



HORIZONS FOR HOMELESS CHILDREN

Playspace Activity Leader Manual

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Part 1: Introduction and History of Horizons For Homeless Children

Close your eyes. Think of a homeless person. Maybe you are picturing a lone man lying on a park bench or huddled in a doorway beneath a tattered blanket. Perhaps an old woman pushing a shopping cart which contains all that she has in the world.

Try again. Only this time, picture a sick, frightened, hungry child with no place to call home. As we move into the 21st century, this cruel vision is the new face of homelessness.

- Dr. Alvin Poussaint, from the preface to Homeless Children: America's New Outcasts, a public policy report from The National Center on Family Homelessness

Welcome! By attending this training, you have taken an important first step towards enriching the lives of homeless children. As a Playspace Activity Leader, you will be an important part of helping to meet the needs of these homeless children living in shelters. Your positive presence in a shelter's Playspace can help alleviate some of the stress in the lives of these children and their parents. By bringing the gift of play and positive stimulation to these children, you are making an invaluable contribution to the quality of their lives, and to their healthy growth and development.

History of Horizons For Homeless Children

The mission of Horizons For Homeless Children is to improve the lives of homeless children and their families. Through the Playspace Programs and the Community Children's Centers, Horizons For Homeless Children provides homeless children in Massachusetts with the nurturing, stimulation, and opportunities for early education and play that all children need to learn and grow in healthy ways. To improve the lives of the children it serves over the long term, Horizons For Homeless Children connects their parents with the tools they need to achieve social and economic self-sufficiency. In addition, Horizons For Homeless Children also provides leadership in advocating for homeless children and their families through leveraging and sharing its expertise with others and advocating with policy makers and the public.

Horizons For Homeless Children was founded in 1988 as an independent non-profit organization by Roger Brown and Linda Mason, CEO and President of Bright Horizons Family Solutions, a Boston-based company which runs high quality, worksite-based childcare centers. A needs assessment was conducted by the newly formed THI, and it was found that the most consistently underserved preschoolers in Boston were children of families who were homeless. These children, the majority of whom were growing up with a single mother, spent most days accompanying their mothers to appointments at the Department of Transitional Assistance and searching for housing. A great deal of time was spent in waiting rooms and offices, obviously not environments designed with children in mind. Unfortunately, it was not much better back in the shelters, where children oftentimes ended up watching television or running around the hallways.

Horizons For Homeless Children's first program, the Playspaces Program, was started in 1990. Staff from Horizons For Homeless Children worked with shelter staff and residents to install child-friendly Playspaces in the shelters. Using spare or vacant rooms in the shelter, mini childcare centers were set up, with toys, books, games, climbing areas, dramatic play areas, and arts and crafts supplies. In 1991, Horizons For Homeless Children began

recruiting, training and placing Playspace Activity Leaders in shelters to staff the Playspaces, giving the children living in shelters more opportunities to grow and develop through play.

It soon became clear to residents of shelters, shelter staff and HHC staff that in order for homeless families to become economically self-sufficient, full time childcare was essential. In 1994 Horizons For Homeless Children opened the Community Children's Center in Dorchester, the first full time childcare center for homeless families in Boston. In 2000, the Putnam Investments Community Children's Center was opened in Jamaica Plain to meet the growing need.

To date, over 3000 individuals have been trained by Horizons For Homeless Children as Playspace Activity Leaders. Over 500 children each week are given a chance to play at more than 50 programs in 16 Greater Boston communities. The Community Children's Centers provide early education for over 120 homeless children, in addition to support services for their families.

Part 2. Family Homelessness and Its Effects on Children

Overview of Family Homelessness

Scope of the Problem

Nationally, nearly 40% of the homeless are members of family units. Families with young children represent the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. There are an estimated 1.5 million homeless children nationwide. In Massachusetts, 58%¹ of the homeless population are families, and the number of homeless families has more than doubled since 1990. Of the approximately 20,000 homeless children in Massachusetts, half are under school age.

The Average Homeless Family

Single mothers head the majority of homeless families in Massachusetts. The average homeless mother is 32 and has 2.3 young children.² Parents of color are disproportionately homeless in Massachusetts; ethnic minorities make up 73% of homeless families.

Becoming Homeless

The basic underlying cause of family homelessness is economic poverty. A 1998 study by UMASS Boston found that more than one third of all renters in Massachusetts were “shelter poor,” meaning that such a large portion of income is spent on rent that other needs cannot be met adequately.³

As rent increases outpace the earnings of families with low-paying jobs, finding and maintaining affordable market rate housing has become increasingly difficult. In addition, there have been significant cuts in subsidy programs that had been in place to help families maintain market rate housing, such as rent and utility assistance programs, and mortgage assistance programs. In Massachusetts, a family earning one minimum wage salary would need to work 119 hours per week to afford a basic two-bedroom apartment.⁴ The Massachusetts Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Project (MassFESS) estimates that a family of four in Boston needs a minimum annual income of \$42,564 to meet basic needs; the federal poverty guideline for the same family is just \$17,050.

