

Emerging Minds Response to the National Housing and Homelessness Plan

October 2023

'It is all confusing as a kid, nothing anyone says makes it really OK. Just being with my family was helpful, and Mum telling me it would not be forever, and that lots of other people are going through the same thing, was the only thing that was OK. And that I was loved.'

██████ 11 years old, reflecting on being homeless at age 9, ████████████████████

Emerging Minds.

About Emerging Minds

Emerging Minds is a non-profit organisation dedicated to advancing the mental health and social and emotional well-being of Australian infants, children, adolescents and their families for over 25 years. Emerging Minds develops mental health policy, services, interventions, training, programs, and resources in response to the needs of professionals, children, and their families. We partner with family members, and national and international organisations to improve support for infant, child, adolescent, parent, and family mental health in Australia.

Emerging Minds is currently responsible for leading the National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health, a national workforce support strategy funded by the Department of Health Aged Care.

Relevance of this inquiry to Emerging Minds:

Emerging Minds supports a national strategy to improve housing as an important determinant of health and mental health in infants, children, parents, caregivers, and families. We have worked with families who have experienced homelessness to develop this submission

Responses

We have responded to selected guided questions. Our responses are framed with a focus on child and family mental health and include:

- Key themes
- Implications for child mental health and wellbeing
- Recommendations

Our submission includes a summary of themes and perspectives shared by families who have experienced homelessness.

Emerging Minds.

How can governments and community service providers reduce homelessness and/or support people who may be at risk of becoming homeless in Australia?

Key themes

Bidirectional nature of distress and inequality in families

Distress or mental illness in families can lead to inequality by impacting employment, education, housing and homelessness, social relationships and substance misuse. There can be a feedback loop between these social determinants and mental health. For example, a parent experiencing mental illness may struggle to maintain stable employment, which can exacerbate financial stress and housing instability, further impacting their mental health and children's social and emotional wellbeing.

Cascading impacts of inequality on child development

Differences in socioeconomic status and resultant housing insecurity and homelessness translate into inequalities in child development. These development discrepancies are evident across cognitive, social, behavioural and health outcomes. The cumulative effects of adverse experiences during childhood and the toxic stress they cause, influence all aspects of health and wellbeing in childhood and beyond. These effects cascade across all areas of developmental functioning, altering the course of development for children.

The impact of homelessness might be compounded for certain families who are facing other intersecting issues at same time, including:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
- Culturally and linguistically diverse and migrant families
- Single parent families
- Parents or carers who have a disability, are chronically ill or experience mental distress
- Families in rural and regional areas
- Families with young parents

Implications for child mental health and wellbeing:

Children under the age of 12 were the fastest growing homeless cohort in 2021. Homelessness has a profound impact on children's mental health.

It can impact children in lots of ways. There is often:

- loss of control
- loss of routines
- disruption to relationships, including less friends visiting and loss of support systems
- loss of private access to kitchen and bathroom facilities
- more sickness
- sleep routines disturbed
- disruption to learning and education.

Emerging Minds.

Children might feel confused, shame, embarrassed, guilty, worried, grief and loss. These impacts may vary across developmental groups as well. Impacts on infants, children and young people might include:

- Infants: barriers to health, social and medical care due to costs and access, medical issues less likely to be monitored by consistent providers, reduced access to play and social opportunities, and high stress can impact caregiver interactions and attachment with their infants.
- Children: disconnected or inconsistent education or community connection, guilt and shame, recognition that they are different from their peers; social exclusion. Flow-on consequences may be on engagement, concentration, learning and behaviour – and educational/developmental outcomes.
- Young people: May find it harder to perceive risk and navigate decisions. Access to health, social and medical support. Development of values systems and goals during transitional life stages. More anxiety, stress, depression. Reduction in privacy making it harder to develop safe intimate relationships. May feel alienated and self-conscious due to their presentation. Chronic tiredness, and difficulties keeping up with study. Feelings of displacement.

When families are experiencing the complex stressors of homelessness, it can be challenging for parents to support their children to cope with these impacts. Homelessness also negatively impacts parent's mental health, which can disrupt the quality of their interactions and further impact children's mental health. The resulting emotions and behaviours in children can then further disrupt parent's well-being, creating a pattern of disrupted and potentially harmful interactions. This pattern can continue well after the period of homelessness ends and contribute to child, parent/caregiver mental health and development challenges.

Family violence is a common cause of family homelessness and requires funding and attention; however many other family situations lead to homelessness including mortgage stress, the rental crisis, and young people exiting out-of-home care who become young parents. In addition, single parents in homeless accommodation have had their children removed and cannot have them returned until they are in appropriate accommodation.

There is a reality that homeless children may be in unsafe situations and rely on a parent to provide their care and protection. Parents may be in trauma and need support to be more vigilant of what these potential risks can be and implement strategies where they can to keep children safe. There are other risks associated with parents with complex needs and some parent's capacity to understand the experience of children (because of their trauma, ongoing crisis, childhood experiences, and so on). These children and families require comprehensive support that incorporates housing system responses that help them retain housing, and improve access to secure housing, including more stable emergency accommodation options, and responses to improve child, parent and family mental health outcomes.

Emerging Minds.

Recommendations

Actions to improve service system responses to improve the mental health of children who are homeless, at risk of becoming homeless, or recently housed but experiencing ongoing impacts of homelessness:

- Provide comprehensive preventive support, including debt management support (with a family violence lens if applicable), and nuanced financial counselling that appreciates the limitations that long-term poverty can have on families (such as a lack of knowledge and skills around finances), to families at tenancy risk to try and keep them in their communities with access to the children's networks of support.
- Provide high quality, trauma-informed, family-focused support to parents and their children when impacted by adversities that can lead to homelessness (such as mental illness, drug and alcohol challenges, family violence, and disasters). Work to identify how to offer this support to parents without instilling a fear of child removal. Emerging Minds has several [e-learning packages](#), [toolkits](#), and an [implementation team](#) available to support systems change across Australia in these ways.
- Children who are homeless will often be disconnected from their communities and support networks. Support services need to consider and work to support the child's unique experience of homelessness, including the impacts of being disconnected from routines, pets, community, extended family, friends, school, sporting clubs, and so on.
- Support services can help parents and children make sense of their experiences. Talking to children about homelessness can help them:
 - make sense of what they are experiencing
 - strengthen trust and relationships
 - understand that it is okay to talk about it
 - acknowledge feelings and reduce worries and concerns.
 - give them hope by explaining the actions you are taking,
 - allow them to ask questions and get the correct information, and
 - keep them safe.
- As well as the points above, homeless support services can better meet family's needs by being:
 - informed by a bio-psycho-socio-cultural framework
 - flexible in terms of their accessibility and criteria
 - reduce the need for families to retell traumatic stories (this may include improved cross-service collaboration and communication)
 - offer child-friendly spaces.
 - staffed by people trained in trauma-informed responses, with knowledge of appropriate referrals for practical as well as social and emotional well-being services for parents and children.
 - trained to support families to keep their children safe, including drug and alcohol support, and support to develop structure/rituals amidst the chaos of homelessness, rather than just a focus on child protection reporting.
 - able to act as mailing addresses for families, especially as they are trying to enrol children in school or access family Centrelink payments.

