



Press release – Friday 29 September 2023

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## **The Psychological Society of Ireland expresses concern over the increasing levels of homelessness and the potential impact on children and families**

The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) has raised concerns about the psychological impact of rising homelessness in Ireland. Although we were pleased to see a slight reduction in overall homelessness [this month](#) due to a correction made on a previous count, another record level of children in homelessness has been reached.

The potential impact on children requires special consideration. Childhood is a time of biological, cognitive, social, and emotional development and threats to well-being during this time are especially challenging. The consequence of stress for children has the potential to last for a long time and it is imperative that children are provided with safe and happy childhoods so that their development is not impacted. The research is clear; threats to well-being in childhood can lead to higher levels of educational disadvantage, and physical and psychological ill-health. There is a disproportionate number of children with disabilities who are experiencing homelessness, and a significant number of autistic children are unhoused. Homelessness can exacerbate already challenging issues for children and parents.

Statistics provided by [Focus Ireland](#) show that the number of people experiencing homelessness and relying on emergency homeless accommodation remains high. The true extent of the seriousness of this issue is further highlighted when factoring in that official figures only record those in state emergency homeless accommodation while excluding those that are in 'own-door' temporary accommodation, domestic violence refuges, asylum seekers, people who are rough sleeping, and other 'hidden homeless'.

The PSI has provided the following information in the hope of supporting those groups impacted by homelessness.

- **How and when to break the news to children**

It can be difficult to know how and when to tell children there is the potential for having to leave their home and numerous factors need to be taken into consideration. These considerations include: the child's age/developmental level; their understanding of the current situation; and possible previous experiences of homelessness. It is important to explain the situation honestly to children at a level they can understand, and to explain that homelessness is a situation that families can fall into, and it can happen for a variety of different reasons. It is also important to answer any questions a child might have as honestly as possible, without projecting any fears or judgments we, as adults, might have about the issue. Clear communication is likely to be helpful in terms of assisting a young person to understand why a homelessness situation has come about, how long it might be before it is resolved, and what plan is in place to seek assistance and/or a solution to the crisis. It is vital to acknowledge any difficulty a young person might be experiencing around this and to ensure that the appropriate levels of support are provided, in order to meet the psychological and emotional needs of the young person as they try to cope with the situation.

- **How to emotionally support children/adolescents when they have to leave their homes**

Every child is different and their approach to having to leave home may differ on an individual basis. Change is difficult to process, especially in times of significant stress. Asking children and adolescents what they think might help or what is important to them is a good place to start. Allowing as much space as possible for children to talk, consider, and tell the story of how they are feeling can help some process what is happening. This can be hard for parents, especially in times of stress, as hearing how their child is feeling can bring up many of the parents' own worries and concerns. Trying to make room to let children express these feelings where possible and however difficult allows a child space to be understood. When working with children experiencing homelessness, incorporating psychological approaches is essential to supporting mental well-being. Parents and teachers can utilise [five essential elements to intervene](#) in this situation to promote:

1. A sense of safety.
2. A sense of calm.
3. A sense of self and community efficacy.
4. A sense of connectedness.
5. A sense of hope.

- **Managing feelings as a parent experiencing homelessness**

Parents who experience homelessness regularly report feelings of loss, isolation, [shame and guilt](#). The most important thing to know is that this is not your fault. There is an unprecedented housing crisis in Ireland and many people are facing the prospect of eviction with huge uncertainty about where they will go. It is important that parents share their feelings with trusted friends or professionals. It can be difficult for some people to share their concerns as there may be worries about judgement. Services that support families at risk of homelessness, such as [Focus Ireland](#) and [Novas](#), provide non-judgemental support. It is likely that children's schools will need to be informed about the change in address so that correspondence can be received; however, it is the choice of parents about what they tell the school regarding the situation. It is useful for a teacher to know what a child is experiencing so that they can support the child during the day.

Services that provide support to those experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, homelessness are also being stretched as a result of unprecedented levels of homelessness, with potential consequences for the well-being of staff. There is great diversity amongst those experiencing homelessness and there is concern that people with additional challenges, such as mental health and addiction, are being pushed even further into the margins. Staff working in frontline services are reporting a 'firefighting scenario', where the demands on the services exceed the resources. For many, this is impacting their professional quality of life with higher reports of work-related stressors with some staff members nearing or experiencing burnout.

The homelessness figures have grown year on year and many people working in frontline services have watched the demands outweigh the resources. It is known that this has an impact on the well-being of many staff who care greatly for their clients. Caring professions can carry greater risks for mental health distress, burnout, work stress, and vicarious traumatisation due to the emotionally demanding nature of the work. Therefore, it is vital that staff have organisational structures that recognise and respond to this stress. Organisations can provide routine opportunities for debriefing, access to quality supervision and therapeutic support where needed.

PSI president Dr Anne Kehoe states: "The psychological trauma and impact of homelessness and housing insecurity cannot be underestimated. The voices of those who live every day facing these issues must be heard. Increased demand requires significant increases in service provision to support those in this position, everything possible must be done. A secure home is a fundamental need for the developing child and their family."

**ENDS.**

For further information, or to arrange an interview please contact:

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**Points to note:**

- Information on homelessness figures can be found on the [Focus Ireland webpage](#) and the [Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage](#).
- The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI), with over 4,300 members, is the learned and professional body for the profession in the Republic of Ireland, with the primary object of advancing psychology as an applied science in Ireland and elsewhere.
- Connect with the PSI through [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [YouTube](#), and [LinkedIn](#).