

The following stories from parents detail their personal experience of parenting amid the stress, sadness and isolation resulting from homelessness. They highlight the harmful impact child homelessness has on their children and their education. Veronica, Deirdre, Maria and Jessica have used pseudonyms to protect their privacy and that of their children.

Personal Testimony One: Veronica, aged 26

"It was costing me €6 every morning on a lunch for Alice going to school and I'd have to buy that in the garage. So I was driving to the garage, getting the breakfast because I had no fridge I couldn't store anything. Then coming up to the Christmas I was trying to save a few quid for Santa so I went and bought some yoghurts and butter and cheese and I left it in my car because it was freezing, so that was my fridge. There was a communal kitchen but there were no locks on anything, so if you went and done your shopping and there was another family there that didn't, they would help themselves to your food. When you came back later in the afternoon everything was gone. Eventually I bought a kettle, I boiled eggs in it and steamed the baby's bottles with it, and we used it for soup, we had soup and rolls."

Veronica is a 26-year-old mother, with two girls: Alice (6) and Annie (18 months). She had been living in supported temporary accommodation for nine months. Before that, the family had spent three months in different types of emergency accommodation; this included two months living in a women's refuge and one month of 'self-accommodating' for one to three nights in various hotels in Dublin.

In September 2016, Veronica's daughter Alice started primary school in the community where Veronica had grown up and is on the waiting list for social housing. The family was placed in emergency accommodation 36 km from Alice's primary school. Their daily routine was to wake the two girls at 6am each day and leave the refuge by 6.45am to ensure that Alice arrived at school on time. The journey took two hours by car, with the baby Anna sleeping in the car and Alice eating her breakfast on the way to school.

Alice enjoyed school; she was fond of her class teacher and the school principal. Veronica believed that she had established good relationships with other children in her class. While the school found her to be a happy and hardworking little girl, Veronica reported that Alice would often be very tired and upset at collection time, sometimes tearful on the way back to the family's accommodation.

Alice would often be reluctant to go to bed and had trouble sleeping through the night in the shared room with her mam and baby sister Annie. Veronica also found it difficult to provide meals and packed lunches for Alice because of a lack of facilities for food preparation and storage.

Veronica has moved with her girls to a self-contained housing unit within supported temporary accommodation 15 km from Alice's school. The family has a kitchen with cooking and storage facilities, which means that Veronica can plan and budget for meals and packed lunches on a weekly basis. While the journey to school still takes 45 minutes, Veronica said that Alice has an established routine, with time and space for play, homework and bedtime stories. She goes to bed at 8pm in her own room, and sleeps through the night, waking for school at 7am.

Personal Testimony Two: Deirdre, aged 47

"On a typical school day, the alarm goes off at six and we get up and get the kids washed and dressed and breakfasts, and then we do the lunches, by the time we have all that done, it's seven o'clock and we have to leave. Most mornings on the way to school on the bus, the two of them fall asleep. Now Ronan fell asleep this morning and he toppled sideways in his wheelchair and whacked his head off the

pole on the bus. And Sarah, there was no seats on the bus for her so she sat down and fell asleep on the floor.”

Deirdre, a 47-year-old mother, was living with her three children in an apartment provided as Temporary Emergency Accommodation (TEA). The family had previously been living in a three-bedroom family home for six years. In 2016, Deirdre was issued with a Notice of Termination stating that her landlord required the house for family use.

Despite efforts to find a home within their community, there was a lack of affordable housing to suit the needs of the family. Deirdre’s son, Ronan, has a physical disability and uses a wheelchair. Ronan also has ongoing health problems and has had two significant surgeries in the last four years. Their family home provided adequate space, accessibility, heating and ventilation for her son’s medical needs but Deirdre could not access equivalent affordable housing in Dublin.

In 2016, Deirdre and her children presented to the local authority and were directed to ‘self-accommodate’ in private emergency accommodation. Deirdre spent two days making phone calls to various hotels until she found availability for two nights in a hotel 20 km away. Deirdre then presented to the local authority, detailing her son’s medical needs and one month later, the family were placed in an apartment on a temporary basis. They have now been living there for over 12 months. While the apartment has ground-floor disability access for Ronan, there have been ongoing maintenance problems with plumbing and ventilation. According to Deirdre, there are significant amounts of black mould in the bathroom and bedrooms and this has exacerbated Ronan’s underlying medical condition which has meant a return to hospital and absence from school.