Subsidized housing programs are also not meeting the needs of struggling families. In Greater Boston, public housing units have been lost to mixed income redevelopment, and some public housing has been closed due to disrepair. As a result, there are very long waitlists for access to public housing. Families also can apply for federally funded Section 8 housing vouchers, which allow the families to pay no more than 40% of their income toward rent. However, there is a cap on the amount of the subsidy and many landlords are now finding they can earn more renting at the market rate.

Welfare reform has also contributed to the rise in family homelessness. In accordance with legislation passed in early 1995, Massachusetts’ benefits for families with dependent children are now cut off after 24 months, regardless of other income sources. Many families are forced into minimum wage jobs, which cannot alone provide economic

¹ Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless publication, ‘Homelessness in Massachusetts,’ 2001.

² McCormack Institute of Public Affairs, Center for Social Policy, September 2000

³ Mishel, Bernstein and Schmitt 1999, as quoted in MCH’s ‘Factors Contributing to Homelessness’

⁴ This figure comes from the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless fact sheet ‘Factors Contributing to Homelessness.’

self-sufficiency. A 1999 study found that one year after losing welfare benefits, the median income of families was about \$300 per week.⁵

Since many families are living in such economically precarious situations, family crises such as domestic violence, health problems, fire, or sudden rent increase can easily result in homelessness.

Getting into Shelter

The vast majority of family shelter units in Massachusetts are publicly funded through the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA). To be eligible for DTA shelter, a family's gross income cannot exceed 130% of the federal poverty line (approximately \$22,000 a year for a family of four). Additionally, a family must prove that they have absolutely nowhere else to stay. DTA workers contact friends and relatives of families seeking shelter to see if they can temporarily house the homeless family.⁶ If found eligible, a family must accept the first shelter placement offered. There is no guarantee that DTA will be able to place the family near its schools, jobs, or support systems. Refusing a placement makes a family ineligible for future shelter placements.

A family facing the immediate threat of domestic violence can seek shelter at an Emergency Domestic Violence Shelter and does not need to meet eligibility requirements of DTA shelters. Emergency Domestic Violence shelters generally allow a maximum stay of three months, after which a family either needs to move to another Emergency shelter or seek shelter through the DTA system.

Living in Shelter

Congregate family shelters account for the majority of Massachusetts' family shelter units. In a congregate shelter, members of a family typically share a single private bedroom, with or without a bathroom. Other facilities (laundry, kitchen, common space, Playspace) are shared with the other families in the shelter. Resident families typically share housekeeping tasks. In some shelters, meals are eaten together, with families taking turns preparing the food; in others, families are responsible for their own meals; and in still others, meals are prepared for all residents by paid food service staff. A variety of rules and regulations govern the schedules and activities of families in congregate shelter, and shelters are staffed 24 hours per day. Some congregate family shelters serve clients with specific concerns, such as substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, or mental health issues.

Scattered-site shelter programs offer families individual apartment units that are not staffed but are governed by a shelter administration.

Emergency domestic violence shelters tend to be structured like congregate family shelters. The most important difference is that they are in confidential locations and stays are limited to three months.

Transitional housing programs provide longer-term stays for families who are homeless and may need additional support services before living independently. Some families move into transitional housing programs from shelters, while other homeless families may directly enter the programs.

Teen living programs provide housing for pregnant and parenting homeless adolescent mothers. These highly structured programs often allow for long-term stays for the moms and their children, and offer many services for their young clients.

⁵ Quoted in MCH, 'Factors Contributing to Homelessness'

⁶ MCH, 'What Families Need to do to Get DTA Funded Family Shelter,' 2001

Motels are often used by DTA due to overcrowding in the shelters. As of August 2001, nearly 230 Massachusetts families were placed in motels. Motels often do not have any kitchen or laundry facilities, and are generally not located near public transportation. According to DTA spokespeople, the DTA will continue to utilize motels as temporary shelter as long as the problem of family homelessness exists in Massachusetts.⁷

Moving from Shelter into Permanent Housing

Families in DTA family shelters are required to actively search for permanent housing while in shelter, and shelters may have Housing Search workers to help families find housing. Due to the major decrease in affordable housing in Massachusetts over the past decade, finding housing has become more difficult, and it is not uncommon for a family to be in shelter for a year or more. When families do find housing, many often find that they have to leave their communities and support systems to do so.

There are many advocacy groups and organizations working to address these issues in Massachusetts. Those interested in learning more about public policy and advocacy efforts should contact the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless (www.mahomeless.org) for more information.

Special Needs and Behaviors of Homeless Children

Being homeless is very disruptive and traumatic for families. Children in these families may not understand all that is happening, but are nonetheless affected by these changes. In most ways, the children in your Playspace will be like any other children you may know. They love to play and have fun, they will be energetic, and they will look forward to your visits. However, it is important to remember that these children may bring special needs and behaviors to the Playspace because of the trauma and loss they may have experienced. The following needs, common to all young children, are especially significant for children who are homeless.

Stability and Consistency:

Many homeless families have not moved into shelter immediately upon losing their permanent housing. 97% of homeless families will have moved during the previous year, many up to three times before entering shelter.⁸ Along with losing their housing, homeless children may have lost friends, possessions, a familiar school, and many other aspects of “home”. In situations of domestic violence, children may lose access to family members. Because these children have experienced so much loss and instability, it is extremely important that PALs keep their commitment and be consistent in coming to their scheduled shifts.

