that his partner could raise their child without being exposed to their ongoing conflict. He reported that he was trying to deal with his anger and that he hoped they could live as a family again when he and his partner had resolved their issues. The young mother was studying and working so that she could gain some financial stability to adequately care for her child.

(Photo by girl, aged 7)

"We were homeless when I was 7. My Mum was on heroin and we had no money. She didn't want to tell my Nan and she didn't want us to be taken by Family Services so we slept in the back of the car until Mum could get enough money"

(Young man, 14 years).

7. What children say they want workers to know and do

7.1 Homelessness affects children

As we have seen in previous sections, children believe that homelessness does affect their health and wellbeing, their emotional state, their education and their connections with others. It appears, also, that homelessness can affect family relationships and cohesion although children believe that families provide them with a sense of stability and security during turbulent times. Children in this study wanted people to know that homeless did affect them and their families because they believed that people would help them if they knew what challenges faced them:

> *If they don't know what's going on they can't really help, can they (Young man, aged 18)*

7.2 Children have stories to tell

Children and young people in this study reported feeling fearful and anxious during their periods of homelessness and reported the need to express these feelings with others. They also had stories relating to how their families had overcome challenges, how they had 'stuck together' and the strengths and capacities they shared. Through the project, children and young people were keen to voice their opinions and appreciated having their stories acknowledged and valued.

This was highlighted by a young girl who, when asked to take photos of things were special to her took a photo of the tape recorder that had just been used to record her interview. The researcher questioned why she had done so, to which she responded that the tape recorder was special because "it has my words on it".

She, like many of the other children and young people that were interviewed, believed that her story and the process of sharing it were both valuable and special to her. Another young man felt that having someone listen to you validated you and made you feel important:

> *At [one refuge], the workers would talk to the kids as well as the parents but at others they didn't. It was good when they talked to you – treated you like a person. If they just ignored you it made you feel weird (Boy, aged 11)*

Children often feel unable to talk to people about how they are feeling

Most children and young people felt supported by their parents during periods of crisis. When times were difficult, they often went to their parents for information and assistance:

> *My Mum helps me with all the sad stuff because she's basically in all the sad stuff and she understands (12 year old, female)*

However, some of the children and young people reported that there were times when they felt that they could not talk to their parents about their concerns, primarily because they were worried about their parents and did not want to further burden them with their fears:

> *At first I didn't tell Mum that stuff was going on because I didn't want her to worry about me (Young man, aged 14)*

Other research suggests that during periods of crisis, parents can become preoccupied with dealing with their family's housing stability and may not be fully available to their children (Bahro 1996). It is during these periods that other adults may need to make themselves available to children to ensure that if they want and need to talk things through or to ask questions about things they don't understand that they are able to do so. The young people in this study felt that this was an important, but often missing role that workers could provide:

Workers shouldn't go behind parents' back but maybe they need to check out if the kid needs their parents to share a little more – if they're worried because they don't trust their Mum as much as I did (Young woman, aged 21)

I would have given anything for a program or a worker where someone would talk to me (Young man, aged 18)

Where possible, these adults should also support children and young people to reconnect with their parents and, in some cases, support children in letting their parents know what they are thinking and how they are feeling. A number of young people thought this was particularly important for children who were concerned about their parents and their behaviour:

[We need] someone to take the child's opinion. Because that would give the parent motivation to do it. Like if a parent could hear 'my child wants me to do it' – that could be a life changing thing for them – if they knew what their child really thought about things. They could like do courses or get support or something (Young man, aged 18)

If I had someone there who confidentially found out what you think and then say to the Mum what they're thinking of the situation. You don't get that – not that I've heard of. Well you think "shit, my child wants me to do this or that" and you'd like wake up to yourself if you heard that's what your child thinks. You'd have to change. Especially if its coming from your child (Young man, aged 18)

As a child who did not have an opportunity to express his views, this young person felt that his relationship with his mother had deteriorated. He wished that he had been supported to talk to his mother when things were bad but never had the chance:

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I get into arguments with my Mum when she gets drunk now and I say 'I had a shit childhood' and she says that she didn't know. But she knows now and says 'sorry' and I say that it's OK (Young man, aged 18)

Although they stressed the importance of talking to others, a number of children didn't feel as if they had anyone to share their thoughts and feelings with:

I can talk to myself inside, I never do that – but I could (Boy, aged 6)

I didn't really have anyone to talk to (Boy, aged 11)

It depends what they need. If they need to get something off their chest I'd tell a toy or something because they can't tell anyone else (Girl, aged 12)

Some suggested that they were reluctant to share their experiences with workers for fear of the repercussions:

I didn't tell her [Mum] and I didn't tell anyone else because if I told them they might tell Family Services or someone and then I'd be taken or they'd think bad of Mum and say it was her fault. So I didn't tell anyone. That wasn't good for me – but I didn't know what else to do (Young man, aged 14)

Children will only talk to people who are safe:
Children and young people felt that children would only approach 'safe' adults who they believed were friendly, who would believe their stories, and help them deal with issues in a way that was respectful of them and their families:

If I was in the position to change things – that's what I'd change. Get people to talk to young people they can trust. Once a young person trusts you they'll really talk to you about what's really going on (Young man, aged 18)

Children stressed the importance of adults making time and space for children, and allowing them to build rapport and trust. They needed to know that the adults would not judge their families or their situation and would protect their privacy. They were quick to point out that adults sometimes needed to break children's confidence when the child was unsafe but that they still needed to treat children and their stories with respect.

