

The Coat

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When it's bitterly cold (penguin cold!), is there anything better than having the perfect coat?

A Discussion and Activity Guide about Homelessness

In *The Coat*, Elise has her first encounter with people who are homeless. Like her, many of us feel compassion for those without homes, yet we aren't sure how to interact with them or offer help. It can be difficult to grasp the causes of homelessness and to know how to talk about homelessness with young children. *The Coat* and this guide offer a child-friendly introduction to the topic.

The guide answers some questions children may ask, offers ideas about how children and families can help those who are homeless, and features activities to help explore homelessness further. You can access this guide online at www.flyawaybooks.com/resources, where you can follow the links for more information.

Helping Children Understand

What does it mean to be homeless or unhoused?

Most people who live in the United States have a home. They live in houses or apartments, and they have food to eat and warm beds to sleep in, just like Elise.

But some people don't have homes. When someone is without a home, they might live outside or in a shelter with lots of other people. They don't have many of the items that others take for granted, like warm coats, for example.



Why are some people without homes?

Most of the time, people without homes are struggling with poverty, which means they don't have enough money. Housing can be very expensive, so people without enough money may have to choose between paying for a home and buying other important

things like food or medicine. Whether their poverty is caused by lack of education, unemployment, an illness or disability, or a combination of factors, most unhoused people are doing their best to improve their lives. Some may be homeless for just a little while. Others are homeless for a longer time.

What do unhoused people look like? Where do they come from?

Anyone can be homeless. Unhoused people come from many different backgrounds, races, and ages. They may be white, like the mother and child in the story, or they may be another color. However, due to [racism](#), people who are not white are more likely to be without a home. Racism makes it more difficult for people who are not white to attend good schools, find jobs, and obtain quality healthcare.

Can only adults be homeless or are there homeless families too?

Not every homeless person is alone. Some homeless people have children, just like the mother who Elise meets in the story.

Is there a way to end homelessness?

Ending homelessness *is* possible! Many cities and states are working hard to help people find homes. There are a few ways that local governments and communities can help:

- They can build homes that do not cost a lot of money. This is called affordable housing.
- They can increase the [minimum wage](#) so that more people are able to pay for a home and other basics like food, clothing, and medical care.
- They can work to fight racism.
- They can teach people who have never had a home how to take care of a house or apartment and plan for all the bills that come along with it.



Helping Children Empathize

Why don't people without homes just get jobs?

Many people without homes do have jobs. But many jobs don't pay well, and because housing can be expensive, people with jobs—even full-time jobs—may still be unable to afford a place to live. People with jobs that *do* pay well sometimes become homeless due to unexpected expenses, such as medical bills, that make it impossible to pay for housing while also buying other necessities.

Those without jobs are often looking for work but [struggling](#) to get hired due to challenges such as lack of transportation and not having a place to bathe regularly, receive mail, and do laundry. Others may be unable to work due to a disability or illness.

Whatever the circumstance, living without a home is very difficult. People rarely do it by choice. Here are two firsthand accounts about what it's like to be homeless from [Nick](#) and the [Pinaula family](#).

Are people without homes dangerous?

Some people believe that everyone who is homeless is a bad person, but this isn't true. It's one of many common myths about homelessness. People without homes are like everyone else. They are struggling for any of the reasons explained above, not because they are bad or lazy.

Of course, it's always important to be cautious. *Never* approach a stranger—whether they are homeless or not—when you are alone. Remember, Elise is walking with a group when she interacts with the mother and child.

Yet it's equally important to remember that most unhoused people are not dangerous or violent. If you would like to help them, it's possible to do so safely. The next section presents a few ideas about how to help.



Helping Children Take Action

Homelessness is a complicated problem. It's easy to feel helpless! But everyone has a part to play. Helping others doesn't have to be expensive, and it's easier than you might think.



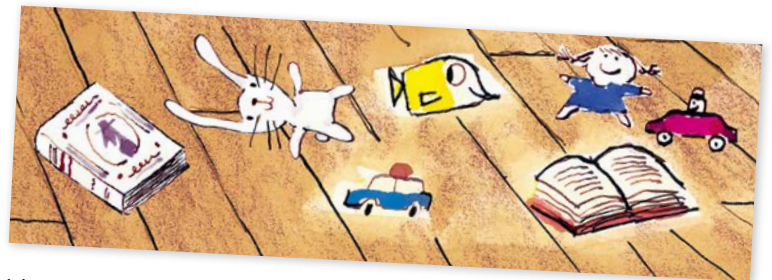
Show Kindness

People without homes deserve [compassion](#) and [respect](#). Try to imagine how they might wish to be treated and act accordingly. This is called [empathy](#). If you don't know what to say to someone who is homeless, you can just smile! If they ask for help that you can't offer, respond politely with a few words such as, "No, I'm sorry, I can't help right now." If you have an item you'd like to share with a homeless person, check with an adult first. After receiving permission, it's fine to offer your gift, yet don't insist that the unhoused person accept it. Remember, Elise holds out the candy to the homeless child in the story but lets her decide whether to take it.

Donate Items

Homeless shelters often need items like those listed below. Ask a parent or teacher to check with shelters [in your area](#) about what they need. Then help gather items, such as:

- Clothing: gently used clothes and shoes
- Household goods: kitchen utensils, furniture, and linens
- Children's items: toys, games, stuffed animals, books, and dolls
- Toiletries: soap, shampoo, toothpaste, and toothbrushes
- Warm weather items: blankets, coats, hats, scarves, mittens, and socks



You can also [donate food](#) to a local food pantry that serves those who are unhoused and others who are hungry.

Volunteer

In addition to accepting donated items, many homeless shelters welcome volunteers! Shelters often need people to help with tasks such as serving food or sorting donations. Find out how you and your family can get involved.

Talk to Others

Learn about what causes homelessness. Share what you learn with others, and encourage them to help in whatever way they can.

Activities for Children and Families

- Watch "[A Rainbow Kind of Day](#)." What does Lily miss about her home? What would you miss most if you were in her situation? Draw, paint, or make a collage of those items. As you create, think about what makes those things special to you.
- In *The Coat*, Elise donates her favorite coat. Look around your room. Do you see something that would be a nice gift for a homeless child? If so, ask about donating it, perhaps with a handmade card for the recipient.
- Do extra chores or set up a lemonade stand to raise money for organizations that work on behalf of people who are homeless. National organizations include the [National Coalition for the Homeless](#), the [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#), and the [National Homelessness Law Center](#). There are also many local organizations that support unhoused people.
- Draw or paint cheerful pictures and then donate them to a local homeless shelter.
- Learn the names of local government officials. Then contact them with a letter or a call to their office to ask that they work to end homelessness.
- Organize a coat drive with [One Warm Coat](#) or host a [Coats for Kids](#) community service project.