Individual Attention:

Children who are homeless may not always get the individual attention they need. Most homeless families are headed by single mothers, and have 2 or more children. The mothers are often consumed with trying to find housing for their family, and may not have the energy left at the end of the day to spend time playing with their children. The small-group attention PALs provide is a critical contribution to the children’s quality of life. Your supportive presence will communicate to these children that they do matter.

⁷ Boston Globe, August 27, 2001

⁸ The National Center on Family Homelessness, 1999

Appropriate and Positive Stimulation:

Although a family shelter environment is full of stimulation, with many adults and children sharing common space, kitchen space, bathrooms and laundry facilities, there may not be much in the shelter that is specifically child-friendly or child-centered. Spending time in the Playspace can give the children opportunities for appropriate and positive stimulation. Additionally, the calm and reliable presence of volunteers in the midst of the activity and stress of the shelter can have a very positive impact on the children.

Structure:

All children need structure to help them feel safe. For homeless children, this structure is especially important. Moving frequently, the children have found different rules and expectations in each new environment. This can be very confusing and stressful for the children. In a structured Playspace with routines and rules for behavior, children know what to expect and can experience a sense of safety.

In addition to the needs described above, there are behaviors common in children who have experienced trauma and loss. Being aware of these possibilities will help you be prepared for situations you may encounter in your Playspace.

Withdrawal/Lack of Appropriate Boundaries:

Some children may be withdrawn and slow to engage with other children or volunteers. These children should not be made to take part in group activities if they are uncomfortable with it, but should be given time to gain trust and engage when they choose. Other children may be hungry for attention and “clingy,” running up to strangers immediately upon meeting them. Volunteers should be aware that while it may feel great to have a child run into your arms, responding this way to a complete stranger is something that could be unsafe for a child. Responding in a positive but reserved way may model more appropriate and safer boundaries.

Hoarding/Not Sharing:

Children who have lost so much may be prone to hoarding toys in the Playspace. They may feel a need to hold on to what they have, because they may have experienced not knowing what tomorrow would bring. It may take children time to understand that the toys they are playing with will not disappear. As they gain trust, sharing may be easier for them.

Emotional Health Issues:

Because of the trauma in their lives, young children who are homeless can experience emotional health issues. Some children may struggle with depression or anxiety. The instability in their lives may also cause children who are homeless to suffer a great deal of worry and fear. Many homeless children worry that they will have no place to live, or will worry about their family members.⁹ If you are concerned about a child who may be depressed, overly anxious, or have other emotional health issues, make sure you tell your Shelter Liaison.

⁹ The National Center on Family Homelessness, 1999

Independent/Mature:

Some homeless children will appear to be very mature and may seem “parentified,” as though they have taken on the caretaker role in a family in crisis. A child may have to translate for his parents, or may act as a parent to younger siblings. Remember that these are children, and in the Playspace they should be given a chance to be kids.

Aggression:

Children may act out by being aggressive. 24% of homeless children have witnessed acts of violence within their family. 15% have seen their father hit their mother, and another 11% have seen their mother abused by a male partner.¹⁰ For boys especially, acts of aggression and violence may be the way they have learned to deal with conflict. Volunteers can model calm and peaceful ways of dealing with conflict, and provide a safe place where hitting and pushing are not allowed.

Developmental Delays:

The trauma and loss in their lives often leaves young homeless children lagging behind their peers developmentally. Studies show that homeless infants up to eighteen months generally meet standard developmental milestones. As they grow older, however, studies show that homeless toddlers show much slower development than other children.¹¹ A lack of appropriate stimulation and play is one factor contributing to these delays. Among school age homeless children, frequent changes in school often leaves them lagging behind their classmates.

Hyperactive Behaviors:

Some homeless children may appear to be hyperactive. These children may or may not have a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Whether or not they have the actual disorder, the frequent changes in their lives, as well as the emotional problems many homeless children experience, may make it hard for them to stay focused. Volunteers should be aware that some children might seem to be hyperactive and have short attention spans, and plan activities accordingly.

Remember, as a volunteer you do not have to fix everything! If you are consistent in your presence and in your behavior, if you are calm in your demeanor, and if you are caring in your interaction with the children, you will be making a very important contribution to the lives of the children in the shelter. Children are resilient, and your time in the Playspace is an enormous contribution to the well being of these children.

¹⁰ The National Center on Family Homelessness, 1999

¹¹ The National Center on Family Homelessness, 1999

Part 3. Working with the Children

Creative Play Activity and Early Childhood Development

Play is truly young children's work – it is through playing that young children grow and learn about themselves, others, and the world. When planning activities for the Playspace, PALs should keep in mind the importance of *process-oriented* (vs. *product-oriented*) play activities for the children. Open-ended, process-oriented activities allow room for children's creativity to be expressed and foster the growth of children's self-esteem and self-confidence. Children need to be given opportunities to explore and make choices.

When planning process-oriented play activities for preschool children, consider the four basic areas of early childhood development: motor, sensory, social/emotional, and language/cognitive development.

Motor Development

Motor development refers to a child's physical development, the development of a child's large (gross) and small (fine) muscles, and his or her ability to use these muscles to perform actions and activities. When creating activities to benefit a child's motor development, the key word is PRACTICE. Children at different stages of development need to practice different kinds of physical activity. By observing children's repetitive behavior in the Playspace, volunteers can discover the needs of the children, and design activities to correspond to these needs. Following is some basic information about children's stages of motor development.