Emerging Minds.

- Provide *easier*, more *affordable* and more *secure* access for families to emergency accommodation, including but not limited to, the continuation of the Safe Places Emergency Accommodation Program.
- Develop processes to enable families to be provided with more stable emergency accommodation, rather than frequent moves between shelters and motels which disrupt children's routines and wellbeing.
- Continue and expand the Reconnect Program, including supporting young people who are exiting out-of-home care.
- Develop incentives to prioritise families accessing social housing and private rental properties. Once families are housed, continues to provide support, including social, emotional and debt management support, to enable them to remain housed.
- Promote Centrelink's strategies for supporting people with no fixed address, and change how this is recorded, for example do not say 'no fixed address' on Health Care Cards as this creates shame, discrimination and barriers when accessing services and private rental applications.
- Consider establishing a national homelessness hotline that has connections and information sharing with state and territory-based services. Allow people to be able to call the hotline 24 hours per day from locations such as police stations or hospitals. It would need:
 - staff with trauma-informed counselling experience and appropriate qualifications, or lived experience, to enable them to engage safely with families
 - training in trans and non-binary experiences (people's birth certificates might not match their gender)
 - approaches to support families who do not have identification documents (for example due to fleeing family violence or disasters such as fire or flood quickly)
 - developing mechanisms for information sharing across states and territories to enable more efficient and appropriate support for families (for example not retelling traumatic stories).
 - collect comprehensive national data on housing insecure and homeless families and children
 - provide support for families and children to access free taxi or public transport with the purpose of accessing services or safe accommodation
- Consider homelessness training, with a child and family focus, for mandated reporters and services families may need to frequent such as:
 - Centrelink
 - Financial counsellors
 - Emergency assistance organisations
 - Food charities
 - Housing services
 - Banks
 - Superannuation companies
 - Trauma services
 - Domestic and family violence services
 - School welfare officers
 - Churches
 - Education settings

Emerging Minds.

- Consider the infrastructure around social housing with child and family needs in mind, including access to transport, safe green spaces, areas for play, activities for all ages, social support, medical facilities, and suitable employment and education options.
- Don't assume that all families have the same housing needs. Some families, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally diverse families, have intergenerational households, which contribute to whole of family social and emotional wellbeing.
- Develop flexible approaches to housing larger families. The experience of many families with 3+ children is that they are often told there is no accommodation available to cater for their needs. Avoid separating children to solve the problem of homelessness.
- Develop flexible and informed approaches to housing LGBTQIA+ families, considering the complexity of their experiences and family make up.
- Develop responses to wrap around support for homeless families with the goal of keeping children with their parents and not being separated by child protection, while taking actions to ensure safety. Not making homelessness a trigger for child removal. Providing training regarding homelessness to mandated reporters.
- Consider the impacts of the NGO sector providing both housing and support services. There will be a tension between being both a landlord and provider of support.
- Consider the expansion of subsidies and other mechanisms (such as shared equity or cooperatives) to support single parents to buy their own homes. Review criteria of these programs to allow single parents who are not first home buyers, or who have been bankrupt, to be eligible. These are issues particularly for parents who have lost homes or been forced into bankruptcy due to family violence. Consider also that some people may not have learned financial literacy skills and may need to support to understand and navigate these systems.
- Improve pathways for families to access social housing as a result of financial strain/cost of living. This requires increasing the social housing stock available, but with the current rental crisis, families are being subject to multiple moves, impacting consistent access to education and support networks, and often leading to forced homelessness due to being pushed out of the rental market.
- Consider establishing a homelessness Commissioner to monitor the appropriateness of homelessness services and provide an accountability and complaints process for homeless people, families and children.
- Families and children need support around education, including:
 - making school zone boundaries flexible for families and children experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness, enabling them to remain at school while living in another area.
 - provide social and emotional wellbeing support for homeless children.
 - training for education providers in homelessness issues
 - teaching support for impacted children to catch up on missed school work
 - expedited enrolment processes at schools for children who have to move multiple times.
 - easier and expedited access, and more support to the home-schooling program for homeless families who are unable to access school, and families who are now housed but experiencing ongoing traumatic impacts of homelessness.

Emerging Minds.

How can governments and the private and community sectors, help to improve sustainable housing and better prepare housing for the effects of climate change?

Key themes

Housing is a known challenge after disasters as is mental health and wellbeing – they can be connected

It is now well understood that infants and children are amongst the most vulnerable populations when disaster occurs. Disasters can lead to children experiencing disruption in housing, health, wellbeing, and education, leading to long-term developmental consequences, including the onset and exacerbation of mental health disorders.

After disasters, children and families living in disaster-affected communities are more likely to live in inappropriate housing. This includes informal lease agreements, acceptance of low-standard housing affected by the disaster, or in locations removed from their support networks, communities, schools, or employment. These housing-related issues can amplify the impacts of the disaster on the mental health, and wellbeing of children and families, and delay recovery processes.

Disasters often impact regional and rural communities.

The loss of housing following a disaster in a regional or rural area can have a significant impact on children and families due to the small size of the private rental market and changes in demand-supply resulting in a lack of affordable housing options for those who can be priced out of the private rental market.

Disasters also impact the housing and homelessness services as well as the other service providers who support infants, children, and families.

The employees of these services may also be impacted, including workers who are parents of infants and children themselves and may also face housing issues or homelessness because of the event. The impact on services and workers makes it challenging for housing services to provide business as usual support and requires time and resourcing for these services and workers to respond and recover from disasters as well as prepare and plan.

Disasters often further marginalise people who experience structural inequalities outside period of disruption.

This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, children and parents living with disabilities, children living in foster care arrangements or under the protection of child safety, families who live in rural and remote geographical locations, and new migrant and culturally and linguistically diverse children and families.