Children said that they liked adults who were 'kind' and who spent time finding out about them and their experiences. Children also appreciated people who appeared friendly, who shared a joke and showed them that they were genuinely interested. They recommended that adults spend time with children, playing games ('let them beat you') and doing other things that were child-focused. They thought that these things should be done before adults broached sensitive issues so that children felt more comfortable.

Kids may need adults to help them communicate

Children reported that it was often difficult for them to talk to adults and that sometimes adults needed to help them communicate about sensitive issues. This became clear not only in discussions we had with children about their support system but through the broader research process. Children and young people reported the need for adults to take time to allow children to share their stories, feelings and concerns in ways that were comfortable to them.

Children and parents suggested that writing stories or drawing pictures were often easier ways to communicate than adults and children talking directly with each

other. It was also suggested that adults consider how children raise their issues and encompass these styles into their communication. For example, children who had imaginary friends or spoke to their toys and pets about their concerns might need workers to use these things in their discussions (ie "can you tell Teddy how you're feeling today" or "how about we write a letter to your friend telling him about how you're feeling" or "are there times when you talk to your dog about sad things? When are these?")

Children also stressed that adults often needed to take the lead in discussions because they weren't sure whether adults were interested or concerned about their feelings and that just by asking questions like "how are you today?" might give them the message that the adult is happy to engage:

> *Make them listen, man. A lot of the workers these days say "you've got to do this and you've got to do this and you've got to do this" but when do they sit back and listen to what the young person wants or needs (young man, aged 21)*

Children sometimes want information and would like to feel like they are involved

There were differing responses within the group as to how much information children and young people should be given regarding their homelessness and how involved children should be in decision-making. In the sample, only a few had been told that they were going to become homeless and only two were consulted about their situation:

> *My Mum came and picked us up from school and took us to our sisters. And I said like "when are we going home?" she said "we're staying here now" and that was pretty much it. (Young man, aged 21)*

I didn't know that I would have to move from my Mum's place… I decided over like a day or so to move with my Dad – I had to decide and I knew my Dad would be moving to a new place so I thought 'yeh experience time'. It was and it wasn't hard to make this decision… some of my friends didn't get the choice - it was a good thing that I got to choose (Girl, aged 11)

In each of these instances, children and young people reported that they were generally pleased that their parents had talked to them about their situation and felt happy about being invited to make decisions.

However, many of the young people argued that children should be shielded from information that they might find distressing. Though they felt that children needed to feel safe, they felt that their parents had made the correct decisions in keeping information about abusive parents and relationships, about distressing experiences and about their own personal fears and concerns to themselves:

I think that if you have to weigh up knowing and having to deal with all that information and hurt and not knowing and having to wonder about what's really going on I'd choose not knowing (Young woman, aged 21)

They felt that the information provided to children should be decided on the child's age and their ability to cope with potentially upsetting information. They felt that adults needed to weigh up the confusion, fear and anxiety that children might feel when they don't know what is going on against the distress and fear they might experience if exposed to confronting information. What follows is one family's account of their parent's decision not to share information with them:

Mum has kept us very shielded to events that she doesn't want us to see as young children. We didn't know that Dad was going to kill her. She was like 'well we have

lived here for two years, it is time to move guys'. She wouldn't say 'we are leaving because Dad's going to kill us' so she kind of kept everything to herself…(Young man, aged 18)

We never knew why we'd left and we were upset because we wanted to see Dad. We thought he was great and didn't understand why we had to leave home (Young woman, aged 21)

[Q: Do you wish you knew at the time?]

"Well, I don't know, I used to think the sun shined out of my Dad's arse and then I went to live with him and said well what Mum says is true, you are an arsehole, so I don't know" – "at that young age you think the sun shines out of both your parents' arse, so when one says something about the other one, you think you know what's going on, so I think maybe its better that Mum kept it to herself" Young man, aged 18)

"I think it is better that Mum kept us shielded" (Young woman, aged 21)

These views reflect the literature on child-centred practice which asserts that children should be informed about events and processes that affect their lives, but that this communication should occur in a way that recognises the child's developmental and emotional needs and minimises any resulting stress (see Winkworth and McArthur, 2006; Save the Children, 2001).

Children need to know that they and their families are safe

Children and young people reported that during their homelessness there were certain things that they needed to know. Among them, children felt that they needed to know that they, their parents and their families were safe and that they were being protected from harm. This was particularly important for children who were exposed to domestic or other violence and was stressed by those who felt

they had a responsibility for their parent's safety. It appeared that these children needed to be convinced that they were safe before they could feel that way.