Infants:

Infants up to the age of about 6 months may exhibit some of the following behaviors: rolling from stomach to back, sitting with support, kicking, grasping, mouthing objects, using hands to manipulate objects.

Between the ages of 7 – 12 months, infants may be capable of sitting alone, pulling themselves up to stand and showing other beginning signs of walking. They may explore their environments by crawling and walking with a helping hand or two. As their fine motor skills improve, they are able to pick up objects using their fingers and thumbs.

During the last stages of infancy, from 12-18 months, infants have begun to walk alone, up and down stairs, and perhaps start toddling. Fine motor skills have improved which allows children to stack objects, do simple puzzles, and scribble with a crayon.

Activities to Stimulate Infants' Motor Development:

Some developmentally appropriate activities for infants are: peek-a-boo and other hiding games; patty-cake; play with grasping toys and tactile materials. Infants need room to crawl and furniture to pull up on.

Toddlers:

When interacting with toddlers, one must not expect them to sit and be quiet for a long period of time because they are at an active, exploring stage of life. Toddlers use their developing gross motor skills to run, jump, climb, and walk on their tip-toes. They may be capable of lifting and carrying objects, pushing toys, throwing and kicking a ball. Their fine motor skills are also improving, giving them the ability to grasp things more effectively. They may be able to pick up small objects, use

wind up toys, turn pages in a book, or open a door. Older toddlers may have established small muscle and eye-hand coordination, which enable them to catch a ball, stack blocks, and hold a crayon.

Activities to Stimulate Toddlers' Motor Development:

Some developmentally appropriate activities for toddlers are: simple puzzles, stacking toys, Duplo blocks, crayons and paper, playdough and stringing beads. Music movement activities (such as London Bridge and Ring Around the Rosie), songs (such as the itsy bitsy spider), or action songs with instruments (i.e. drums and shakers) are also appropriate activities.

Preschoolers:

By preschool age, many children have achieved balance and coordination of their arms, legs, and body as a whole. This is demonstrated in their ability to jump, hop on one foot, pedal a bicycle, and climb stairs effectively. Small muscle and eye-hand coordination has improved and may be visible in their ability to use pegboards, zippers, buttons, and writing implements.

Activities to Stimulate Preschoolers' Motor Development:

Some developmentally appropriate activities for preschoolers are: 6-8 piece puzzles, painting, drawing, pasting, playdough, clay, number concept activities with simple counting, color and shape sorting. Music and movement activities such as “if you’re happy and you know it” or the “hokey pokey” are appropriate for this age group.

Sensory Development:

An important part of activity planning for young children is incorporating stimulating sensory experiences into the activities. The key word is EXPERIENCE, and volunteers should seek to engage as many of the senses as possible in Playspace activities.

Here are a few ideas about ways to involve the various senses in the Playspace – just to get your own creative juices flowing!

Sight: As much as you can, make sure the Playspace has a variety of interesting and colorful objects to look at. While playing with any toy or game, you can discuss the names of colors with the children, and have them describe the things they see.

Hearing: Listening to music, making music, and singing songs are great ways to focus on hearing. If your Playspace has a tape player, you can play music that the children might enjoy. You can sing together, or play toy instruments. You can also listen to sounds that are in the environment and talk about them – footsteps in the halls, cars or birds outside. Rhyming games, names games, and listening games like ‘Simon Says’ are other ways to stimulate children’s sense of hearing in the Playspace.

Touch: Having a variety of objects of different textures in the Playspace can give children the opportunity to have different kinds of tactile experience. A ‘Mystery Box’ in which various objects of different textures can be placed allows children to feel different things – a smooth stone, a pinecone, a sponge, sand – and guess what they’re touching.

Taste: In some shelters, you may have access to the kitchen and may be able to do simple cooking projects with the children. In other shelters snack time may be a part of the routine. *** Before you do any activity related to food, be sure you check with shelter staff to make sure it's okay and check about any food allergies children may have. Some allergies, such as to milk and nuts, are very common and can cause very serious health problems.

Smell: Smell and taste are often very related. Cooking projects can engage both of these senses. Also, the 'Mystery Box' mentioned above can be a medium for exploring smells as well as textures. Lemon peel, vanilla, a clove of garlic, or any other strong smelling substance can be an exciting discovery.

Language and Cognitive Development:

When planning activities to stimulate children's language and cognitive growth, the keyword is LITERACY. Literacy refers not only to the ability to read and write, but, more broadly, to any form of activity and interaction which has to do with communication. From a very young age, children are developing cognitive skills that contribute to their ability to communicate effectively later in life.

Children at all ages show signs of language and cognitive development.

Infants:

Although infants do not communicate through speech, it is important to talk to infants while interacting with them. They are capable of interacting through smiling, crying, or cooing. As they get older, they will begin to practice the babbling sounds that lead to speech. Infants at this age can understand and respond to simple words or expression such as "no" and "bye-bye."

Toddlers:

Toddlers are developing their language skills (by the age of three, vocabulary generally expands to about 200 words), and their attention spans are generally long enough to listen to simple stories and carry on conversations. When working with toddlers, volunteers should talk through activities and encourage language expansion by helping children name things and form sentences.