Emerging Minds.

Implications for child mental health:

Research demonstrates positive outcomes for children and families who receive the right support in the context of disasters. However, at present support that considers the unique needs of infants and children in the context of disasters remains scarce. Recent disasters have highlighted several gaps and challenges regarding implementing co-ordinated and effective support for infants, children, and families following disasters.

Planning for access to safe and affordable housing is one of many opportunities to assist communities in reducing their disaster risk by developing approaches and practical strategies that prioritise the unique developmental needs of infants, children, young people and their families for ongoing preparedness, readiness, response, and resilience.

Recommendations

- In preparing for and responding to disasters in the housing sector, ensure strategies specifically address the needs of infants, children, and young people. This needs to include a lens on the interconnectedness of their mental health and wellbeing, housing issues, and disasters.
- Use targeted approaches to specifically seek the input of children, young people and families when developing plans, policies, services, and initiatives to respond prepare for or respond to housing and homelessness due to disasters and climate change.
- Provide access to workforce capacity building initiatives for housing and homelessness services and professionals that includes a focus on supporting infants, children, and families in disasters. Consider accessing [Emerging Minds resources for professionals focused on supporting children in the context of disasters](#), [resources for families on supporting children in natural disasters](#), and [organisational support for quality improvement](#).
- Provide education on how to take protective actions in preparation for disasters for children, parents, and families who are facing housing or homelessness which specifically includes the developmental needs of children and parenting.
- Plan for and provide stable emergency short term accommodation suitable for families with infants and children, which is ideally located in the affected community where possible. This includes larger families and families with more than two generations living together.
- Develop more detailed planning for any 'pod home' villages that integrates the perspectives of children, young people, and parents to ensure their needs are accommodated for in emergency planning and preparedness initiatives within the housing sector.
- Ensure the emergency short-term accommodation has child and family-friendly spaces and equipment for play appropriate for all ages, informal social support and connection to nature.
- Avoid situations where emergency accommodation becomes inadvertently permanent. Identify clear pathways for people to move from emergency accommodation into semi-permanent medium-term housing suitable for children and families. Ensure there are options for larger families.
- Provide subsidised, social housing options in regions affected by disasters, particularly in regional and rural areas. These options need to be available in locations close to or within locations close to their support networks, communities, schooling, and employment.
- Provide rental incentives for landlords with holiday lets to offer leases to families with infants and children in their care.
- Provide trauma-informed rebuilding support for all people, particularly parents living with children, who are building new homes.

Emerging Minds.

- Ensure mental health support for infants, children, parents and caregivers who are facing housing issues and homelessness in the context of disasters
 - providing grief and loss support for children and families who have lost their homes and/or belongings after the event.
 - Provide social support for children and families who are displaced due to the disaster and living away from their community connections.
- Ensure practical and mental health support is available to employees of housing and homelessness services and programs which considers the parenting role for employees who are parents and considers the needs of their infants and children.
- Housing support services can be subsumed into the emergency response to address the acute challenges of housing disaster-affected communities. This can leave few resources to respond to the needs of children and families who were homeless or facing housing issues before the event. Housing support services in local communities affected by disasters need additional resourcing to be able to respond to the acute challenges following a disaster yet also continue to provide support that accommodates the specific circumstances and needs of people already experiencing homelessness before the disaster. Resource housing and homelessness services to: undertake disaster preparedness and planning and support the disaster response and recovery process, including specific actions to address the needs of infants, children, and families.
- In planning and responding to housing issues in communities affected by disasters, avoid homogenising the housing needs of affected communities. Ensure the approach considers the diverse and specific needs of various community members, rather than the universal needs of the whole community. Children and families are diverse and face varied challenges in disaster recovery which specifically relates to housing and homelessness. This approach includes considering and consulting on the needs of children and families who are at risk. For instance, children and families experiencing health issues, disability, low incomes, lack support networks, are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or come from new migrant and/or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This targeted approach will help to ensure that unique and diverse needs are less likely to be missed.
- Ensure the processes and forms housing and homelessness services use in the context of disasters are easy for people experiencing distress to engage with and consider the needs of infants, children, and parents.
- Ensure funding and support programs/services available to disaster-affected communities is at least 3-5 years, rather than 1-2 years. Research suggests the impacts and needs of people affected by disasters are long-lasting and sometimes issues only begin to emerge after 1-2 years. For instance, people need emergency accommodations long-after the event. Children and families can be relying on informal housing arrangements with friends, families, and other community members which are unsustainable in the medium to long term.
- Invest in addressing homelessness and housing issues in areas vulnerable to disasters. Target housing initiatives in areas where children and families live in less resilient accommodation e.g., lower lying areas prone to flooding, high bushfire risk, exposure to extreme temperatures, etc
- With disasters becoming more frequent and more intense, there will be an increase in need for accommodation options that are sustainable and affordable with climate-appropriate features. Develop suitable options for sustainable building that account for housing supply-chain issues to grow the stock of social and affordable housing that can accommodate children and families e.g. modular housing.
- Preparedness needs to include an all-hazard approach to disasters. Yet consider the nuances of experiencing different types of hazards and the impact on housing and homelessness issues – and how this affects particular at-risk groups of the population such as infants and children. For

Emerging Minds.

instance, heatwaves result in more deaths than any other hazards in Australia. Strategies to mitigate heat waves and maintain safety within the housing and homelessness plan need to include targeted, considered approaches for those who are vulnerable to adverse effects of heat waves. Infants, young children, and pregnant women who are facing housing issues and homelessness or families who are living in accommodation that is less resilient in heatwaves are vulnerable.

- Consider housing impacts and support options for children and families with accommodation in the disaster-affected area that is not directly impacted by the disaster yet are impacted by cascading effects of the disaster e.g. low income families who can no longer afford private rental accommodation due to rent hikes and limited supply in their local area.
- Children and young people who become homeless or live in inadequate accommodation after a disaster can face difficulties attending and participating in school. Consider school-based support which targets students and families who are experiencing medium or long-term housing issues or homelessness after a disaster.
- Children and families who are displaced after a disaster can face challenges in transitioning to new schools located in areas not affected by disasters. Targeted support should be made available for children, young people and their families.

Emerging Minds.

