



Guided Homeless Experiences

Parent Overview

The best way to learn something is not to just hear about it but to actually experience it. With that in mind, we have developed a list of family activities that mimic experiences that people who are homeless face on a daily basis.

The activities are meant to be fun but also challenging. We want you to really think about what it means to be homeless. For instance, your family may enjoy camping outside one night in the safety of your backyard but to a homeless family, sleeping outside is an everyday reality, not a choice. The camping activity gives you a chance, as a parent, to experience something fun with your children and use the opportunity to discuss homelessness in a way that is right for your family.

Some of these activities are more intense than others so please read through the options and choose those activities that are most appropriate for your family. Most of the activities will also require a little advance planning on your part.

It may be fun to plan these activities over a weekend, dedicating the entire weekend to learning about homelessness through experiences.

Food – People who are homeless do not always have enough food to eat. They also are limited in the types of things that they can eat since they do not have a kitchen. Because they may depend on a soup kitchen or feeding program to get their meals, they also do not get to choose when they eat. Some simple ways to experience these challenges yourselves are listed below. Please note that we are not suggesting that you limit food for your family members who may have health issues related to diet.

- No snack day – Pick a day, or several days, when your family can only eat at meal times. Ask your children how they feel about not being able to have a snack at their usual times (or when they want one). Remember that people who are homeless can only eat when food is available, not necessarily when they want to eat.
- Pop top meal – People who are homeless may not be able to have a hot meal. They may have to eat food out of a can – at room temperature. Their meal may consist of canned foods that don't require a can opener. Plan ahead and choose such foods at your grocery store. Then, have a meal (s) with your family that only consists of canned food – and no plates or silverware allowed!
- Skip a meal – Assuming that it does not threaten anyone's health, plan to skip a meal with your family. Spend that time talking about the issues of homelessness and praying for those who do not have enough to eat. Share with each other how it feels to be hungry and not able to eat.
- Fast for a day – We only recommend a full day fast for individuals whose health permits it. However, if you choose this activity for your family, we suggest you use the experience to not only talk about hunger and poverty but also about fasting as a spiritual discipline. If you need more guidance about fasting, we recommend you ask your church for appropriate resources.

Shelter – People who are homeless may not have a safe place to spend the night. Many times, they have to spend the night outside regardless of the temperature or weather conditions. We encourage you to consider one of the family activities below that is safe and appropriate for you and your children.

- Spend a day outside – This will take some planning in order to make sure your all day experience is pleasant even if it is challenging. You decide how much food you make available (see Food activities above) and what distractions (toys, books) are allowed. Consider ahead of time what your response will be when the kids want to run inside for “just a minute” to grab a toy or a snack or if they become “bored” with being outside. Only you can decide just how much your children can take before allowing them back into your home. We encourage you to help each child, as well as yourselves, get a full appreciation for what a homeless person goes through each day.
- Spend a night outside – Again, preparation is key, especially if your family has never camped before. You’ll need to consider how you want to handle shelter (tent/ sleeping bags), food, lighting and entertainment. Take the opportunity to create good conversation and experiences about being in the dark, ie. What do you hear or not hear? How does being in the dark make you feel? What if you did not have a flashlight? What if it was really cold or really hot outside?
- Spend a night outside in the rain – Only a few families will want to try this activity. We recommend for families with older children only. Being in the elements can be scary and dangerous for anyone. We will let you decide how to implement this activity. Our goal in suggesting it is to help you consider the extremes that those experiencing homelessness have to face regularly.

Clothing – How blessed most of us are to have a choice of what we wear each day. People who are homeless do not have this luxury – and it is a luxury!

- Same clothes for 2 days - Take at least a couple of days and wear the exact same clothes each day. In fact, no pajamas allowed! Yes, you have to sleep in those same clothes. As you go throughout the second (or third) day with the same clothes on, talk about how you feel about the way you look. Are your clothes dirty or wrinkled? How would you feel about having to ask someone for a job looking like this? Would you feel comfortable going to church or to a party or large family gathering? How would you as parents feel about doing this exercise during the school year – sending your kids to school for a couple of days in the same clothes?
- No shoes, coat – Let safety be your guide on this one parents. If you choose this activity, we recommend it for a day when your family will be at home so that you have complete control of the situation. Pick a day when it is a little chilly outside – a day when you would normally wear a sweater or light jacket. Plan on spending some time outside without that sweater or jacket and without shoes. For younger children, we obviously recommend the discomfort be very brief. It won’t take long to make the point – what if this was not a choice but an everyday fact of your life?
- Washing – Public laundromats are available to the homeless to wash and dry their clothing. In order to use them, a person who is homeless needs to save money to buy laundry detergent. Then, they have to have enough quarters to use the washing and drying machines in the laundromat. Next, they have to find a way to get to the laundromat which their clothes. Once there, they have to wait for their clothes to be cleaned and dried. This process could end up being expensive for them AND take up most of their day.