Preschoolers:

Three and four year olds generally have begun to grasp cause and effect, and may begin telling stories and jokes. By the time children are kindergarten age, children's fine motor skills and familiarity with letters have often developed to the point that they can write their own names. These are all steps towards being able to read.

Activities to Enhance Literacy:

Research has shown that children who are read to from a young age are more likely to become readers and enjoy reading. Reading in the Playspace is one important way to contribute to language and literacy development for children of all ages. Simply turning the pages of a picture book with an infant or toddler, letting a preschooler recount the story of his favorite book, or listening as a school age child reads to the younger children in the Playspace are all ways to encourage a love of books, which is a critical element of literacy development.

For children of any age, volunteers can make language and literacy related activities fun for the children. Making a game out of a story you have read, doing arts and crafts activities related to a favorite book, or acting out the characters in a book are all ways to make reading fun for the children.

Social/Emotional Development:

As you seek to contribute to a child's social/emotional development, the key phrase is SELF-ESTEEM. As a PAL, there are a number of ways you can contribute to a child's self-esteem.

1. *Be consistent.* By taking your commitment to the children seriously, you will be sending the important message that they matter to you.
2. *Set limits with the children.* Children who are homeless have experienced a great deal of instability and a lack of predictability. Children need limits to feel safe. They need to know that their world is predictable, orderly, and dependable. In the Playspace, you can help create a safe, predictable, environment by setting limits around acceptable behavior and by structuring the time in a predictable way. (See below for more information on limit setting.)
3. *Give children choices.* Help children have some control in the Playspace by letting them choose what activity they would like to do. Give them specific choices between safe and appropriate activities – i.e. “Would you like to draw at the table or come over here to read with me?”
4. *Use positive language.* Remember this startling fact: the average child, by the age 18, is told “No” over 148,000 times. Be mindful of using positive phrasing when you are with the children – tell them what *can* be done, what *can* be accomplished.
5. *Be specific in your praise.* A child who hears only generic praise can grow to distrust it. Rather than saying “Great job!” let the child know as specifically as possible what it was she done so well. This shows that you're responding to the child as an individual. Rather than “That's a beautiful picture!” you might say, “I really like all the red paint that you used here, Jonathan!”

Limit Setting and Behavior Management in the Playspace

As a PAL, you will find your Playspace is more easily managed when you set limits and create structure. The following suggestions will help you create a Playspace environment that is conducive to safe and enjoyable play for the children, and is manageable for you and your fellow PALs.

Get to Know the Children

Any effort to set limits in the Playspace will be easier when you know the children and they know you. There are things you can do right away that will help create a sense of connection with the children. Learning the names of the children in your Playspace will show that you care about them as individuals. Having children decorate nametags, or playing a name-game, are good ways to help you with this. Speaking to the children at eye-level, using clear and calm speech, will help make you a trustworthy and safe individual in their eyes.

Enforce Behavior Rules Consistently

All Playspaces have basic behavior rules posted, and consistently promoting and enforcing these rules will help you and your buddies manage the Playspace. You may wish to go over the rules at the beginning of your playtime, even making a game of it to get the children involved. Shelters have different approaches to dealing with children whose behavior has become disruptive or unsafe. Be sure to ask your Shelter Liaison for specific guidance in these situations.

Routine and Ritual

Establishing predictable routines or rituals in the Playspace will help create an atmosphere of safety and consistency. The establishment of routines – for instance singing the same song at the beginning of each week’s playtime, or having reading time at the end of each shift as a “wind down” - will allow children to know what to expect from you and from their time in the Playspace, making them more comfortable and less likely to act out. In setting up routines in the Playspace, remember that transitions can be difficult for young children, especially those who have experienced loss and trauma. Always give children warnings about a coming change of activity: “In ten minutes it’s going to be time to clean up”.

Planning

Having enough activity options available for the children is one way to insure that they will be less likely to get out of hand. Planning age-appropriate activities will help create some structure from the start of each shift. While you may not always be able to carry out your plans, it is good for you and your buddy to have a general idea of what you will do during your shift. As you plan, remember that giving children choices between appropriate activities will give them the opportunity to feel in control of the situation while insuring that they are engaged in safe and appropriate play. If you need help planning activities, there are many ideas in the PAL Training Packet, and PAL Activity Workshops are held regularly to give PALs new ideas.

Redirecting Disruptive Children

If children get into an argument, separating them and giving each child a choice of some new and appropriate activity is a good way to redirect their energy. Arguments may arise over the use of a particular toy, and offering an appealing alternative can provide enough distraction to defuse the situation. Redirecting attention in this way may also help in situations where an individual child’s behavior has become disruptive or unsafe.

Part 4. The Volunteer Experience

The Role of the Playspace Activity Leader

Playspace Activity Leader Job Description & Time Commitment

As a Playspace Activity Leader (PAL), your role is to facilitate fun, safe, and appropriate play activities for groups of children living in a family shelter program or domestic violence shelter. You are expected to commit to two-three hours per week for at least six months.