Further reading and references

- Brookfield, S., & Fitzgerald, L. (2018). Homelessness and natural disasters: The role of community service organisations. *Australian Journal of Emergency Management, The*, 33(4), 62-68.
- Centre for Social Innovation 2010, READY: A multi-media disaster preparedness toolkit for homeless services. Centre for Social Services: Needham, MA.
- Chamberlain C & MacKenzie D 1992, Understanding contemporary homelessness: issues of definition and meaning. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 27(4), pp. 274-97.
- Cusack L, van Loon A, Kralik D, Arbon P & Gilbert S 2013, Extreme weather-related health needs of people who are homeless. *Australian Journal of Primary Health*, vol. 19, pp.250–255. <https://doi.org/10.1071/PY12048>
- Emerging Minds. (2023). Community Trauma Toolkit. Emerging Minds <https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/toolkits/community-trauma-toolkit/>
- Every, D., McLennan, J., Osborn, E., & Cook, C. (2021). Experiences of heat stress while homeless on hot summer days in Adelaide. *The Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 36(4), 55-61.
- Every D & Richardson J 2018, A framework for disaster resilience education with homeless communities. *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal*, vol. 127, pp.146–158. <https://doi.org/10.1108/DPM-08-2017-0196>
- Every D, Richardson J & Osborn E 2019, There's nowhere to go: counting the costs of extreme weather to the homeless community. *Disasters*, vol. 43, pp.799–817. <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12400>
- Every D & Thompson K 2014, Disaster resilience: Can the homeless afford it? *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, vol 29, no.3, pp.52–56.
- Edgington S 2009, Disaster planning for people experiencing homelessness. Nashville, USA: National Health Care for the Homeless Council, Inc.
- Fothergill, A., & Peek, L. (2015). *Children of Katrina*. University of Texas Press.
- Gibson C & Johnstone T 2010, Investing in our future: children's journeys through homelessness and child protection. A scan of the literature, policy and practice. Adelaide: Australian Centre for Child Protection: University of South Australia.
- Hansen A, Bi P, Nitschke M, Ryan P, Pisaniello D & Tucker G 2008, The effect of heat waves on mental health in a temperate Australian city. *Environmental Health Perspectives* vol. 116, pp.1369–75. <https://doi.org/10.1289/ehp.11339>
- Jacobs K & Williams S 2009, Natural disaster preparation and response: issues for state housing authorities. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute: Melbourne, Victoria.
- Van den Nouwelant, R. & Cibirin, A. (2022) "The impact of housing vulnerability on climate disaster recovery: The 2022 Northern Rivers Floods" (Sydney: City Futures Research Centre)

Emerging Minds.

Additional Material

Lived experiences of family homelessness

We have worked with families who have experienced homelessness to learn about:

- [Myths and misunderstandings about family homelessness](#)
- [Impacts of family homelessness on children](#)
- [Impacts of accessing services when living with housing insecurity, homelessness, or other structural barriers](#)
- [Feedback loops of stress](#)
- [Skills families use when navigating homelessness](#)
- [Talking to kids about family homelessness](#)

Myths and misunderstandings about family homelessness

“Homelessness means sleeping on the street”

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, only 6% of people experiencing homelessness sleep rough on the street.

‘Homelessness can include couch surfing or staying with friends, staying in shelters, escaping domestic violence, sleeping rough (perhaps with a tent or some kind of shelter or without any shelter), squatting, and staying in motels or emergency accommodation. Parents experiencing homelessness may be employed or unemployed. It’s often not a one off experience. If you’ve been homeless once, it’s actually easier to experience it again.’

‘People would think that you’re poor, your kids needed clothes or you needed food. It’s like, we just need shelter, we just need a home. And I don’t wanna live in a shed with my four children when they’ve had a lovely home before. People really have a misunderstanding about how many people it’s affecting these days.’

‘It was helpful to have a stable place to stay instead of moving around every night or week. The motel was ok it was like a mini house and it was the most stable place we got to stay and it was ok because it was just our own family we didn’t have to deal with other people or move every day mostly.’ ■■■ 16 years old, reflecting on being homeless at 13, ■■■■

“Why don’t you reach out to services that can help?”

For homeless families, lots of things make accessing services really hard. These things include long waiting times, inflexible scheduling, inadequate service options and complicated admission criteria.

Emerging Minds.

'When you don't have stable access to housing, it's very hard to connect in with the services that want to help you because you don't know where you're gonna be from one moment to the next. We actually crisscrossed NSW and SA in the process of finding somewhere to live. And even... where do you get your mail sent? Stuff like that.'

'I started to have my mail forwarded and I started to just tell people my old address because it was easier at appointments to do that than have all the questions and misunderstandings. It's harder to claim Centrelink payments if you don't have a fixed address, you can't enrol your children in high school if you don't have a fixed address...'

'Any mum or family that engages with the homelessness service can get mandatory reported. And knowing that you're doing everything you can under the circumstances that you have no control over, is just devastating to think that you are being reported as a bad parent. It's like, I'm feeding, clothing them, trying to keep my kids safe, but there's nothing in this world right now to support me in doing so. It stops a lot of families seeking that support because they're worried they're gonna lose their children. I'd be very careful about who I told. A lot of times when we were camping we would just camp in free places. But if we could manage it, we'd go to an actual caravan park and put the tent up there. And I'd be really careful about not letting people around us know that we're homeless. I would only tell people if I really needed to access the service.'

"You just need to try harder to find a rental property"

We are experiencing a housing crisis. This means there are fewer houses available for rent, competition is tough and most of the available housing is unaffordable to low income and even middle income families. We also have inadequate legal protections to prevent landlords from increasing rents or discriminating against those applying for rentals.

'The second time we experienced homelessness, it happened really rapidly. We had secure private rental for a number of years, like 11 years, and then all of a sudden we had to vacate a property in the middle of a rental crisis. I quickly discovered that something was wrong when I started looking and I wasn't getting to view properties, and then when I was rocking up, there were 200 other people there and it just went on and on and I wasn't securing a home. I never took my kids to opens because I was advised not to. Being a single parent is one of the biggest [discriminations in the rental market]. I even got told by one organisation to take my children off of the rental application. If only landlords knew that single mums with kids are probably one of the best tenants they'll ever have. Cause they're stable. We look after stuff.'

'I dressed like a professional. I went with my rental application. I was always on the ball, always in first and nothing was changing. I just was like a machine I was at opens and opens and opens and opens and on the phone to real estate agents and checking every day. Um, to the point that it was almost sending me mad like, why are we not getting one?'

'When we became homeless, it was couch surfing, squatting in a vacant home which didn't have electricity... People helped where they could, but people didn't understand why I couldn't secure a rental. They weren't in those queues experiencing what I was experiencing with hundreds of other people going through the same thing.'

Emerging Minds.

