

Talking with Children About Bright Spaces



In this blog, Emily Harris (pictured left) writes about how we can talk with children about the work of the Foundation and our Bright Spaces. Emily is the Foundation's Development Manager, and mother of two children aged 6 and 4.

The children Bright Horizons educates and cares for will often take part in activities to support the Foundation; whether by creating artwork for art auctions, making or buying cakes, taking part in Walk Ons, bringing in recycling, dressing-up for the day or collecting Christmas gifts for local children.

I have often wondered about the extent to which the children understand the purpose behind these activities. I had to give this deeper thought when I was part of a team which opened a Bright Space garden for the Eve domestic violence refuge in Northampton. My children's school did a sponsored Walk On (pictured right) to raise money for the project. The Headmistress and I felt it was important for the children to understand what they were raising money for, and to connect them to the project; so I agreed to go into assembly to talk to them.



Although I am quite used to presenting to 'grown-ups', I was quite nervous about addressing a group of 160 children aged between 3 and 8 years old! Would they be interested? What questions might they ask me? I decided to ask my children to be my dress rehearsal, and I was glad I did, as their questions surprised me: "What is a refuge, Mummy?", "Why haven't the children got a home?", "Where are their daddies?"

These conversations made me re-think what I was going to say; and here are some tips which you might find helpful when talking to children about the Foundation and our Bright Spaces:

- Use simple, clear language, e.g. the Foundation helps children who haven't got a home
- Help the children to think about how this might feel, e.g. not having a home makes children sad as they miss where they used to live, they may have to move away from their friends and leave behind their toys and clothes
- Describe Bright Spaces as special play spaces where children can play and have fun until they find a new place to live with their families. What would they like to see in a Bright Space?
- Be visual if you can, showing photos and pictures
- If you are supporting a specific Bright Space, describe what the space is like and what you are going to do to transform it e.g. there is no grass, there are no plants or flowers, there are not many toys or things to do, and there is nowhere to sit so the children don't use it very much
- Explain how children have been involved in making decisions about their Bright Space e.g. the children would like to have grass, be able to grow vegetables and flowers to make the garden look pretty; a place to sit in the garden to read books and spend time with their mummies; to be able to play with water, play games and make music; and for the garden to be somewhere that they want to go
- Share with them the plans for what the Bright Space will provide in a visual way— show pictures of equipment from catalogues, talk them through what the new Bright Space will look, feel and sound like
- Be prepared for questions, and answer them thoughtfully in simple language
- If the children are fundraising for a project tell them how much you are raising, and when you have raised the money celebrate it with them
- Take them on the journey with you – tell them the story, share before and after pictures, quotes from the children using the Bright Space. Ask them questions throughout, and let them tell you what they think





The finished Eve Bright Space

I'm sure I am not alone in feeling a dilemma: as a parent I want my children to be kind and have compassion for others who are less fortunate; but at the same time, I also want to protect them from knowing too much about the terrible things that happen in the world and I want them to feel safe. So conversations around these topics need to be considered and sensitive, but also honest.

There are two articles on our Foundation website which helped me and might help you: [Curbing the Demands: Creating Givers in a Consumer-Driven Culture](#) and [Talking with Children About Homelessness](#).

By collectively and consistently demonstrating kindness and compassion in our actions and the things we say, we can help children develop these qualities, and really make a difference in the world.

What Can We Do? 5 Tips

1. Set the example
2. De-emphasise possessions
3. Create a climate of giving
4. Manage technology wisely
5. Be a role model

Bright Horizons FOUNDATION FOR CHILDREN

BRIGHT SPACES

Raising Socially Responsible Children

Curbing the Demands: Creating Givers in a Consumer-Driven Culture

Allowing children to develop a sense of entitlement isn't good for them or us. However, both adults and children are bombarded daily, with messages that we need more, more, more. These messages can come from television advertisements, magazines, peers, and even our own family. Knowing how to counter them can seem daunting, but it can be done.

Below, you'll find tips for helping you to teach your children how to live a life of gratitude and giving.

1. **Set the example**
Children learn more from our actions than our words, so it's important to think about what values we unconsciously teach. If every weekend to spend shopping, children quickly learn that "stuff" matters. Talk as a family about what your values really are. Try to articulate those values in one or two brief sentences, such as, "As a family we care about all people" or "As a family we want to help people who aren't as lucky as we are." Now think about how much time and money you spend on fostering those values. If the answer is "very little," think about what more you can do. The more your habits align with your values, the greater the learning for your children.
2. **De-emphasise "stuff"**
A 2006 study from the Lego® Learning Institute found that half of parents in France and Japan characterised shopping as a play activity. Our children are forgetting how to play and how to entertain themselves. Change this trend in your home by offering plenty of non-commercial, at-home activities. Play board games, go for a walk, garden, build with blocks, have a tea party, bake together, or teach your children a handicraft. These types of activities build competence and creativity. They also create a slower, more peaceful pace for children.
3. **Create a climate of giving**
Giving isn't something we do just during festivals or during a food drive or other charity event. Giving is a way of life and it starts at home. Encourage your children to look for ways to help, such as making a sibling's bed or helping with homework. On busy mornings, an older child can brush a younger child's hair or get breakfast ready. Consciously share

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Talking with Children About Homelessness

As parents, we tend to want to protect our children from the more frightening aspects of life, including homelessness and poverty. That said, children are keen observers and they perceive that the world isn't perfect in spite of our efforts to shield them. More importantly, children have an innate desire to help others and are interested in social issues. We can foster this natural tendency by having open, honest, intentional conversations about the issues of poverty and homelessness.

Parents often wonder how to start the conversation or what to say. Start by spending some time thinking about your own views on the subject. Do your perceptions match up with your values? Do you have some unconscious biases to overcome? People often become impoverished through no fault of their own, but through circumstances, such as job loss, death, divorce, or health issues. What do you want your children to know about poverty and homelessness? In what ways would you and your family like to help? Once you're clear on your own feelings, it's time to talk with your children. These conversations don't have to be long or heavy-handed. Start simply and continue to talk as your children get older.

1. **Become informed**
Learn more about homelessness and poverty yourself, and work to dispel myths and stereotypes. People become homeless for all sorts of reasons that are not their fault, including health problems, the death of a child or spouse, a job loss, and domestic violence. Homeless people come from all demographics and all walks of life. Many are families with children. More than 100,000 children in the UK and Ireland are currently homeless.
2. **Consider your child's developmental level and interest**
Young children are naturally somewhat egocentric, but as they develop, they are able to consider the needs and perspectives of others and understand more abstract concepts. This is an ideal time to broach the subject of homelessness and poverty, although some younger children will also be interested in discussing these topics.
3. **Talk about homelessness as it comes up**
When you encounter a homeless person, answer your child's questions or bring up the topic yourself. Your child may ask questions spontaneously or in response to a book or something they see on the television. Be sure to offer simple answers that are appropriate for your child's age and maturity. Think about the message you want to send to your child about homelessness and make sure your tone, body language and facial expression represent your true intention.

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Finally, Thank You!

Remember, "No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted."

Aesop



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