

Parenting *ideas*

INSIGHTS

Building parent-school partnerships

WORDS Sarah Wayland

Nowhere else to go – reaching out to those at risk of youth homelessness

On any given night in Australia, 27,000 young people are homeless. Living away from home with uncertainty as to where their next meal or safe place to sleep might come from. Parentingideas writer Sarah Wayland looks at the signs and practical ways we can step in when concerned.

Our community has some stereotypical ideas about what 'sleeping rough' looks like, but youth homelessness is a broad term spanning a range of circumstances. It can involve anything from running away for a single night to long periods of time living on the streets or moving from refuge to refuge.

Young girls are more likely to be homeless than their male friends, and the majority of young people living away from home are classed as 'hidden homeless' because they don't reach out for help.

All of this means that the true extent of youth homelessness is unknown. Help more commonly comes from people in a young person's inner circle; it's usually a friend, or a friend's parents, who ends up providing some level of safety, though sometimes this can feel precarious.

Kerri had a niggling feeling that her 16-year-old daughter's friend was at risk or homeless. She decided to keep an eye on her.

The signs were subtle at first – not too dissimilar to the striving for independence common to most adolescents.

"She'd call from the park down the road late at night, crying, asking if she could stay," Kerri explained. "She'd be hesitant to return home and didn't want me to ring her mum to let her know she was okay."

After the third occurrence of this in a few months, Kerri decided that she needed to reach out for help and contacted her daughter's school. With the help of the school counsellor and some sessions with the Youth Health Services in their local community, her daughter's friend got the help she needed. She was provided with some stable temporary accommodation until she and her mum could decide whether returning home would be the best decision for everyone.

Kerri looks back on that time and feels honoured that her home was seen as a safe place. But she also knows that the situation put her out of her depth, which is why she sought help.

Young people spend time away from their family home for many reasons, including:

- wanting to assert independence
- having fears for their personal safety
- child protection issues
- domestic violence concerns
- offending behaviors
- lack of empathy surrounding acceptance of their sexuality
- a clash of opinions around lifestyle
- a need to be somewhere other than 'here'
- a shift in family dynamics through loss, divorce, separation or the beginning of a new relationship
- emerging mental health concerns.

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Irrespective of the reasons why a young person is not at home, there is the need for that child's safety to be assured as they navigate the crisis period.

So what do you do if you are concerned about your teen's friends?

- Embrace the idea that your home might be seen as a place of safety.
- Use that concept of a safe space to springboard conversations about what might be happening for them.
- Listen openly and objectively.
- Don't focus on solving the issue alone. Be guided by the young person but be mindful that the issue might be bigger than you can help with.
- Use your resources. Speak to the young person's school and the school counsellor. Counsellors will use strategies like family conferences to facilitate discussions, as well as making practical referrals to ensure safe housing is available if the situation worsens.
- If the young person is not attending school, contact your local youth health service and ask for help.
- Keep it simple. A warm cup of tea and a calm environment can drastically reduce the stress a young person is experiencing.

Kylie Ofu echoes those suggestions. She is a woman who experienced youth homelessness herself and is now an ambassador for communities@work in Canberra. She is philosophical about how others can help.

"Unfortunately, you can't change what is going on in the home but you can help the child. Be supportive, offer a safe place to hang out, be available to listen, help with schoolwork and so on," she suggests.

Reaching out to young people to help them through a momentary crisis or a life-altering experience can be a privilege. Helping to prevent another young person sleeping rough by linking them with the people and services that can help can transform lives.

For more information contact:

Kids Helpline – kidshelp.com.au

Headspace – headspace.org.au

sarah wayland



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