'We are getting kicked out of our house so the owner can bring her family from [REDACTED] to live in the house, it's not fair we will be homeless as auntie can't find a house for us.' Child, 10 years old, Victoria

"If you're a single mum, the government's gonna hand you a house"

In Australia, around 175,000 people are on waiting lists for public housing. This number doesn't include those on wait lists for community housing options. Even people on priority waiting lists, such as single parents, can wait a very long time. There is no housing stock specifically for single mums.

'A lot of people have this misconception that if you're a single parent on a single income with children, that someone's gonna hand you a house. There's no way you'll be homeless.'

'There was a calculation the [homelessness] gateway gave us... We'd have to sleep rough for about three or four days until essentially that money had gone. Then maybe one or two days out of a fortnight, they put us in a cabin in the caravan park so we could say goodbye to the tent. And those days were genuinely fantastic. We walked in there like it was the Hilton. We'd say, oh look, there's a table! Look at this microwave. I mean, we literally get so excited to be sleeping in a cabin. But the rest of the time we'd be back in the tent.'

'I went to the housing authority, I had advocacy letters from specialists that deal with my children to try and get us up the list. And I got refused any help because I had been a private renter for so long and I didn't have complex needs, so I didn't fit into the category of people that they help. I pretty much got told that there is no way in my lifetime that I would ever be housed by them. We got refused emergency accommodation unless I paid upfront for it, which was \$1,200 a week. And I don't earn that, which led me to doing the couch surfing and staying with friends for a period of time. It made us move around a lot more. Eventually we got funding for part of our emergency accommodation, but we would get kicked out most weekends so people could have their holidays. So we would have to find our own accommodation on top of paying 500 a week for five days. Sometimes we would sleep in the car or sometimes I would find a friend that was going away for the weekend and we would house sit and pet sit for them so that we would have somewhere comfortable to stay. It was a constant worry every single week wondering where do we go on the weekend?'

"You should be able to keep your kids in school"

Attending school is difficult for children who are homeless for many reasons, including difficulties enrolling, attending regularly, and feeling supported by teachers and accepted peers.

'There's this idea that when you've got children and you're homeless, that you'll be able to, no matter where you are, get your kids into school and that's not the case at all. When we were in the refuges, we were shuttled through a few different refuges, we'd go to a new area and I'd wanna put the kids into school, but then there'd be this big wait. You'd have to have an interview, so you'd wait for the interview time and then you'd do the paperwork and you'd wait for that to be processed. And then you'd have to wait for the new school term to start. One time we'd done all that and we were gone two days before the first day of school was meant to start. You couldn't just go to an area and walk up to the school and say, 'Here's my kid. I want them to learn

Emerging Minds.

something.' When we were homeless in South Australia and sleeping rough, they didn't go to school at all. They would've missed at least half a year of their schooling, maybe more.

But the thing is I now know that that's okay. It sounds a cliché, but they are very life schooled. They're very wise and compassionate, they're good human beings and they've got options and ideas open to them that they wouldn't have done. At the end of the day, the fact that they missed all this school isn't terrible. - [REDACTED]

'My daughter was actually starting high school at the time [we became homeless] and we couldn't get her into a high school. We had to lie about where we lived. I had to provide a bill from a friend's address so that we could get her into the high school that she needed. She missed 12 months, the whole of year eight because when we finally got her into school, her anxiety was so bad she couldn't go to school. And then we moved like a month or two into that first year and I couldn't get her into a school for a really long time. And she couldn't get on a bus [to travel to the old school] it was too hard for her. There's a lot of school refusal that comes because they don't wanna be there without their friends. There's new teachers, new rules, new environments, and they've been unsettled, so it's really impactful. And schools have no understanding or supports put in place for kids that are experiencing this.' –

Impacts of family homelessness on children

Emotional impacts

'Trying to get services to understand the impact [of homelessness] on two autistic children, one with a mild intellectual disability, the impacts that was having on them ... Like they're waking at night with panic attacks and I'm not sleeping because I'm having to support them through breathing exercises all night long.

Disconnection

'When you've had a stable place to live and you've got connections within the community, and you have to move away from that, it's almost another traumatic layer. I found that still impacts my family today, even 18 months later, settling into new schools: they miss their old friends. They miss all the things that we used to do with our community. They didn't wanna leave where we lived. They had come from a domestic violence situation where we had had to move a number of times before that, and this was the place that they felt was home. This was the first place in their lives for six years where they felt safe and could sleep at night.

'It was unhelpful to have to move around all the time. People not understanding what we were going through, and people asking lots of questions, was also unhelpful.' [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] sisters, 13 and 14 years old, [REDACTED], reflecting on being homeless at ages 10 and 11

'The other thing they missed was our dog, who's a big part of the family. She had to stay with my brother for six months and that was one of the hardest things for the kids. And we didn't visit the dog much; we did a couple of times, but then that became traumatic having to leave her behind again. So I kind of had to keep a routine and adapt to the daily things that we were dealing with and monitor each and every step along the way of what they were feeling, and how to shield them a little bit from what was happening.

Emerging Minds.

'The most helpful thing for homeless kids would be if they could keep their pets with them, because they help keep you happy and calm.' ██████ 11 years old, ██████
██████, reflecting on being homeless at age 9

Feeling like no one cares

'We drove around a lot of days wondering where we were gonna sleep at night. And it's just an awful feeling to think, you know, nobody actually cares. My kids would say, "Does anybody care about what's happening to us?" And I would just be like, "I care." There was lots of times I would cry myself to sleep and my kids would cry themselves to sleep – they wanted it to end. I had no answers. I felt very lost and alone often throughout the experience.'

Negotiating living and sleeping

'You are trying to manage cooking, washing your kids' clothes, trying to keep a budget, because you don't have a lot. There was no way to cook. The four of us were in a one-bedroom motel room. We had problems when we moved into a house where everybody wanted to sleep in the same room because it'd been so long that we'd been doing that. It was the only way that everybody felt safe.'

'There's no emergency accommodation for families of more than two children and a mum or a dad. They said they wouldn't be able to house us because I had a larger family. And I was like willing to take anything. But there's rules around that, you know: families that have four children need four bedrooms. Who made up these silly rules to keep us out of houses that there are available, like a two-bedroom or a three-bedroom home?'