> *You know you've got that job to do, to protect your Mum. And that's all you think about and you stress that she's gonna get hurt if you're not around so it's hard to calm down even when there're people around to help. It takes ages to get comfortable again and give that stuff up (Young man, aged 15)*

Children need to know that their housing is stable and secure to feel comfortable

Children and young people appreciated routine and predictability and felt that it was important for them to know that their accommodation was stable. They argued that to feel comfortable, or 'at home' they needed information that set their minds at ease. As such, some information about their tenancy and, when tenancy was temporary or short-term, and about plans for the future was seen as being useful. Children and young people did not want to know that their housing was unstable or insecure:

> *They shouldn't be told that they'd don't have anywhere to live. They can be told when they're 9 or 10 when they actually know what that means – not when they were 6 or 7 when they couldn't cope with it (Girl, aged 12)*

One parent concurred and felt that shielding young and middle-aged children (ie those aged 7 to 12) from such information was particularly important, believing that younger children were unable to comprehend the situation and were less likely to be affected and that those who were older could deal with details of their homelessness more capably:

They weren't really able to cope with things that well. If they were younger they might have dealt with it better – they are more 'go with the flow'. They were stuck in what they wanted. Not when they're that age. It's very difficult. They get very emotionally disturbed because they're homeless (Parent)

7.3 Children need to be protected

Sometimes children are not safe and sometimes their needs are not being met

Though this report has highlighted the fact that children see their families as providing them with protection and safety, it is important to recognise that some children in this study had lived in unsafe circumstances, had been exposed to abuse and, at times, not had their basic needs met.

In a number of these cases, parents were unable to provide for their children because of poverty or because of the physical environment within which they were living. In others, this poverty was compounded by parental alcohol or other drug use and / or crisis which led to them being unable to fully respond to their children's needs.

In such cases, children need services to assertively respond to their situation. In some instances, a referral to a statutory body may be necessary to ensure that children are safe and protected from harm but, in most cases, actively raising issues with parents and assisting them to make changes for their children can have equally positive outcomes. Workers and parents also argued that it was important for services to assist families to find appropriate supports and to help families through supported referral.

Children and families need to be protected from further violence and trauma

In this study children and young people reported that they had been exposed to violence and had experienced trauma at each stage of their homelessness. As discussed, families reported that this exposure did not always cease when entering into refuges or other accommodation and that children constantly worried, were anxious and felt afraid as a result.

If it is the intention of homelessness services and the broader service system to protect families from further violence and trauma, steps must be taken to ensure that families are provided with safe, secure and stable accommodation as early in the homelessness cycle as possible. Services must develop policies and practices that promote children's safety and that minimise their exposure to such stressors. This may mean allocating more semi-supported but independent housing options to families at each stage along the supported accommodation continuum (ie by crisis, medium and long-term services). Otherwise, children's exposure to violence may be sustained or, in many cases, exacerbated by their interactions with homelessness services.

The service system must also realise that many families will not seek or access supports until they are confident that their children can be shielded from violence. Families who have been exposed to violence in services in the past may also be reluctant to seek further assistance and may need to be approached by workers who can alleviate their fears.

Children want and need to know how to protect themselves

A significant number of participants felt that it was important for children to know about how to protect themselves and to stay away from harm Children shared experiences of being exposed to 'dangerous people' while on the streets

and in shared accommodation, of being bullied and harassed by other children and adults and of feeling unsafe when sleeping rough. As such, many thought that children should know about 'stranger danger' and about how to get help from people when they were in dangerous environments.

7.4   Children need adults to respond

Though the act of talking and listening was valued by the children, a number suggested that when children told adults about their problems they needed help in dealing with them. Young people recalled instances where they felt 'let down' by workers who listened to their stories but did nothing to respond to their situations:

> *I went to this group once and we could talk about our feelings but I remember saying "I feel sick of having nowhere to stay" [They couldn't help with that and] that didn't help much (Young man, aged 14)*

> *I'm too proud to ring [a telephone support line], but I eventually did start ringing 'em. But as I thought all along they didn't do anything for me… they seemed to think they couldn't. I'd ring em all day, everyday. They said the same thing: 'ring these people they'll help you out'. I rang those people – they couldn't do nothing. What can you do? I can give you a number for another place that won't help you out I guess.. (Young man, aged 16)*

When engaging children, workers need to be aware of the services and supports that are available from their own and other programs and should help children to access such assistance through supported referral.

> *There should be stuff for kids: people they can talk to about stuff and not worry that people are going to think bad of their parents or get them in trouble. Kids won't tell*

unless they know people are safe and they're not going to help unless they think people are going to do something to help (Young man, aged 14)

7.5   Responding appropriately to family homelessness

Though children and families appreciated the support they had received from the service system, they stressed the need for earlier responses to homelessness, greater continuity of care, more holistic supports for children and families, greater recognition of family's strengths and better collaboration of services.

Services respond early in the life of the problem

The importance of early intervention with vulnerable children and young people has been clearly demonstrated in the literature. It was reiterated by young people, parents and workers in this study who believed that for systems to appropriately and effectively respond to the needs of homeless children, supports must be provided during initial stages of the family's homelessness and at the early points in the life of problems affecting their families.

One parent reported, for example, that her son had poor mental health, had become disconnected from school and from his community and was acting aggressively to those around him. She believed that each of these were outcomes from his experience of homelessness and was concerned that unless things dramatically changed his future would also be bleak:

I'm scared for his future. I can't even see a future for him if we can't get him back on the right path… and its all because of our history (Mother).