Volunteer shifts are generally set up in two-hour blocks of time, and volunteers are expected to arrive promptly at the shelter for their scheduled shift. Horizons For Homeless Children Playspace Programs staff and shelter staff set up the “volunteer shifts”, some of which are at times when parents at the shelters may be in groups or meetings. Other shifts are held at times when parents may not be in meetings but could benefit from some time for themselves, or to get chores or tasks completed. It is helpful if volunteers can arrive a few minutes early in order to talk with fellow volunteers, check in with shelter staff about any special instructions, and prepare the Playspace for the children’s arrival.

Each shelter has monthly attendance sheets for volunteers to sign each week when they arrive, as well as a logbook where volunteers can make notes for PALs on other shifts about successful activities in the Playspace. You will be shown where these are when you have your on-site orientation at the shelter.

Parent/Volunteer Relations

The degree to which PALs have contact with parents in the shelter varies greatly from shelter to shelter. In some cases, if the parents are attending group meetings while volunteers are on site, you may see them only as they drop off and pick up their children at the Playspace. In other cases, parents may choose to spend time in the Playspace with volunteers and children.

PALs who volunteer in teen parent shelters find that the teen moms will, over time, begin to develop relationships with the volunteers and will spend more and more time interacting with them. For some PALs placed at teen shelters, these relationships can become an important and rewarding side-benefit to the time spent with the very young infants and toddlers in the shelters.

Interested parents should be welcomed in the Playspace. Taking their advice about their children’s interests is one way to involve them. If a child’s parent chooses not to involve herself in the activities of the Playspace, do not misinterpret this as a lack of interest or appreciation for your time and energy. Please remember that the only time a parent has to herself might be the time her child spends in the Playspace.

Getting Started: The Placement Process

Playspace Programs Managers work carefully to match each volunteer with a shelter that will be relatively convenient to get to, and will take other interests or preferences of the volunteer into consideration.

Placement at a Shelter:

At the PAL training, each new volunteer fills out a Placement Questionnaire. This questionnaire gives the Playspace Programs Managers information about a PAL’s schedule, the location of home and work or

school, and other information that will help them make a good match. Within several days after the completion of the training, new PALs can expect to receive a phone call from one of the Program Managers to discuss placement options. Based on your questionnaire, the Program Manager will have identified a number of potential shelter matches. The Program Manager may have additional questions for you that will help him or her identify the best possible placement options. The Program Manager will explain the options they have identified and answer any questions you may have. The aim of this conversation is not to decide upon a shelter placement, but to determine a number of options for each volunteer, so that the best possible set of placements for the group of volunteers being placed at the same time can be determined.

Remember that your placement options will have an effect on the placements of others. If you find that any of the information you have supplied on the Placement Questionnaire changes after this discussion, please let the Program Manager know immediately.

Reference Checks:

We check the references listed on your application. If you get a call from us indicating that we have had difficulty reaching a reference, please call back as soon as possible to give us another reference. Your placement may be delayed if we are unable to complete reference checks within the week following the training.

CORI/SORI Check:

Every PAL must have a criminal background (CORI) check with the state and a Sexual Offender Registry Information check (SORI) prior to volunteering. You authorize this criminal background check when you fill out our application paperwork. If you do have a criminal record, it does not necessarily disqualify you from the program. If you anticipate that a record will come back from the state, please mention this to us ahead of time so we can talk about what bearing this may have on your placement.

Placement Packet:

Approximately two weeks after your training, a placement packet will be sent to you. In this packet will be information about the shelter to which you have been assigned, as well as the schedule of your assigned shift. You will be assigned a Program Manager from Horizons For Homeless Children and a Shelter Liaison from the shelter. Your Shelter Liaison will be sent a letter with your name, shift time, and a copy of your application.

Interview and Orientation at the Shelter:

Upon receipt of your packet, you will be asked to contact your Shelter Liaison within one week to set up your interview and orientation meeting. The interview is a chance for both liaison and volunteer to make sure that the match is a good one. Most shelters will combine the interview with an orientation to the shelter. The orientation should include information about the shelter and its services. If you experience any difficulty in arranging your meeting with the Shelter Liaison, please contact your Program Manager who will help facilitate this process. Once you have met with your Shelter Liaison, you are ready to begin volunteering!

PAL Supervision and Support

The Playspace Programs Manager

Your Playspace Programs Manager will be an important source of guidance and support. After you have gotten started at your shelter, you can expect your Program Manager to check in with you by phone or email occasionally. You may also see her or him on site at your shelter periodically.

You should contact your Program Manager right away if:

- Your schedule changes or your assigned volunteer shift no longer works for you, or if for some reason you cannot continue to volunteer at all.
- You find that there are not enough volunteers for the number of children in the Playspace.
- You find there are too many volunteers for the number of children in the Playspace.
- You are having problems with the Playspace – if you need supplies, find that the Playspace is not being kept clean, or if you have any safety concerns about the space.

If you are experiencing some challenges on your shift, would like additional materials or information on homelessness or child development, or want to share a recent shelter experience, please feel free to contact your Program Manager at any time.

The Shelter Liaison

Every shelter program in our Playspace Volunteer Network has an assigned Shelter Liaison. You will receive your Shelter Liaison's name and phone number when you receive your placement packet.