*'I have nothing good to say about it. It was absolutely s***. And even though I'm past it, it's actually better now, and I understand that it's better, but it's changed my life forever.'*
██████ 16 years old, ██████ reflecting on being homeless at age 13

Worrying about long-term impacts

'The first time we were homeless as a family, the kids were young enough – I was able to present it as a big camping trip. And that worked. They didn't really realise until later they were actually homeless ... The second time, they were older and we'd already been through a lot of really traumatic stuff. We were really in the process of a lot of healing, and we needed a lot of help and we weren't getting it cause we were homeless. I remember we were setting up the tent and the kids were throwing things at each other, like throwing sticks and rocks at each other. And I just realised that this experience was damaging them. You know, I could see that it was damaging them badly and there was nothing I could do about it. That was devastating. I thought, "This suffering is impacting them, it's creating marks in their psyche. And I can't do anything." That was really hard.'

'One time we were homeless for like two months, but it was disguised as a camping trip. In reality it was 'cause we had no house and we had to live outta tents and a car. But even though for ██████ it must have been stressful as heck – it would've been a horrible

Emerging Minds.

experience – as a child it is like a really, really core childhood memory, that I only realised as an adult was actually a really stressful time.’ [REDACTED] young person, [REDACTED], reflecting on being homeless as a child

‘I [had to have] confidence that we would eventually get through this. I thought it was more important for me to be there as their parent than the alternative; for me to just disappear from the picture. I had to accept that yes, you know, potentially the kids were being impacted long-term by this in a bad way. But I also had to then accept that even if that is the case, they can work through that too. I had a damaging childhood and I’m still here.’

‘I used to look forward to the places that had free meals. It was like a family event. Everyone would always be really nice and it was a regular outing. I have really good family memories from those places.’ [REDACTED] 25 years old, [REDACTED], reflecting back on childhood homelessness

‘The homelessness experience did push me to glimpse that moment of “Yes, I just want this to end. I can’t see a way out.” But the love for my kids was the absolute turning point of “That isn’t an option at all. I need to be there for them for as long as I can be.” [REDACTED]

Impacts of accessing services when living with housing insecurity, homelessness, or other structural barriers

When our families are facing difficulties outside our control, like money struggles, poverty, housing issues or homelessness, we often need to reach out to services. Some services and workers meet us with compassion, collaboration, understanding and provide life sustaining support. But sometimes the responses we get from the service system can be harmful and cause us and our families hurt, embarrassment and shame.

When we talk about experiences of accessing services and being let down, it can feel like it’s ‘us vs them’. But it can be helpful to remember the problem is usually bigger than individual services or workers. Unfortunately, how services are often funded and the broader culture in which they exist can make it hard for frontline workers to respond in ways that are flexible, collaborative and understanding. Workplaces can prioritise outcomes and efficiency over compassion and respect, which ends up being worse for everyone.

The stories here aren’t able to capture all the different experiences that families have. Some are more likely to experience difficulty or mistreatment when accessing services, especially culturally and linguistically diverse people (particularly if they are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander), or folks who are illiterate, have less English, aren’t Australian citizens, use drugs, have disabilities, are gender non-conforming or are higher weight. But we hope this resource helps you feel less alone and reminds you about some of the skills you have which you can call on to navigate services.

Assumptions about us and our families

Emerging Minds.

Sometimes services make assumptions about us and our families before they even talk to us. Or they assume we are bad parents, or that we are incapable or have no skills. Or that we are greedy and are trying to get more than we deserve. *Sometimes this can trick us into believing them and forget all the ways that we are skillfully supporting our families in spite of what we are up against.*

Assumptions turning into reality

For some of us, the assumptions from services can reinforce assumptions we already have about ourselves. We don't intend to pass these assumptions onto our children, but when we think them and live them, that can happen.

Shame

When accessing services, we have felt shame and embarrassment. Sometimes it feels like we don't belong. Or we feel guilty for accessing a service we might not feel we deserve. And these things can make us feel really anxious and worried about needing to access services again in the future.

Judgement

Judgement can be feeling blamed for things outside of our control. It can feel like the people in the service don't understand our experiences. Our children have felt this judgement too.

'Workers at Centrelink look down at you.' Young person living with disability in NSW

Incorrect or bad advice

For some of us, services have given incorrect or bad advice. It is hard to know when this is happening, especially if you are distressed or dealing with trauma at the same time.

Saying the story over and over and over again

Always having to retell our stories just to get some basic support is exhausting, and it can be retraumatising as well. This can take up so much energy that it can impact our ability to parent how we want to. *Especially when the only story we get to tell about our family is one of struggle and suffering.*

Feeling unsafe sharing our stories

We have all felt unsure if it was safe to tell our stories to services. We don't know what they will do with what we tell them.

Barriers to access

Many services we have tried to use for emergency relief are hard to access. Things like hardly any appointments, postcode requirements, restrictions on whether we can receive help in person or over the phone, all make it harder to figure out how to use the service and get what our families need. It's even harder to jump through these hoops while trying to care for children.

Power imbalances

We might not understand the service system or what our rights are, or how to advocate for our families. And so many of us have felt a power imbalance when accessing services.

Emerging Minds.

Challenges at food charities

For a lot of us, the food from food charities is really poor quality, sometimes inedible, which is hard when feeding a family. If you have to go there with kids, there are a lot of sweets on offer, which is hard when you want to keep them healthy. When we go to food charities without our kids, people often assume we are greedy and taking more than we need. Sometimes food charities can be set up in a way that means people have to rush for food and grab it quickly, forcing them to lose their dignity.

Having to take kids with us

We prefer not to have to take our kids with us when we access services. But if we don't have any support systems, are homeless, single parents, or dealing with domestic violence, we do have to take our kids with us. When waiting times are long, the spaces are not kid friendly, or there might be rude language being spoken by others, it is really hard on us parents and kids. Little kids especially can't wait for that long, they get bored. Then our kids get irritable, we get irritable and when we are finally seen, we are not in the frame of mind to navigate the service how we had planned.

Lifelong impacts on kids

Some of our kids have felt a lot of shame about accessing charities and now won't accept any second hand or cheap items, or food from a charity. Or our kids might be fearful about what their peers think of them, and isolate themselves as a result.

Feedback loops of stress

Homelessness can put a lot of pressure on family relationships and sometimes make it harder to be the parents we want to be. We can end up in feedback loops of stress. We feel stress, our kids notice and worry, and we feel worried about their stress, or sometimes we don't know how to respond to their stress. It can be hard to break out of. Responses from friends, family and strangers can easily contribute to feelings of shame, blame and isolation.