She reported that she knew that her child needed help during their homelessness but that because she had no money and had little stability she could not afford or organise counselling:

He should have been helped by counsellors when he was in kindergarten but I couldn't afford it so there was nothing I could do (Parent)

She believed that if services had been provided to her son earlier, the impacts on his life would not have been as great:

If only they'd been able to work with him earlier he wouldn't have had to go through all the problems he faced. They said that things weren't bad enough – but why did we have to wait until things got out of control. It almost killed him and me – I could see things were getting worse but there was nothing I could do. I couldn't afford to pay for help and no one would let us in. It was a horrible situation and one that still affects us all (Parent).

Other young people also stressed the importance of early intervention and support for their parents, which they believed would also have positive outcomes for them and their siblings:

I wish someone had stepped in when I was a kid, and like helped out. I shouldn't have gone through all that shit and have suffered the way we did. I dunno why they waited until things were so bad they couldn't be fixed. If they'd helped get Mum on track heaps earlier it would've been OK. I don't reckon that things would be like perfect but they wouldn't be as bad as what they are (Young man, aged 21)

Services work to provide continuity of care

Children, parents and workers each stressed the importance of children having consistent, stable and trusting relationship with adults in addition to their parents. This reflects research on resilience and children's coping that asserts the need for children to feel connected to and guided by positive, affirming and consistent

adults who provide them with stability (Resnick et al, 1993; (Brendtro and Shahbazian, 2004) and Shahbazian, 2004).

However, parents reported that during periods of homelessness, children often had special adults come in and out of their lives and that they often felt a sense of loss when they were separated:

> *The boys had been abandoned by their father and then they felt abandoned time and time again by workers and people who moved in and out of their lives (Mother)*

One parent reported that this had a damaging affect on her child, leading him to become closed off with adults:

> *No-one attached to him because he has a wall around him He tried to put up the wall so he wouldn't get hurt again. And his… worker just dropped him because they couldn't crack him and they didn't think it was worth it. I thought, 'Great, another person who's abandoned him!' (Mother)*

Young people shared stories of workers who had been around for 'the long haul' and who had made a big impression on their lives:

> *He was like a kind giant for me. He was such a big dude but was the nicest person. He tried to help me out as much as he can. I remember the positive affect from me for when I was really young… He kept coming back and back, he was there for a long time so you could come back to him (Young man, aged 18)*

They reported, however, how difficult it was losing such important people and stressed the need for opportunities to remain connected:

It was real hard, man when he told me he couldn't help anymore cos the youth service didn't work with guys like me. It was like being kicked in the guts, man. Like he had turned his back on you. I could tell he was cut too – but they just said 'no' to him helping. I know my life had changed, but I still needed him just as much as before and there was no one else who I'd like made that connection with, man. I was like all alone again and that hurt... It felt like it was my Dad walking off on me again (Young man, aged 15)

Throughout the interviews with workers it became clear that current responses to homeless families were primarily during crisis periods and were not accessible to families for prolonged periods. Workers in SAAP services felt restricted by the fact that they could only provide limited outreach support and that after families left their services further assistance and support was not possible and other programs often were time-restricted. In fact, one worker suggested that in the most part only church affiliated charitable organisations were able to provide long-term support and that this seriously limited the sector's capacity to provide sustainable outcomes for vulnerable children.

This was disappointing as workers recognised that as well as their need for stable adults, children often required ongoing counselling and assistance to reduce the residual impacts of their homeless experience. Workers were also concerned that without ongoing support, parents were often unable to keep their children's appointments with providers, to access transport and to negotiate for additional services. As such, they argued that additional resources were required to support children during and after their periods of homelessness.

Services work with families AND children

The primary concern raised by workers was the lack of time and resources to dedicate to children and their needs. It was suggested that though children

outnumber adults in homeless family services, targeted supports were limited and often met adult's needs rather children's wishes.

Some services argued that more children's workers were required so that time could be spent with children to assess their needs, to hear their stories and to respond to their concerns. Children, however, thought that all workers in homelessness services needed training and support to become accessible and responsive to their needs. They felt that this was important so that kids would always have some available and so that they had some choice about who they worked with and how this might occur:

> *I think all the workers should talk to kids. Maybe they could take turns on nights to work with kids (Boy, aged 11)*

Workers and parents, including a child counsellor, argued that it was important for services to talk with children and to identify and respond to their felt needs (being those that children themselves felt were important). Currently, most services do not allow for child-focussed assessments or for ascertaining children's views. Workers felt that they needed training, support and strategies to assist them in doing so.

Parents and young people, in particular, stressed the importance of children having a neutral and trusting relationship with workers that they could utilise during stressful periods and in situations when they felt unable to share with their parents. One mother was reminded of an experience she had as a child which shaped her view that children should be able to talk to adults:

> *I remember when I was young and my father was bashing the crap out of me… It was back in the days when children could be charged as being uncontrollable and put into a*

home. My father wanted to charge me with that. I ran away. My Mum took me to a welfare agency to counselling and she was in the counselling room with me and I had these massive welt marks that had been bleeding on my back and while Mum was in the room with me I was this tough little bitch. As soon as my Mum went out I opened up to that guy. I was 14 or 15. I think that if kids want to open up and have this embarrassment or something hanging over them – because I had this 'no talk' / 'no feel' rule. If they want to open up they should be able to without the parent there. I remember what it was like as a child. I wouldn't open up in front of my parents. And I probably never have – to this day. (Parent)

Services recognise family strengths and achievements

One of the key messages that came from children in this project was that families have strengths and have overcome significant hardship during their lives. Parents agreed with the children and argued that it was important for these things to be acknowledged by those working with families. They believed that workers could help families by not further compounding their experiences by relating to them as problems or thinking about their experiences as being only negative. They thought it was important for family strengths to be valued so that positive outcomes could be achieved.

