

Discussing poverty and homelessness with children

Anna Rushall | Schools Team Manager

Anna is a qualified primary school teacher and English lead who has taught all year groups, from Reception to Year 6. She is passionate about finding new ways to inspire children to become lifelong readers.



Respect and community are key

Approximately 30% of UK children are living in relative poverty (rising to 49% in single-parent households), with 121,000 children homeless and living in temporary accommodation.

Barnardo's new report, *A Crisis On Our Doorstep*, surveyed 1,010 parents in collaboration with YouGov. Due to the cost of living crisis, 23% of parents reported difficulties providing for their families, and 52% of children said they worried about their families not having enough money.

For teachers with pupils in their class who are experiencing these issues, it is beneficial to be confident and empathetic when broaching the concepts of poverty and homelessness. In this guide, you'll find some recommended reads and practical tips you can use.

Anna

"Above all else, maintaining a respectful and community-based feel to your class is integral.

"You can do this by creating the sense that you are all working collaboratively towards something and that each of you may need support from another at any point – both adults and children."

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Schools Team Manager

Give children a vehicle through which their voices can be heard

The key to approaching poverty and homelessness with children is to keep the core community of the class as the central driving force. The aim is to discuss any sensitive issues in a neutral way. Children should feel free, but not pressured, to contribute.

Through **using fictional characters**, you have an opportunity to make the 'silences' children may have witnessed or experienced speak. They are given a vehicle through which they can express any concerns about things they have seen or felt about their own circumstances through the safety of shared characters and circumstances. **Role-play work** can help children here too, depending on age and preference.

Why role-play?



Role-play allows children to explore the experiences of characters and how they might feel in these circumstances without having to share their own story.

In some circumstances, this can help them to understand similar scenarios they have been in, or encourage them to voice any concerns they have to a trusted member of staff.

It's just as valuable to allow those who don't want to participate to observe and reflect. As with adults, we all have our own way of navigating difficult experiences.

Never 'other' disadvantaged children

What is critical is avoiding any sense of 'othering'. For instance if your school policy is to feed targeted children in your class, make it a part of a shared class experience so they are not isolated. Similarly with clothes, if your school policy allows you to provide for an individual, manage this discreetly and simply leave the item labelled on their peg or have a designated class box available.

At one school I taught at, we set up a food and clothes bank during the pandemic. It's important that these are easily accessible and that anyone can use them. On different weeks, different families may need help – you will only ever know a fraction of what might be happening in their life.

Cultivate meaningful discussions through activities

You can introduce thought-provoking activities that return to issues like poverty in a worldwide or neutral way. One way of doing this is **sharing a photograph** – for example featured by the BBC or The Guardian – that gives a snapshot of someone's day in another part of the world. You can then invite pupils to express their thoughts. Children don't always have to understand the full issue to have an opinion.

A **quote or question of the week** that children can respond to and share with their family at home can broaden questions. It can be useful and reassuring for children who are in tricky situations to realise that there are others out there in difficult (or even worse) situations, and also that things can get better.

Foster trust and honesty

If supported by your senior leadership team, **being honest with your own feelings and experiences** is important. You could give examples of other adults – like **celebrities or historical figures** – to help your class to build trust and resilience. Show them that yes, sometimes you will experience difficult things, but there are examples of people who are not defined by their background.

Being available on the playground after you have shared stories or discussions is key, as it allows children to speak to you 1:1 without it appearing out of the ordinary. **Thought boxes** in the classroom can help with this too.



Help build children's empathy

Continually finding opportunities to **establish the concept of walking in someone else's shoes** will build empathy when it comes to big conversations about topics like poverty and homelessness. Trying to **build in an element of hope** is important, but **being honest with children** is essential. Don't gloss over their concerns or use metaphorical analogies for the events that trouble them. **Be led by the children's questions** and respond directly to these.

Recommended classroom reads

How to Heal a Broken Wing by Bob Graham: This is great for introducing younger children to the ideas of empathy and noticing what is happening around you. With KS2 children you can take this further and talk about what the bird might be a symbol for, or who is sometimes ignored in society, and how we can help

The Day War Came by Nicola Davies and **Migrants** by Issa Watanabe: These are good for broaching more issues about migrants and homelessness with different ages

The Invisible by Tom Percival and **Has Anyone Seen Archie Ebbs?** by Simon Packham: As current examples of tackling poverty and homelessness, these books express the sense that it could happen to anyone of us

Contact us for more advice



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