Skills families use when navigating homelessness

Building routines and rituals into homelessness

'We had a regular afternoon routine that was go for a walk in nature, then we would go to the supermarket to get something to make for dinner and things for school lunch the next day. Because we didn't have storage or anything bigger than an esky to keep things cold this became the normal each day to try and keep costs down. The kids enjoyed doing this too, as they got to pick things to pack for the next day and it was teaching them to keep within our budget as we would set this before heading into the store. We also had laundry days we would all head off to do our laundry. We would pick one close to facilities too, so we could go and borrow books from the library or take a walk while we waited. All of these things helped create a bit of normal. We also had a routine with friends before we had to move away from them all - that was Friday night we would get hot chips and head to a park after school and we managed to keep this up throughout, until we had to move out of the area.'

'Because we were in a tent a lot and moving lots, we couldn't stick to routines that well. Even things like not having a place to charge the phone to set an alarm. But it did help to keep our little

Emerging Minds.

spot tidy. Bring able to organise the little bit we had was good because it kept a bit of order in the chaos.'

Finding small moments of connection throughout the day

'For example, colouring in one small drawing, you don't need to play elaborately for hours. Also, pointing out small things to take pleasure in when we were out, like finding the wonder in nature - look at the clouds, aren't they beautiful today, or look at that little plant, isn't it unusual. That kind of thing of thing.'

'We did a lot of beach time and sometimes it would just be to collect sticks and make pebble pictures and draw in the sand. We would do some basic yoga breathing exercises together as there was a lot of anxiety for the kids.'

Take time to notice small strengths in yourself and your children

'One thing my kids did consistently and it seems simple, but it was big – is that they just walked *everywhere* with me. A lot of the times we didn't have a car or money for public transport or we didn't know how to use it because it might have been a new area. So we did a lot of walking. You would go to one service and they would say, "Well you have to put this form in there" and that might be on the other side of town. And you had to walk there, sometimes you had to walk there quickly, 'cause you had to get there before they closed.

'One time we were driving when we did have a car and the car broke down. So, then we had to walk to the nearest town. When we were first in the refuge we were able to go back to our house a couple of times and pick up some possessions. We couldn't go back many times because it was too traumatising. So we would get as much as we could in one go. We had these big stripy laundry bags and we'd come back loaded up and it was a walk from the train station to our refuge. And we would just do it, you know? They never said, "I can't do that. I'm not walking." It was just like, "Yeah, OK, let's go."

Give children choice when you can, small ways they can feel in control

'Letting them pick the lunch snacks for the next day was a consistent one. We also had a suit case each and they picked their colour. And they had their "home away from home" things, so one special toy to bring on our travels with us. One of my kids wanted to always wear their school uniform like every day, so I just let them.'

'Because we were in the car so much we played a lot of CDs. So the kids would take it in turns to pick one. We would have favourite songs and when one would come on I'd turn up the volume and we would all sing loudly and car dance (dance while you're sitting!). We would also make up silly rap songs. One of the kids would also always do a really silly voice which would crack us up every time.'

Try to take care of yourself as a parent

'You just have to take one day at a time and stay strong. And most of the time bad times don't last forever. And if they last a long time, we still do get through them. I just had to start to really focus on taking care of myself through it. So, making sure I got a walk in and the kids got exercise, being in nature and connecting in with some normality of our lives ... friends. We didn't

Emerging Minds.

have a house to go home to every night, but we did have our friends and we did have people that loved us around us.'

Try to stay sober

'If you are in recovery for AOD [alcohol and other drug use], despite the feelings of hopelessness the situation can bring, keep doing whatever it is you do in recovery to maintain sobriety – journaling, calling supports, going to meetings. Having experienced homelessness in active addiction and then in recovery, I can say that the difference is when in active addiction, it's very hard to keep your kids safe.'

Get creative about postal addresses

'I started to have my mail forwarded and I started to just tell people my old address because it was easier at appointments to do that than have all the questions. My daughter was actually enrolling in high school and we couldn't get her into a high school. We had to lie about where we lived, provide a bill from a friend's address so that we could get her into the high school that she needed.'

Sometimes people have alternative motives in supporting you

'I've learned a lot from ... from my experience ... that sometimes people have alternative motives in supporting you when it's actually them that maybe need the help. I stayed with one friend and I was cooking and cleaning and going above and beyond to try and make it easy for us living there. And she took advantage of that. She would leave her kids with me, go out for dinner. I was cooking for nine people every night and I was shopping. I was paying for all the food and there was all this extra pressure on me taking care of another family along with mine when I was the one that was dealing with all the stress of trying to find a home. I think understanding that, and instead finding people that support, listen, encourage and try and brainstorm with you.'

Connect with nature

'Aside from the day-to-day mechanics of surviving, we were lucky because we were always in rural spaces. So we had a lot of nature on our doorstep. Getting into wide open spaces is really important. If you've got kids ... it seems like it should be the opposite because you're homeless, but being able to have a place where they can just run around and just be in those wide open spaces, not playgrounds because they're too structured, but unstructured open space. It's really, really good.'

'I've spent a lot of time in nature. Playing with rocks and building things outta sticks and all of that stuff is so wonderful for kids and mums, whether you are watching it, participating in it, walking in it or just being in the present moment. Photography helped me focus in on the beauty in the world. I started taking a lot of photographs of nature and two of my kids have followed my footsteps and now they're doing photography at school and it's one of their passions. It actually just took everything else that was going on for us away. So, stay in touch with nature and connect with your hobbies or your loves or your interests, whatever that might be for your family.'

Emerging Minds.

Finding libraries and free activities and spaces

'Libraries are free, they have water, toilets, all the amenities usually, they're temperature controlled, and they've usually got play areas. So we used to do that every place we went to – we found the local library.'

'In cities, one good thing about them is there's lots of free activities. Most places you can go on public transport, especially in the centre of the city, for almost next to nothing, and that's where the bulk of the free activities are. We were able to find out kinds of activities that we wanted to do and then we'd go and join in.'

Sticking together

'Sticking together, and knowing that you've got your family there no matter what, got us through. You might feel scared, you might feel unsafe and you might feel uncared for, but we knew that our family cared and loved us. We all loved each other. And that's what got us through. Bad times don't last forever. Always remember there are better times to come.'

It's not you, it's the system

By 'the system', we mean the political and social services and institutions that are meant to prevent people from experiencing homelessness. Things that result from these systems being flawed, such as discrimination, a lack of social and affordable housing, increased costs of living without increases in wages or benefits, are just some of the reasons more people are finding themselves without a secure and stable place to live.

