

How to Talk to Your Child About Homelessness

A family guide to honest conversations, dignity, and compassion.

Why children notice homelessness

Your child may notice someone resting outside, see a person holding a sign, or hear the word “homeless” at school. Their questions can catch you off guard, especially when you want to answer honestly without making them afraid.

You do not need a perfect explanation. A calm, simple conversation can help your child understand that every person deserves care, respect, and a safe place to live.

Start with what your child already understands

Before explaining, ask: “What did you notice?” or “What do you think that means?” Their answer can help you understand whether they are curious, confused, or worried.

Listen without correcting every word right away. Then respond to the question they actually asked. Younger children may need only a sentence or two. Older children may want to talk more about housing, work, and how communities help. Let their questions guide how much you share.

Explain homelessness in simple, factual language

You might say: “Homelessness means someone does not have a steady, safe place to live right now.”

If your child wants more detail, add: “Some people stay in shelters. Others stay temporarily with other people, in cars, or outside while they look for a place to live.”

Explain that homelessness can affect adults, children, and families. It does not always look like what your child sees on the street.

Focus on the person before the circumstance

Use language such as “a person experiencing homelessness” or “someone who does not have a home right now.” This keeps the person at the center of the conversation.

Try: “That person has a name, interests, and a story, just like we do. We do not know their story by looking at them.”

A person’s housing situation is one part of their life. It does not tell us their character, abilities, or what they hope for.

Homelessness rarely has one simple cause

For a younger child, keep it concrete: "Sometimes people lose their home when they do not have enough money to pay for it, and getting another home can be hard."

With older children, explain that housing costs, lost income, health challenges, or having to leave an unsafe home can overlap. Finding housing can be especially difficult when affordable options and support are limited.

Avoid turning one possible reason into an explanation for everyone. We usually cannot know why a particular person lost their housing.

Avoid stereotypes and assumptions

Avoid explanations such as "They do not want to work," "They made bad choices," or "People without homes are dangerous." Those statements assign a story we do not know.

If your child repeats something they have heard, respond calmly: "People experience homelessness for different reasons. We cannot tell whether someone works, what happened to them, or what help they need just by looking."

When a child says, "That poor person," you can gently shift toward respect: "It may be hard not to have a home. They deserve kindness and support, just as we do."

"Why doesn't that person have a home?"

You can answer: "I do not know what happened to that person. Sometimes people cannot afford a home or go through something difficult and need support. Everyone deserves a safe place to live."

If they ask why the person does not go to a shelter, try: "Shelters can help, but there may not be space or the right support for everyone. A shelter is a place to stay while someone works toward a more lasting home."

It is okay to say, "I do not know." You can be honest without guessing about someone's private life.

Talk about safety without creating fear

Use the same safety expectations you would in any public setting: stay with your trusted adult, ask before approaching someone, and let an adult decide how to respond.

You might say: "You can be kind and stay close to me. You do not need to approach anyone or handle a difficult situation by yourself."

If someone's behavior feels unsafe, explain the behavior: "We are going to give that person space and move somewhere else." Housing status alone does not tell us whether someone is safe.

If your child asks, "Could that happen to us?" respond honestly about your own circumstances: "You can always talk to me about that worry. Taking care of our family is an adult responsibility. If we need help, we can ask for it." Avoid promises you cannot make.

Introduce dignity, compassion, and being a good neighbor

Dignity means every person has worth. Compassion means noticing when someone is having a hard time and responding with care. Being a good neighbor means treating people respectfully and helping in thoughtful ways.

For families who want to connect the conversation to faith, you might say: "Jesus teaches us to love our neighbors. Every person is loved by God, and we can show that love through our words and actions."

Model a respectful tone. Avoid staring, taking photos, or asking someone to explain their circumstances. Children do not have to solve homelessness; they can learn to care without feeling responsible for fixing another person's life.

One simple next step for your family

Together, choose one item from City Union Mission's current Neighbor Care Kit list. Let your child help pick it out, and talk about how an everyday essential can support someone's comfort and well-being.