Workers assisting families must therefore recognise parent's strengths, particularly their commitment to meeting their children's needs and for being good parents. Though the family's experience of homelessness often reduced their capacity to provide for their children, parents expressed the view that their child's safety and wellbeing was always paramount:

I have been probably over-protective, but making sure she was warm, making sure she had food in her belly, making sure that there was plenty of water for her to drink… making sure of all these other bits and pieces (Father)

Parents reported that wherever possible they shielded their children from traumatic or harmful experiences and hoped that the impacts of their homelessness were minimal for their children. They were most proud of the way that they fought for their children and how, to varying degrees, they had 'got back on track' and had been successful in finding stability:

> *I'm a survivor… I've just fought. I hate injustice… I don't fight for myself but I fight for my children – to keep them together. I just fight (Mother)*

Most of the children and young people in this study felt that their safety was a driving force for parents, and that their parents were doing the best they could to protect them from harm. Workers agreed, suggesting that parents often felt that they were bad parents and were not meeting the needs of their children even though they were ably supporting them. They suggested that it was important to reassure parents and to acknowledge their strengths as carers for their children.

A number of families, however, reported that they did not feel as though workers from services had fully appreciated their situation or had responded appropriately. This was frustrating for many, particularly as they felt that they wanted to have their issues resolved quickly so that could minimise negative consequences for their children.

Services working collaboratively

A number of young people, parents and workers suggested that if services were able to work together more effective and sustainable outcomes could be achieved for families and children. Pooling resources, sharing expertise and encouraging continuity of care were all achievable when services shared clients and worked

together to develop care plans that supported children and families through their transitions in and out of the service system.

However, a number of workers suggested that services and supports were sometimes reluctant or felt unable to work with other organisations to meet the needs of their clients. Suggesting that collaborations were more resource intensive, that services sometimes felt protective of families and were sometimes reluctant to 'share them' with other services, these workers reported that programs were unable to provide sustainable outcomes and kept families from connecting to potentially helpful supports.

(Picture by boy, aged 12)

One of the people

always talked to me,

they were like my friend— that was

good. They helped to get me into

schools.

(Young woman, 11years)

8. Key Findings for Policy and Practice

The main aim of this research was to explore from a children's perspective the experience of being homeless. This was done in an effort to fill an important gap in our knowledge of how children understand and experience homelessness. Although there is an emerging body of work that has explored family homelessness and the impact on children, there have been few attempts to talk to children about these experiences and to understand how these experiences make sense to them. Using a qualitative research approach we talked in a number of different ways at a number of different times to 25 children and young people. We also 25 interviewed parents and workers.

The project also aimed to draw out the key elements of the experience so that the services that surround children can hear from them what they regard as important. Their perceptions and experiences of homelessness and how it has affected them form the core of our findings.

A further key outcome of this research is the development of a set of appropriate tools to engage children in research. Workers and others are often of the view that children are too vulnerable to participate in research such as this, despite changes over the last 2 decades in how childhood is conceptualised. This research adds weight to the view that children and young people's understandings and experiences differ to those of their parents and other adults. Because of this their involvement in research contributes to our knowledge about the experience of homelessness in important ways. Using a variety of different tools enabled children and young people to participate in the research in meaningful ways not the least being centrally involved in the design of the research itself.

In identifying key themes and possible implications for practice within the systems that have a role in supporting children, we also drew on comments from parents and from workers in relevant areas. Reviews of the literature firstly on children's experience of family homelessness and secondly on ways of engaging children in research on sensitive issues, provided further context for conducting the research and interpreting our findings. This final section discusses the major themes that emerged from the research.

Listening and Talking

It is vital to connect with children and young people in their own right, engage with them as individuals, and listen to and acknowledge their stories. This is important in the research context but it is also important that services that come into contact with children develop the skills of listening to children. Participation by children and listening to them achieves positive outcomes, both for individual children and for children as a group. Individually it improves the accuracy and relevancy of decision making about individual children. In the case of the children as a group, participation: helps to uphold their rights as citizens and service users; fulfils legal responsibilities; and improves the quality of services that impact on them (Winkworth and McArthur, 2006).

What becomes clear from what the children and young people said during the research was that there is an imperative not to become fixed on 'one size fits all' processes or responses. Sometimes children want to know specifically what is happening and sometimes they only want to know that 'things are going to be ok". Workers and others who come into contact with children who are experiencing homelessness need to take their cues from the child whilst providing them with opportunities and appropriate spaces to express their needs.

Children and young people may also need support to be able to talk with parents about what is happening for them, in order to help the child and also to strengthen relationships within the family. Workers have a key role to play in facilitating opportunities for families to raise and resolve issues particularly when children are afraid to do so themselves. This may happen for a range of reasons including children not wanting to add to their parent's burden.