'The system's really f***ed. No matter your journey to homelessness, I can bet that you've arrived there because of at least one, or probably many, failures in the system. And continuing homelessness is not to do with you, it's to do with the failures of the system. You just gotta keep reminding yourself, and that's hard. And sometimes you can't, sometimes you're just gonna be sitting with that feeling of a complete failure. But it's not you and you've gotta remind yourself that. 'It can happen to anybody today in this country. It's your circumstance that leads to homelessness. It's not anything you did. Remember, it's your human right to have a home, a roof over your head and be able to feed your kids and clothe them in this country. It should not happen and it's not your fault.'

Don't feel you have to be grateful for people doing their job

'Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including ... housing.' – United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, 1947

'If you go into Centrelink and they do their job, don't be grateful. Don't say, "Thanks, I really appreciate it." I mean maybe you wanna say it 'cause you're polite, but don't walk out of there thinking, "Oh, I'm so grateful to them." Don't be grateful to housing services or a real estate agent for letting you have an inspection. Don't feel you have to give people your gratitude 'cause they're just doing a job. They're gonna go home and sleep in their houses and you are not, so cut yourself some slack.'

You can find a way out of even the deepest trauma

Emerging Minds.

'The conversation started when my kids started to see me stressed. They're pretty in tuned in when I'm stressed or worried about something. They started asking a lot of questions before we became homeless. And as the time drew closer [to losing our accommodation?], I talked them through, obviously I kept it quite positive with them: "We're just gonna stay with a friend for a couple of weeks and mum's gonna keep looking for a house."

'Parents should be honest and open about it, and answer any questions kids have; and stay calm and positive. Talk to them about the positives in their lives so they know it's not all bad. Let them talk about their feelings often, and offer helpful strategies.'

██████████, sisters, 13 and 14 years old, reflecting on being homeless at ages 10 and 11,
██████████

Team meetings

'[When we became homeless] I was very open with them. They're all quite inquisitive children, so there was a lot of questions that I had to answer and I found it quite exhausting. We'd have little team meetings so that I could talk to everybody and we wouldn't dwell so much on things. 'Like: "We're gonna talk about what's happening today and where things are at; and what mum's doing to try to get us a house; and different things that we might have to consider, like moving out of the area and starting new schools." We kind of made those decisions together. There was some tough decisions, like moving away, which wasn't really what the kids wanted, but it was something we had to do to be housed, so I had to make that really hard decision. But I think it was a journey together.'

Taking it day by day

'I always brought it back to we'd been through difficult things. I've always got through to the other side and there was always a positive outcome at the end of it all. And if I could do that again, then I just had to take it day by day. I started to really focus on taking care of myself through it; making sure I got a walk in and the kids got exercise, being in nature and connecting in with some normality of our lives. We didn't have a house to go home to every night, but we did have our friends and we did have people that loved us around us.'

Teaching children about the world they live in

'I started to teach the kids about recognising the world that they live in is not always an easy one. I started to teach them to be compassionate for others. I used it [homelessness] as a learning experience for them to lessen the blow on themselves: "We are not the only people that are doing this. There's other families.' My kids will reach out to anybody that is on the street now if they can see or recognise homelessness, which they do. They have a little radar, they'll say, "Mum, that person – it's raining and they're trying to get some sleep, and can we give them something to make sure that they're warm?" I've taught them that we are housed now – we're safe and secure – but there's still people out there that are dealing with this.'

Supporting one another with care and fun

'There'd be a lot of supporting one another. If somebody got upset and someone else was OK, they would comfort that person. We'd often all end up sleeping in the same bed. I don't know

Emerging Minds.

how, but they would all squish in there. We'd have movie nights in the motel. We did try to make fun out of the situation. They would tell ghost stories in the house that we squatted in – it had no electricity so I got fairy lights from Bunnings cause there was no lights at night and it was an old house, kind of cold and spooky.

'We would still have family meals together. There was a lot of togetherness that happened during that period of time. And I think we grew closer as a family because they started to say things like, "We're OK because we have each other and that's the most important thing." Now if we come across a little hurdle, everybody kind of rallies in and they're like, "You know, we got through that. We got through that together and we can do anything together.'"

'Make your kids aware that, yes they are experiencing homelessness, but don't focus just on being homeless – keep them living their lives doing fun things and focus on the good things around them, like the people you love and that are there for you; the things you love to do. Distract from what's happening so you're not consumed by it. The good things in life will get you through it. It happens to lots of other families, and it might be for a while, but it's usually not forever.' [REDACTED], sisters, 13 and 14 years old, reflecting on being homeless at ages 10 and 11, [REDACTED]

Having functional conversations

Sometimes conversations need to be practical and about routines and what to expect...

'At the start we didn't have any kind of reflection conversations at that time that we were experiencing it. This experience of homelessness came about from an incredibly, incredibly violent episode. I was really so deep in trauma that I was a hairs breath away from just falling apart in general. I wasn't able to really function and have a lot of capacity for that kind of more complex thinking. It was more, "this is happening today..." or "this is what we're doing", or "we're going here to do this..." or "next week we've got an appointment about this..." Functional conversations. School was just out of the picture and we never had any money. Our lives were structured around appointments with services, going to food places, etc. I wasn't in the state to be able to reflect and they wouldn't have been in the state to be able to reflect.'

Turning bad experiences into a family 'inside joke'

'I remember once, we were getting on a bus going from one refuge to the next – which was a 10-hour bus trip – and one of my kids at the time who was going through a lot of trauma responses wouldn't wear shoes. I believe that was the way that they grounded themselves. The bus driver wouldn't let them get on the bus without shoes. He started to talk to my child and say, "put your shoes on, blah, blah, blah." And they got really upset and angry about that.

'I got really angry at the bus driver. I'd lost so much, including myself, but I thought, "F***, I'm still a parent. How dare he tell me how to raise my child, and then tell my child to the things that he thinks that I should be saying that I'm not?!" Then I tried to have a conversation with the kids that it was unreasonable for the bus driver to say this. That was the one and only time I tried to frame things in a wider context with them 'cause they just weren't able to do it. So even though I was

Emerging Minds.

quite impaired, I was still able to pull things together and do meaning making of this really upsetting situation. We actually ended up making a whole joke about it later on, a whole story that turned into something funny for the family.'

'It is all confusing as a kid, nothing anyone says makes it really OK. Just being with my family was helpful, and Mum telling me it would not be forever, and that lots of other people are going through the same thing, was the only thing that was OK. And that I was loved.' [REDACTED] 11 years old, reflecting on being homeless at age 9, [REDACTED]