- The Shelter Liaison is responsible for working with the PALs and to insure they have a positive experience.
- The Shelter Liaison is the person with whom you will meet for your interview and orientation when you first get started at the shelter.
- The Shelter Liaison is someone you should always be able to reach with any shelter specific questions or concerns.
- The Shelter Liaison is the person you should talk with about any occasional schedule conflicts with your assigned shift. Please let your Shelter Liaison know about any schedule problems as far in advance as possible, so other arrangements can be made. At some shelters, a volunteer shift will be cancelled if only one volunteer can come. Be sure that you find out from your Shelter Liaison what the procedure is at your shelter.

The Buddy System

Every PAL is assigned at least one “buddy” on his or her shift at the shelter. Your buddy will be another Horizons Initiative PAL, shelter volunteer, or shelter staff person. No PAL is placed to work alone. You will have anywhere from one to as many as five or six buddies, depending on the number of children in the shelter. You and your buddy or buddies will be working together in the Playspace, and you can plan activities together. When you are assigned to a shift, you will receive the names of your buddies and other PALs at your shelter. Feel free to call your buddy to introduce yourself before you get started.

Once you are volunteering, you will find that you and your buddy will come to depend on one another. If you know in advance that you need to miss a shift, let your buddy and your Shelter Liaison know this so they can plan appropriately.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality and respect for the privacy of individuals living and working in shelters is crucial to the integrity of our program. Whenever talking about your experience, respecting the children's and families' confidentiality is of the utmost importance. Families may not want others to know where they are living. Given that the majority of homeless families have in some way or another been affected by domestic violence, this may be a matter of safety. Whether or not that's the case, families may simply not want others to know they are living in shelter. As a Playspace Activity Leader, you should never discuss the children or families you know from your shelter in detail. Do not use last names or other distinguishing characteristics when talking about the children or families. Boston can be a small city, and information you may feel is innocuous to share might inadvertently get back to the wrong person. Be mindful of these safety issues when communicating with other PALs or Playspace Programs staff by email. Also, photographs of the children you work with should never be taken without written permission from the children's parents and shelter staff.

Safety, Universal Precautions, and Liability

1. A child should never be left alone with you. If your buddy is not on the shift with you, try to have a staff person or parent in the Playspace with you. Barring that, you may want to move your activities to near staff offices.
2. All small or sharp objects that could be ingested should be removed from the Playspace.
3. Electrical outlets should be covered.
4. Volunteers should be aware of fire exits in the building and fire drill procedures, as well as the location of the first aid kit. In case of emergency, volunteers should inform a staff member immediately.
5. Please do not bring guests with you to the shelter. Only people who have filled out an application, had a CORI check, been interviewed, and been trained as volunteers are allowed at the shelters.
6. Volunteers are not allowed to go off-site with children unless shelter staff are present.
7. Find out where latex gloves are kept at your shelter, and take precautions against disease by wearing gloves in any situation in which you may have contact with children's blood, vomit, mucous, etc.
8. For liability and health reasons, volunteers should not change children's diapers. Please find a staff person or parent if a child needs a change.

What to Do When You Can No Longer Volunteer

We recognize that the time will come when you can no longer volunteer as a PAL. Perhaps you are moving, or maybe your work schedule is changing and you simply cannot continue to make the 2-hour shift anymore.

Whenever you know that such a change is coming, let your Program Manager and Shelter Liaison know as soon as possible. Let each of them know what your situation is, and when your last day will be. This will

help each of them plan accordingly so that your buddies won't have to wait long for new help with the children.

After you leave the program, we will send you a program evaluation, which we hope you will take the time to fill out completely and honestly and send back to us. The feedback of former PALs is very helpful, and taken very seriously.

Frequently Asked Questions

“There are far too many children in the Playspace for my buddy and I to work with comfortably or safely. At times it feels like we’re just playing policeman, trying to avoid accidents. What can we do?”

First of all, let your Program Manager know right away. If more volunteers would help the situation be more manageable, he or she will be able to work on getting you extra help. If the space itself is already stretched to its limit, he or she will contact the Shelter Liaison to discuss ways to insure that a more appropriate ratio of volunteers to children (depending on the children's ages, 1 volunteer to each 3 to 5 children) can be maintained.

“The last couple weeks, there have been fewer kids in the Playspace. Sometimes my buddy and I are there with just 2 or 3 kids. Am I really still needed here?”

Things can change very quickly in the shelters. You may find that in another week or two there are more children coming to the Playspace again, and things will be more like what you're used to. Until then, while it may feel like you're "doing less" because there are fewer children on site, remember that this chance for one-on-one interaction can be tremendously valuable to the children who are there. Life in shelter doesn't offer much chance for privacy or individual attention – the two hours a child gets to spend with just you and your undivided attention is a rare treat.

“My Playspace really needs some new supplies. Over the past couple months, all the crayons have been broken, and the puzzles and games have been played so much that they’re really showing their age. Can HHC help me get some newer, nicer, things for my Playspace?”

Absolutely! We certainly can help you get new items for your Playspace. We regularly get books, games, puzzles, arts and crafts supplies, and other items donated which we distribute regularly to the shelters. Let your Program Manager know what you need, and we'll be happy to help you out.

“Is it okay to take the children off the grounds of the shelter? There’s a great park down the street – I’d love to be able to take them there!”

