

doi.org/10.61605/cha_3119

Volume 48 Suppl.1

Article type: Conference Report

Young Voices. Big Impact. Disrupting the trajectory of homelessness: The role of early intervention and prevention with children and families

Avi MacMull¹ *

Leanne Nicholson¹

Affiliations

¹ Anchor Community Care, Melbourne, Vic. 3140, Australia

Correspondence

* Avi MacMull avi.macmull@anchor.org.au

CITATION: MacMull, A., & Nicholson, L. (2026). Young Voices. Big Impact. Disrupting the trajectory of homelessness: The role of early intervention and prevention with children and families. *Children Australia*, 48(Suppl.1), 3119. doi.org/10.61605/cha_3119

© 2026 MacMull, A., & Nicholson, L. This work is licensed under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence

Background/Issue

Anchor Community Care is a Victorian not-for-profit organisation providing homelessness support, family and youth services and tailored interventions for vulnerable children. The organisation is committed to ensuring that children and young people are given sufficient spotlight to ensure their experiences are not invisible within the system or broader society. Within this mission, Anchor identified a significant gap in service provision for children experiencing homelessness.

The 'Young Voices. Big Impact' initiative arose in response to a chronic lack of child-centred, trauma-informed supports within the Eastern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne, Victoria. While many homelessness services address parental needs, such as housing, case management and financial stress, children's developmental, social and educational needs are often overlooked. At the time of program design, 119 children were accessing Anchor's homelessness service, with little access to psychological support or therapeutic engagement.

Evidence demonstrates that homelessness disrupts children's education, social networks and emotional wellbeing. Children in housing crisis report lower school attendance, difficulty maintaining friendships, diminished self-esteem and a heightened risk of poor mental health and intergenerational homelessness. Anchor's program drew from prior practice experience and existing frameworks, such as the *Statewide Children's Resource Program* (2024), and current Australian research on resilience, belonging and psychosocial recovery. The underlying theory of change

proposed that embedding a specialist child-focused practitioner within crisis response teams could mitigate trauma impacts, strengthen family relationships and foster resilience and school engagement.

Action/Response

Young Voices. Big Impact was piloted as a Specialist Homeless Children's Practitioner Project, employing a therapeutic practitioner trained in trauma-informed and child-centred practice. The role involved individual and, occasionally, group work with children and parents within homelessness services, focusing on psychosocial support, skill building and advocacy within schools and community networks.

Program design was informed by current research compiled within Anchor's evaluation matrix. The matrix had seven components: school belonging; self-care skills; resiliency; goal setting; self-esteem; academic performance; and friendship development. Each were underpinned by peer-reviewed evidence. For instance, research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies (Daraganova & Joss, 2019) and the National Children's Bureau (National Children's Bureau, 2024) highlight how positive peer relationships and school belonging improve wellbeing and academic confidence, particularly for children facing instability. Other referenced studies, such as Coates and Mason (2025), support the application of trauma-informed and activity-based interventions to strengthen emotional regulation and resilience.

Three complementary instruments were employed.

1. Parent Survey: Capturing parents' perspectives on communication, support and observed changes in their child's learning, confidence, and friendships.
2. Client (Child/Young Person) Survey: Age appropriate, assessing children's feelings about school, friendships, safety and self-belief before and after participation.
3. Practitioner Rubric: A structured assessment covering seven constructs, from school belonging to self-esteem. Each construct included clear descriptors (from 'Not yet met' to 'Outstanding'), ensuring a consistent practice framework and data comparability.

This triangulated approach blended quantitative and qualitative data to provide a rounded picture. The practitioner recorded baseline and endline measures, supported by parent and child feedback, allowing observation of both direct emotional change and indirect gains (e.g. school attendance and peer connection).

The pilot engaged children living in transitional or crisis housing within the Outer East of Melbourne, Victoria. Families were primarily referred internally by Anchor homelessness practitioners. Participation remained voluntary to ensure authentic, child-centred consent. Across the initial evaluation window, data were collected from clients, parents and the practitioner over several months of consistent engagement, including outreach and onsite sessions at schools, homes or scheduled outings.

Success measures aligned to Anchor's Outcomes and Impact Framework, with improvements in resilience, academic participation, friendships and emotional self-care. Quantitatively, practitioner records indicated an average improvement of % across constructs, with notable gains in resiliency (+30%) and goal setting (+28%). Qualitative themes echoed these results: parents described greater confidence supporting their children; children reported feeling 'happier at school' and more able to 'bounce back after setbacks'. Parent surveys rated clarity, relevance and safety of the program at averages above 4.5 on a 5-point scale, underscoring the program's accessibility and therapeutic rapport.

Lessons learned

Children responded positively to the opportunity for individual attention and creativity in sessions. They valued consistent relationships with the practitioner, especially in environments marked by frequent change. Parents expressed that the program

References

Coates, J. K., & Mason, C. (2025). 'You've got to make yourself uncomfortable to finally feel comfortable': young homeless people's experiences of a trauma-informed sport-based intervention. *Sport, Education and Society*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2025.2481995>

Daraganova G, Joss N 2019 Growing up in Australia: The longitudinal study of Australian children, annual statistical report 2018 Melbourne, Australia Australian Institute of Family Studies
<https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-10/LSAC-Annual-Statistical-Report-2018.pdf>

not only supported their children but improved their own confidence to nurture learning routines and emotional safety at home.

Successes include:

- Clear evidence of improved resilience, self-esteem and goal orientation among participants;
- Strengthened parent-child relationships through guided involvement and communication strategies;
- Enhanced collaboration with schools, enabling smoother student transitions and attendance improvements; and
- Practitioners reported better integration of trauma knowledge across Anchor's staff team, improving consistency of child-focused practice in homelessness contexts.

Challenges to be addressed include:

- Recruitment and retention can be difficult amid families' frequent housing changes and competing priorities;
- Limited duration of the pilot constrained deeper longitudinal insights; and
- The reliance on one specialist practitioner highlighted the need for broader workforce training to sustain impact across caseloads.

Next steps

Anchor sees opportunities to expand the Young Voices. Big Impact model by:

- Building partnerships with local communities to ensure continuity of support through effective transitions and addressing systemic barriers;
- Embedding training modules for frontline workers to increase confidence in engaging one on one with children and strengthening parental capacity; and
- Seeking additional funding to scale the child-focused therapeutic role across regions and build upon the evidence base.

The evaluation demonstrates that when homelessness responses explicitly centre children's voices, through structured assessment, relational practice and evidence-based design, tangible progress occurs in learning engagement, emotional resilience and family stability. The Young Voices. Big Impact project provides an adaptable blueprint for community organisations seeking to integrate child development frameworks into homelessness and family services.

National Children's Bureau. (2024, 8 May). *Nurturing a sense of belonging at school: What helps pupils feel connected?* London, UK: National Children's Bureau. <https://www.ncb.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/news-opinion/nurturing-sense-belonging-school-what-helps-pupils-feel>

Statewide Children's Resource Program (SCRIP). (2024). *Resources*.
<https://www.statewidechildrensresourceprogram.com.au/resources>