Two months after leaving her previous family home, Deirdre returned to the house to collect post, and was surprised to find that the house was being rented by multiple tenants for significantly more rent than her family had been paying. With support from a housing charity, she took a case to the Private Residential Tenancies Board who found that the Notice of Termination had been invalid. The Board made a modest award for damages to the family but one year after the invalid eviction from their previous home, the family remains homeless.

Personal Testimony Three: Maria, aged 31

“They’ve missed so many days because they are sick all the time. They were getting chest infections and I had no doctor. So it was a nightmare, I had no doctor because I’d no permanent address. Then I couldn’t get a doctor because they wouldn’t take me on and the kids with medical cards. Obviously, they’d sent the renewal form to my old address, so I never renewed them in time and I couldn’t reapply for medical cards without a doctor.”

Maria is a 31-year-old mother of five children who had spent 20 months living in private emergency accommodation. Maria, her partner and children had lived for eight years in private rented accommodation which they were required to vacate in 2016. On presenting to their local authority as homeless, the family was placed in a hotel 30 km from their previous home and the children's school. They were living in a room with three single beds and one double bed between two adults and four children.

During the period of homelessness, Maria became pregnant, and this placed additional strain on the family; her relationship with her partner broke down. At the time, Maria’s children attended four different schools owing to the distance between the children's school and the family’s emergency accommodation.

Last year, the family were notified that long-term accommodation had been identified and that they would be housed within four weeks. The children's new school supported the family during the period of transition, providing advice and information on the school and the local area. The school principal made time for Maria and her children to meet with class teachers prior to starting classes and the school provided a 'financial waiver' from the costs of the school book scheme and voluntary donation.

Maria's children settled well into their new school, making new friends and forming relationships with teachers and school staff. Her eldest son, Padraig (9) had been encouraged by his class teacher to join the school's football team and was delighted when he made the team.

Despite the challenges faced by the family in the period of homelessness and transitions in schooling, Maria remained optimistic about her children's experience of education and the experiences and opportunities education can provide for her children in the future.

Personal Testimony Four: Jessica, aged 24

"When we were in the hotel and moving around, Clare's behaviour got very, very bad you know. She was very, I don't like to say bold but she was very bold, you know she was just acting up all the time like, attention-seeking and screaming, all this stuff. She lashed out all the time, you know we'd come back to the hotel, and then, if we were after booking out and booking back in, we'd change room, like they'd give us a different room. Clare wouldn't understand. She'd be on the floor in the hallway shouting, 'This is our house!' You know so I had to kind of explain to her somehow like, 'No we're in this one today', it wasn't nice to try to explain that to her.

Jessica is a 24-year-old mother of two children, Clare (3) and Peter (2). Jessica presented as homeless to her local authority in 2017 following six months living with friends and family members while trying to find affordable rental accommodation. Jessica had been living in supported temporary accommodation in North County Dublin for four months. Before this, the family had spent three months moving between various hotels and bed and breakfasts in Dublin.

Jessica's son Peter was born with a complex medical condition that resulted in physical disability and severely reduced mobility. He has required ongoing medical intervention and therapeutic support since birth and requires use of a wheelchair. Jessica described how the multiple changes in accommodation impacted on her children, particularly her young daughter Clare.

Childcare had helped Clare and Peter in re-establishing routines and predictability. Despite travelling for an hour each morning, maintaining the provision was a priority for the family as the children formed relationships with staff and children in the creche. The preschool teachers were aware of Peter's physical needs and have made adaptations to the physical environment, as well as working with his physiotherapist to support his movement and independent within the creche. Clare formed relationships with her teachers and classmates and Jessica has been provided with advice and information on parenting programmes and financial supports for parents caring for a child with a disability.

Jessica believes that accessibility to affordable, high quality childcare has provided her children with secure routines to support development and learning as well as providing her with time to seek long-term accommodation and a return to employment. Jessica is a university graduate and at the time of interview was preparing to commence employment.

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