We certainly understand your desire to take the children to the park. Unfortunately, though, unless a shelter staff person is going with you, you cannot take the children off site. It is just too great a liability and safety risk. Ask your liaison whether they or another staff person can go with you. If they are unable, you will need to find ways to have fun on site.

“My friend has been asking me about my volunteering, and she’d like to come along with me next week. Is that okay?”

Unfortunately not. All volunteers must have filled out an application and had a Criminal Background Check and reference checks in order to be placed as volunteers. On top of that, be conscious of the fact that a shelter is home to many people, and they do not want to have strangers coming and going without shelter staff knowing who they are and that they are safe. We don’t want to be inconsiderate – not to mention that the CORI is required by law!

Of course, we are glad your friend is interested in your volunteer work. Please have her call us to get a volunteer application and information about our upcoming training sessions.

“My work schedule will be changing next month, and while I’d like to continue my current volunteer shift, I’m not sure that it will be realistic to do so. I don’t want to leave my buddies – we really work well together! – and of course I’ll miss these kids. Any advice? Could I still volunteer, but at a different time?”

We can absolutely work with you to find a shift that will work better for you. There may even be an opening on a different day, or at a different time of day, at your current shelter that would work better for you. This would probably be ideal, since you already know the shelter and the children who are there. If that does not work, there is very likely a need at another shelter that might fit your new schedule. Please call your Program Manager to discuss this.

Also, once you know for certain what will be happening with your schedule, let your Shelter Liaison know. If you will be leaving the shelter, this is something you may want to prepare the children for, too. They have gotten used to you, and it may be hard for some of them to see you go.

Appendix: Helpful Books and Websites for PALs

Homelessness

Haig Friedman, Donna. Parenting in Public: Family Shelter and Public Assistance. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. www.mahomeless.org The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless (MCH) works to address the broad economic and social issues that lead to homelessness in Massachusetts. The website contains good information about homelessness in Massachusetts, legislative initiatives, etc.

National Coalition for the Homeless. www.nationalhomeless.org. The National Coalition works to end homelessness by focusing on four areas: housing justice, economic justice, health care justice, and civil rights.

Special Needs of Homeless Children

The National Center on Family Homelessness. www.familyhomelessness.org. The National Center on Family Homelessness is a not-for-profit organization working towards long-term solutions that help homeless families become self-supporting and active participants in community life. Some of their research on the effects of homelessness on children is available online.

The Child Witness to Violence Project. www.bostonchildhealth.org/childwitnessstoviolence. This website includes information and articles about the effects of violence on children.

Play and Activity Planning

www.123child.com. Over 1000 activity ideas for young children. Theme based art, math, science, games, songs, dramatic play and more. Also, many links to other early childhood websites.

www.earlychildhood.com. New activities for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-aged children are posted weekly, corresponding to monthly theme.

Enchanted Learning. www.enchantedlearning.com. Links to many online educational activity ideas, to stimulate interest in science, geography, reading, etc.

The Idea Box. www.theideabox.com. Activity ideas organized by theme – seasonal, holidays, crafts, music, etc.

National Network for Child Care. www.nncc.org. Online resources on such subjects as Child Development, Children's Literacy, Diversity, Infant and Toddler Care, Preschool Care, Guidance and Discipline.

Perpetual Preschool. www.perpetualpreschool.com. Year round activity theme ideas, tips, and resources for people working with preschoolers. Includes many activity ideas submitted by Early Childhood Education professionals.

Terrific Toddlers. www.terrifictoddlers.com. Year round activity theme ideas, tips, and resources for people working with toddlers. Includes many activity ideas submitted by Early Childhood Education professionals.

Tot City. www.totcity.com. Geared to parents, but lots of great information for planning activities for toddlers and preschoolers. Users can search database for activities by theme, such as shapes, colors, numbers, reading, etc.

Civardi, Anne and Penny King. Festival Decorations. Thumbprint Books: New York, 1998. This book includes lots of multicultural activity ideas.

Gould, Roberta. Making Cool Crafts and Awesome Art: A Kids' Treasure Trove of Fabulous Fun. Williamson Publishing: Charlotte, Vermont, 1998.

Hauser, Jill Frankel. Kids Crazy Concoctions: 50 Mysterious Mixtures for Art and Craft Fun. Williamson Publishing: Charlotte, Vermont, 1995.

Wilkes, Angela. My First Christmas Activity Book: A Step-by-Step Guide to Making Fun Things for Christmas. DK Publishing, Inc.: London, 1994.

Zweifel, Frances and Ann Schweninger. The Make-Something Club: Fun with Crafts, Food, and Gifts. Viking: New York, 1994.

Literacy

The Reading Connection. www.thereadingconnection.org. This Virginia organization works to promote early literacy amongst children who are homeless. Their website provides some useful information and ideas on literacy.

Limit Setting/Behavior Management

Nelsen, Jane. Positive Discipline for Preschoolers; For Their Early Years--Raising Children Who Are Responsible, Respectful, and Resourceful. Roseville, CA: Prima Publishing, 1998.

National Network for Child Care. www.nncc.org. Online resources on such subjects as Child Development, Children's Literacy, Diversity, Infant and Toddler Care, Preschool Care, Guidance and Discipline.