Workers identified a range of barriers to supporting children in this way including the view that talking with children about these issues undermines the parental role, concerns that staff are not adequately trained or supported to 'work' with children and finally the view that children are not their clients. These views would indicate there is a need for further training in child centred practice for workers in systems that have contact with children.

Providing information to children

Children need information about the events and processes affecting their lives but this should be given in a way that recognises their developmental and emotional needs. The children and young people in this study responded in a variety of different ways to the question of what information they needed. These views reflect the literature on child-centred practice which asserts that children should be informed about events and processes that impact on them (see Winkworth and McArthur, 2006; Save the Children, 2001). The provision of information to children can and should take a variety of different forms for example the use of child friendly language and the use of art or story telling. Apart from ensuring the developmental and emotional appropriateness of information it should be provided in a way that responds to the child's interests and wishes.

Impacts of homelessness

Children from families experiencing homelessness often have problems at school, with their health, and making and retaining friends. Previous research indicates the impacts of homelessness and the children in this project talked about similar issues. What strongly emerged was how schooling and friendships were most affected by being homelessness. Children depending on their age and developmental stage found it easier or harder to make new friends. The school's response to 'new' children appeared to make a difference to the experience of change. For some of the young people in the study school was cut short and they reflected on how this has had an ongoing effect on their lives.

Schools have an important role not only in the education of children but as a universal service they have key opportunities to assist vulnerable children and their families. Recognising the impact that unstable housing has on children's lives, schools can play an important role by providing children with a sense of security and predictability.

Supporting parents

Some of the factors that are recognised as 'pathways' into family homelessness, such as parental drug and alcohol use, family violence and parental mental health issues, themselves make children more at risk during periods of homelessness. Not surprisingly the children in this study wanted their parents to be supported to deal with the issues contributing to their homelessness.

Effective referral and linking to services

A number of parents and workers identified barriers to effective referral for families and this impacted on children. Workers reported that they struggled to maintain up-to-date information about relevant services and felt constrained by the boundaries of their role to actively connect families with services and to

provide follow up support. Most children and young people were not able to identify any service or organisation that had assisted them after leaving supported accommodation. This may be for at least two possible reasons: they didn't have follow up services or they didn't know who was assisting them.

Ongoing support

As outlined in the report there are ongoing effects of homelessness on children beyond the periods of homelessness. High levels of change and insecurity in the child's life make it important that support for them is sustained beyond the crisis period. Although it is unrealistic to imagine that one worker remains involved indefinitely children in the study point to the importance of having safe, trustworthy and stable relationships during and after periods where they experience instability and chaos. Working out who is in the best position to provide this support on an ongoing basis is an essential part of providing services to children.

Stable and secure living arrangements

Much of the fear and distress of homelessness reported by the children in this study was as result of the insecure and sometimes unsafe nature of their temporary housing. Although this fear reduced somewhat when children felt supported by their families. The early identification of families at risk of homelessness and planning for safe, secure and stable accommodation must be made as early in the homelessness cycle as possible. This also reflects the key role housing plays in enabling families to stay together, and points to the need for services working with families to work in a more integrated way.

Family strengths

Previous research has suggested that parental capacity to meet the needs of children during periods of homelessness is diminished. Although this may be

sometimes the case and intervention is required the children in this study pointed to the many and varied strengths and skills their parents demonstrated every day. They discussed how their parents did their best to keep them safe. The views of these children reflect what we would call a strengths perspective. The strengths perspective focuses on the capacities and potentialities of people and aims to utilise and develop opportunities for individuals and communities to articulate and work towards the future. Whilst parents often felt judged and criticised by services which sometimes impacted on their help seeking behaviour their children focused on what their parents could do rather than what they couldn't. Organisations often frame their practice with this perspective but to implement a strengths approach with families means they must assume that families can, with opportunities, support and information, make decisions and plans to ensure the safety of their children.

Finally at the broader system level, it is clear that early intervention to prevent homelessness occurring in the first place (through, for example, improved communication between different areas within human service departments) is vastly less damaging for the families involved and far more efficient in terms of community resources.
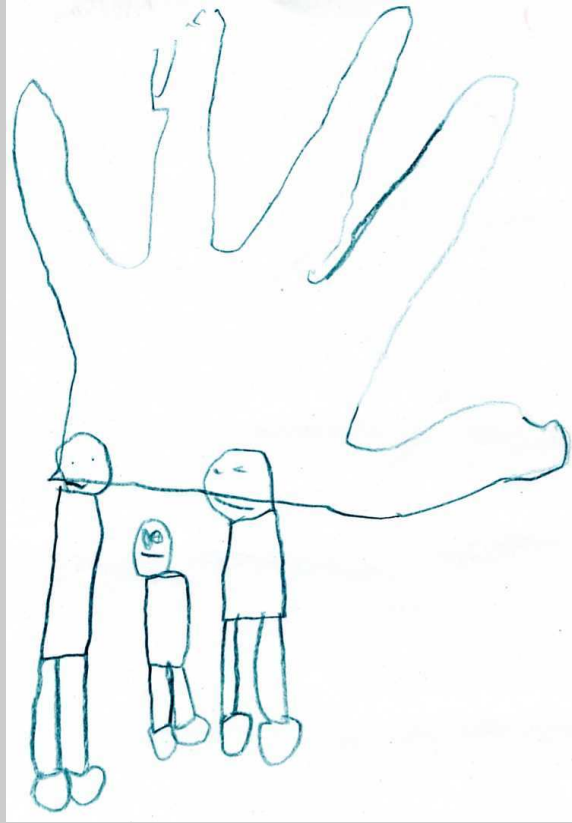
My hope for the future:

To grow up to be a nice person…[and] that my family will get more money and we will be successful (Girl, aged 7)

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10. Appendices to the report

10.1 Appendix A: Interviews with parents

As mentioned in the methodology section of this report, when families were recruited for the research, parents were given the option of participating in a one-on-one interview. Parents who consented to interview were asked about their experiences of homelessness and how they believed that homelessness had affected their children. The responses of the five parents who participated are summarised as key issues/themes as follows:

- **Difficulty of accessing formal support services** that match the individual needs of parents, including services being very restrictive about the clients they could take on; parents having bad experiences with services such as child protection and becoming fearful of further contact; and parents finding it difficult to get information about what services were available or the kind of help they offered.

- **Limited access to transport** (e.g. no car and limited public transport) which can make it difficult to access services, and limit contact visits to other parent.

- **Strong parental protectiveness towards children,** trying to ensure that they have good relationships with their children, especially during periods of crisis and homelessness; trying to ensure children are not stressed about situation and make sure that they think the parent has everything under control, often including parents downplaying situations and the level of need/crisis that they are experiencing.

- **Stable housing available often only possible after successful engagement with a SAAP service** – SAAP help needed to locate crisis accommodation and then access to longer term accommodation.

- **Difficulties in parents' own childhood / adolescence impacting on how they parent,** especially unresolved emotional issues from their

childhood/adolescence impacting on their mental health and wellbeing to the point of being a major contributor to their homelessness; also strongly motivated to try and protect their children from crisis / homelessness / violence and abuse.

- **Awareness that kids have different responses to homelessness and try to cope in different ways.**

- **Difficulties of being in refuges** e.g. sharing with others; not always feeling safe.

- **Importance of good professionals in kids' lives, someone that they trust and can form a supportive relationship with e.g.** teachers / counsellors / mentors, because kids can't always tell parents how they are feeling and parents can't always help.

10.2   Appendix B: Interviews with community workers

As noted in the methodology section of the report, workers from refuges, homelessness services and community programs were invited to participate and were recruited through local e-lists and service forums. Consenting workers were interviewed about their services, the way those services supported homeless families, the challenges and barriers they believed kept them from working with children and the ways they believed the service system could be improved to support homeless families.

Responses from 12 workers (7 SAAP workers, 2 teachers, 1 community health worker,1 community worker and 1 psychologist) are summarised below under three major headings:

1. Problems with services:

- Being a **Children's Worker in a SAAP service is a complex and difficult role. Barriers** to effective engagement with children **include:**
    o Lack of time – kids need to be seen out of school hours;
    o Lack of resources and funding – ratio of workers for the numbers of kids compared to numbers of adults in services is out of whack. More kids than adults but often only one kids worker;
    o Lack of support and recognition of the importance of the role – no network for kids workers in the ACT;
    o Some parents not willing to have kids talk to workers or become involved in kids' groups – need to involve parents when working with kids and it is always the parent's decision whether the child receives support or not. Some parents are over-protective of kids and don't want them to talk because of fear of Care and Protection..
    o Reluctance of workers to question parents about their kids or to talk to kids (because of lack of confidence, lack of recognition of children's

needs or worried about what parents may think and don't want to take on a parenting role or C&P role themselves)

o Often only have very short involvement with families

- **Evidence of a lack of proper referral and case closure planning from SAAP services in the ACT**. –Services can be protective about their clients and not refer them out to necessary services with the result that no follow-up support is in place when they close their own involvement.

- **Access to services is a huge issue for poor, homeless families who often have no means of transport.** Even transport to get to school is difficult for many kids, especially after they have moved. Sometimes services such as transport or respite are available but the child must have a disability or involvement with C&P in order to qualify - being homeless is not enough to qualify for extra [often necessary] support services. Also there is a **lack of services able to provide long-term support** and kids in many instances are falling through the gaps in the service system.

- **Severe lack of public housing and affordable accommodation available** to families in the ACT.

- **Care and Protection Services need improvement** in the following areas/ways:
  o Better communication and information sharing with services and families;
  o Following up on what they say they will do or what their policies say they will do;
  o More understanding and support for parents who are trying to do the right thing by their kids;
  o Building better relationships with services and families;
  o Being careful about their use of language ('scaremongering' was a term used by to describe how they talk to parents). It is important C&P

realises that people are scared stiff of their involvement in their lives and needs to respond appropriately and try to reduce the stereotypes and impressions that the community as a whole has of their service;

o Initial responses need to be more thorough and provide more early intervention assistance. If this had been in done better in some cases, children would not have had to be removed and family relationships could have been strengthened;

o Need to be more consistent about what is 'OK' and what is 'not OK' parenting;

o Need to value and listen to parents and workers more;

o Need to be more flexible and prepared to review their decisions/opinions each case.