Before purchasing, check the current list for requested items, sizes, and delivery instructions. Keep the focus on being useful: "We are choosing something the Mission has requested for our neighbors."

Afterward, ask: "What did we learn about caring for our neighbors?" A small act of service can help a conversation become a habit of compassion.

Learn Together. Talk Together. Serve Together.

Background: United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, Homelessness Data & Trends.

7 Questions That Grow Compassion

Compassion grows through everyday conversations. Use these seven questions at the dinner table, in the car, or before bed to help your family notice others, listen with care, and find small ways to help.

Choose one question at a time. Give everyone room to answer, and share your own thoughts, too.

- 1 What does it mean to be a good neighbor?**

- 2 What do you think makes someone feel cared for?**

- 3 What is something you use every day that you rarely think about?**

- 4 How might it feel if you did not have easy access to that?**

- 5 What could we do when we notice someone having a hard time?**

- 6 How can we serve someone without making them feel embarrassed?**

- 7 What is one compassionate thing our family could practice this week?**

Parent note

There are no perfect answers. The goal is to notice, listen, and keep the conversation going.

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5 Ways to Practice Compassion as a Family

Compassion grows when we practice it. A service project is a meaningful place to start, but everyday moments matter, too. These five simple practices can help your family notice others, listen with care, and make kindness part of your week.

1. Check on a neighbor

A thoughtful check-in can begin with "How are you doing?" Together, reach out to a neighbor you know and give them room to share. Listen before offering help, and let their answer guide you. Children can join with a parent or trusted adult.

Talk About It: What could we ask to learn how our neighbor is doing?

2. Encourage someone

Write a note, make a card, or tell someone something specific you appreciate about them. You might thank a teacher for their patience or a friend for including others. Help your child notice the person and their effort, rather than only what that person does for your family.

Talk About It: Who could use a little encouragement from us?

3. Practice gratitude

Choose something you use every day, such as toothpaste, clean socks, or a warm blanket. Talk about how it supports your comfort and well-being. Gratitude can help us notice needs we might otherwise overlook, without comparing our lives to someone else's or assuming what they have.

Talk About It: What everyday item are we grateful for, and why?

4. Serve together

Choose a simple way to care for someone in your community. With their permission, help a neighbor with yardwork or bring a meal to someone you know. Ask what would be useful, choose something your family can manage, and respect the person's privacy.

Talk About It: How can we find out what help someone would welcome?

5. Build a Neighbor Care Kit

Use City Union Mission's current Neighbor Care Kit lists to choose requested essentials together. Check the needed items, sizes, and delivery instructions before shopping. Let children help within your family's budget, and explain how useful items can support a neighbor's everyday needs with care and dignity.

Talk About It: How can we make sure our kit is useful to the person receiving it?

Choose one practice to try this week. You do not have to do everything at once. Small, thoughtful acts repeated over time can help your family build a habit of compassion.

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Family Compassion Challenge

Seven days. Small acts. A growing habit of compassion.

Try one simple practice each day. Check the box after you try it, and talk about the experience together. Adapt each activity to your children's ages and your family's time and budget.

- ☐ **Day 1: Notice**
Look for someone who may need encouragement. Think of a kind word or gesture you could offer.

- ☐ **Day 2: Listen**
Ask someone how they are doing and really listen. Give them time to answer without rushing to offer advice.

- ☐ **Day 3: Appreciate**
Name three everyday things your family usually takes for granted. Talk about how each one helps you.

- ☐ **Day 4: Include**
Invite someone into a conversation, activity, or meal. Make room for them, and respect their choice to join or decline.

- ☐ **Day 5: Give**
Choose something your family can share, such as time, a useful item, or a meal. Ask what would be welcome.

- ☐ **Day 6: Serve**
Build or shop for a Neighbor Care Kit. Check City Union Mission's current lists for requested items, sizes, and delivery instructions.

- ☐ **Day 7: Reflect**
Talk about what your family learned. What did you notice about listening, caring, and helping others?

What is one thing our family wants to keep practicing?

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