Sometimes people who are homeless have a chance to wash those dirty clothes but not necessarily in a washing machine – that costs money. They might be able to find a public bathroom where they could clean their clothes in a sink. Without expensive laundry detergent, they may just use hand soap. Have each of your family member wash out a piece of clothing in a sink using soap. Remember to rinse it well. Now how will you get it dry? How do you think someone who is homeless would dry their clothes?

Bathroom Basics – As we discussed in the Learning section of Backyard Missions, trying to stay clean is very difficult when you do not have a home. How often do your family members wash their hands? Take a shower? Brush your teeth? Since you probably have access to a bathroom (or more than one), does it have soap and toilet paper and shampoo, toothpaste and other toiletries? The following suggested activities are very simple and should not pose a health risk to your family. They are designed to make it easy for parents to make a point with your children about how difficult the basics of cleanliness are to those who are living homeless.

- No shower or bath – Challenge your family members to go a day (or several) without taking a shower. Maybe your younger kids would find this fun, but you get the point!
- Sink bath – Your children may have never even heard about a sink bath. To people who are homeless, this might be the only way they ever have to wash their bodies. They may have to find a public bathroom where they can do this. Help your younger kids take a sink bath using only a washcloth and soap. What if you had to use the paper towels and soap that are free in a public bathroom? Your older kids can handle this exercise on their own. Ask them about their impressions when all is said and done.
- Finger toothbrush – Did you ever think of your toothbrush as a luxury item? If you only had a few dollars to your name, would you use it to buy toothpaste? These are questions you can ask your children as you explain how to use your finger as a toothbrush. How clean do you think your teeth get without a toothbrush? What do you think your teeth would look like if you didn't get to brush your teeth for several weeks? What happens if a person who is homeless has a tooth ache?
- Toilet "what if" – We encourage you parents to have a conversation with your children about the challenges of the homeless population when it comes to toileting. We are sure you will get some interesting questions!

Entertainment – No home, means no television, no toy chest, no book shelf, no swing set, no bikes, no basketball court or board games. Often, people who are homeless **do** have a cell phone but chances are they do not have access to online movies or games – just the basics. Entertainment is rarely a luxury that the homeless can enjoy. Isn't that hard for us to imagine in this day and age and in this privileged country? Parents, how difficult would it be to not be able to offer the simplest toys and games to your children? Before participating in these activities, make sure you explain that withholding these things from your children is not a punishment..... it's an experiment!

- No toys – Pretty self-explanatory – you choose the time frame.
- No video games, TV or phone – The time that would normally be devoted to these types of entertainment could be spent talking with your family about gratitude. How grateful are you that you have access to various forms of entertainment? What else are you grateful for?
- Discuss – brainstorm with your family where someone who is homeless might be able to go and spend some recreation time – the library? public parks?

Take a Bus Ride – Access to reliable transportation is a huge challenge for people experiencing homelessness. We talked about this in the learning module, but homeless people usually have to depend on public transportation to get to work. Have you ever ridden one of Greenville's Greenlink buses?

The main office for the Greenlink system is in downtown Greenville (100 West McBee Avenue, Greenville, SC 29601). Greenlink also has a website <https://www.greenvillesc.gov/151/Greenlink-Transit> with their routes, fares and schedules. We suggest you plan an outing with your family to take a bus ride. Maybe catch the bus to ride to the park or to your

favorite ice cream shop.

As you are traveling, talk about what it would be like to have to take the bus everywhere you normally go. What would it be like to have to wait for the bus to pick you up instead of leaving immediately? If it is cold or rainy outside, would standing at a bus stop be fun? What would you do if the bus did not go where you needed to go?

Some of the people who live at Miracle Hill homeless shelters need to ride the bus in order to find a job. If possible, we provide them with a bus pass to get to that job interview. Those bus passes can be purchased at the Greenlink office on McBee Avenue. Perhaps your family would like to purchase a few bus passes to donate to Miracle Hill? If so, read more about this serving opportunity under the SERVE section of Backyard Missions. [Here is quick link to that service opportunity.](#)