2. Needs of children/young people

- **Needs of children are very diverse –** but many need help with attending and engaging successfully at school and someone to talk to about what is happening in their lives. Also many do not have opportunity to have fun and 'be kids' – this is a major part of what children's workers in SAAP services try to provide (i.e. opportunities for having fun);

- **Other needs include** need to quickly give children their own space and possessions, help them reconnect them with safe adults and friends from their past life, and help them build(or re-build) emotional connections with parents so that parents are able to identify and respond to children's needs;

- Each child will have **different immediate felt needs** and **it is important to talk to them and find out what these are** – often different from what parents think they are;

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- **Schools:** where schools were supportive, it made a huge difference to children. Some schools still attach a stigma to homeless children, view them as being 'trouble' and would prefer not to have to deal with them or have them in their school;

- **Children need to be heard, spoken to and seen as individuals in their own right** by services so that their needs can be addressed. Most services admitted that they don't talk separately to children or assess their needs in a comprehensive coordinated way. If they were assessed, it was usually done through a pro-forma filled out by parents;

- **Parenting support** was also crucial, especially for parents who did not have / do not have good role models for parenting skills and techniques; a lot of people needing support had been homeless themselves as children or experienced DV as a child.

3. What is needed

- **More housing (crisis and long-term)** – there is a severe lack of exit points for clients seen by SAAP services;

- **More support services for families and children that are also better linked and easier for people to access**, including more for some specific groups like AOD parents and their kids, single men and their kids, young parents (under 18) and their kids, boys over nine years (especially when with a single mum), more long term support services; and more general services / things to do that are free and easy to access for children from poor families;

- **For children to be taken more seriously by community as a whole and valued and listened to as people in their own right;**

- **Less stereotyping and judging of families** experiencing homelessness.

10.3   Appendix C: Interviews with care and protection workers

Interviews were conducted with 8 workers from the Care and Protection (C&P) system, with a focus on how they viewed the relationship between family homelessness and child protection. Participating workers were recruited through their work teams with the support of team leaders. Their responses are summarised below.

1. Main themes identified

- Major challenges for homeless children and young people are maintaining contact (homeless children can become 'invisible'), establishing and maintaining social networks, schooling, and access to health and community services;

- A particular issue in the ACT is transient families, 'border hoppers' or families moving on frequently between states;

- Homelessness is a symptom of or preceded by other issues such as substance abuse, family violence, or criminal activity;

- Common observation is that homelessness means most of a parent's energy is taken up finding a place to sleep and food, so that children's other needs are overlooked or unable to be met, other care and protection concerns often go unaddressed.

2. Aspects identified for improvement:

- **Early intervention, collaboration and joint responsibility**

Many different ideas on how intervention can occur earlier in the cycle of homelessness. The most immediate need is to improve communication with housing so that interventions can take place in time to prevent evictions. Some aspects of this would include:

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o employing housing liaison officers, and work on defining C&P and housing roles:

o increasing collaboration between housing, C & P, and accommodation providers and services. For example, joint family visits, a housing crisis service;

o adopting a whole-of-department approach to homelessness- being under one executive is seen as a very positive step towards that;

o using schools as a way of providing information to children on where to get help, especially 9 – 14 years, to prevent family conflicts resulting in homelessness. Also, the Schools as Communities Program was seen as very positive in this regard, and needs to be expanded.

Legislative change

o Some identified a need for legislation to include others in the responsibility for children (suggestions included refuges, foster care providers, community partners) to change the perception that child protection is the sole responsibility of C&P rather than the whole community (e.g. the UK model of community partners); also to increase commitment from accommodation providers to find ways of meeting needs and making accommodation arrangements work rather than evicting people. A number of respondents raised the issue of people being evicted from refuges, refuges not being committed to meeting needs, and services in Canberra being quite rigid with their boundaries/eligibility criteria), not enough flexibility and cooperation in the system

o Helpful to change to child protection system so it is less adversarial and allows more scope for cooperation (e.g: Scottish children's hearing system)

- o Could trial a children's crisis centre operating 24/7 with statutory responsibilities as one way to accommodate 9 – 14 year olds who are homeless and teach them social and living skills.
- o There was a suggestion that it is too easy for parents to turn their backs on their own children in Canberra – legislative change may partially address this.

More support for families
- o Under present arrangements, C &P only have capacity to deal with crises and 'core business'
- o There is a need for supported accommodation, and for services which can support families and children in order to prevent C& P involvement and prevent removal, or to facilitate restoration. Some families will always need higher levels of support in order to care for children, but this is strongly preferable to removal of the child or young person.

Crisis accommodation for families
- o At the moment, C &P puts families up in hotels and caravan parks at great expense in crises. There were various ideas about alternatives including emergency short-term accommodation managed within housing (like DV crisis flats) for this purpose, similar flats but managed by housing and with housing crisis service attached; permanent booking by C&P in a hostel or YWCA or similar for crises

Training, Professional development and support for C&P staff
- o to increase knowledge of and links with services, greater focus on collaboration, joint meetings etc

- need to change C&P image, make it more accessible, (perhaps through co-location of some staff)
- administrative load for C&P staff (reporting) prevents them engaging in the work with children and families

There is fear among professionals, resulting from micro-management, too much reporting and not enough action