A photograph of a young child with curly hair, smiling broadly while holding hands with two adults in a circle. The child is wearing a light-colored, striped tank top. The background is a blurred outdoor setting, possibly a park or playground, with a paved path and greenery. The image has a soft, slightly desaturated color palette.

Welcome!

Please place in the chat
your name,
organization,
and what you are hoping to gain from today's
workshop.



Seeing the Unseen

How can we best support young
children and their families
experiencing homelessness?

Sarah Vrabic, M.S.

What we'll discuss today

- how experiencing homelessness may affect a young child and their family
- research findings that show when parents feel supported, their children display better social-emotional functioning, and
- actionable ways we can support children and caregivers through a relationship-based and trauma responsive lens

Children Experiencing Homelessness – McKinney-Vento Act

Children and youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence

Sharing the housing of other persons due to the loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason

Living in hotels, motels, trailer parks, camping grounds due to lack of alternative accommodations

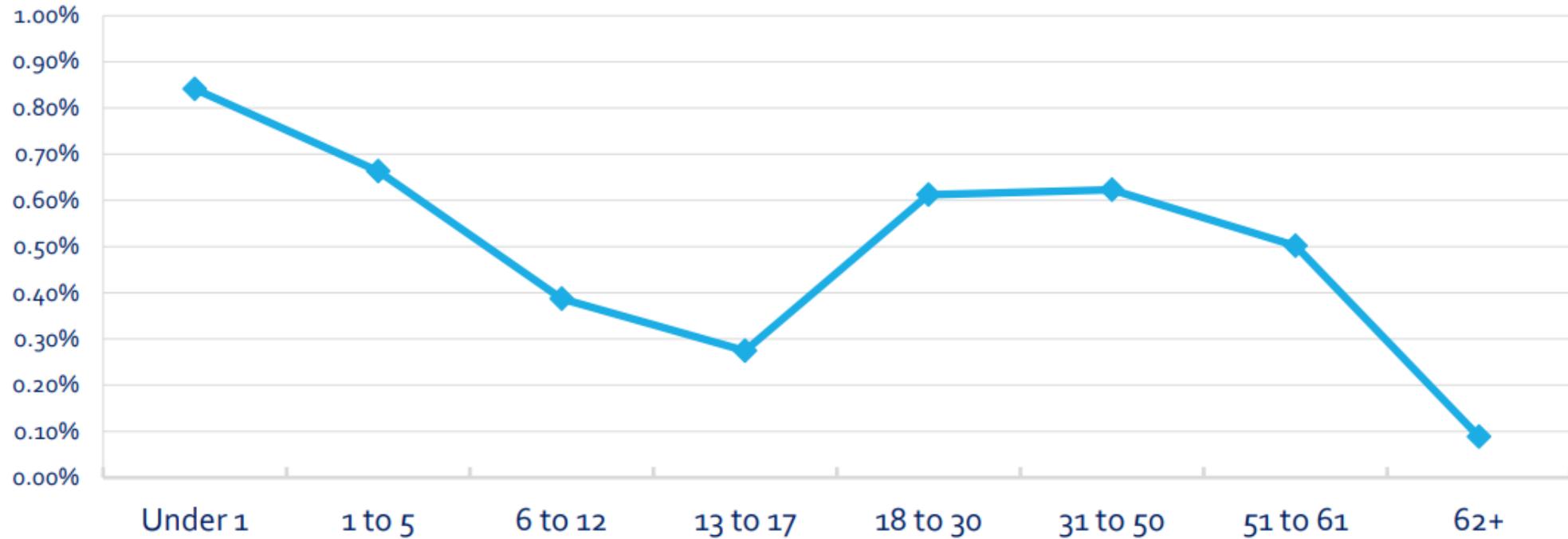
Living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings

Abandoned in hospitals

Living in emergency or transitional shelters

Primary nighttime residence is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings

Infants and Homelessness



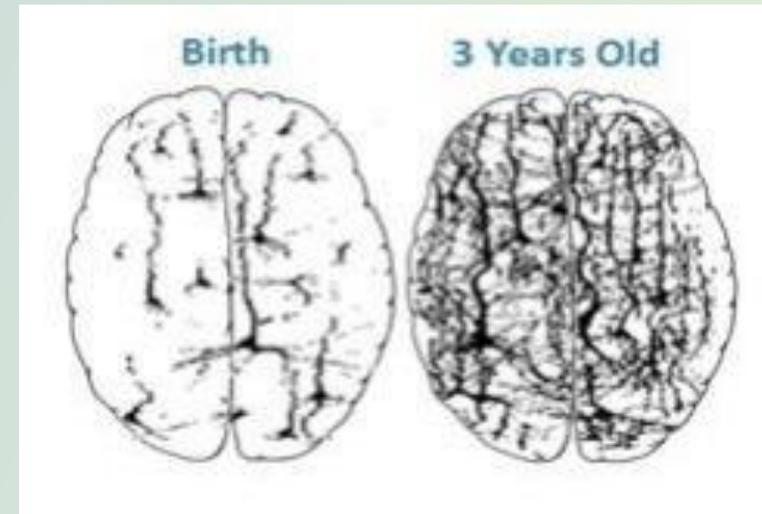
Annual Percentage Rates of Shelter Use By Age (National)

Why is this important?

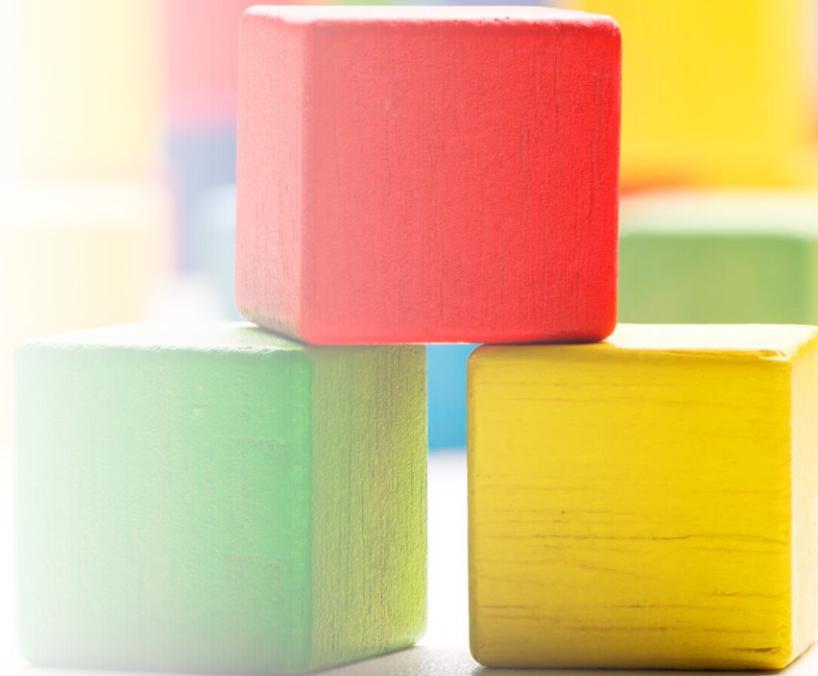
- Brain more than triples in size from birth – 24 months
 - Reaches 75% of adult size by age 2
- Positive early experiences associated with increased brain development
- Negative, associated with decreased brain development



- Newborns - lower birth weights
- Higher incidence of physical and mental health problems
- Attachment relationships and the process of caring is more challenging



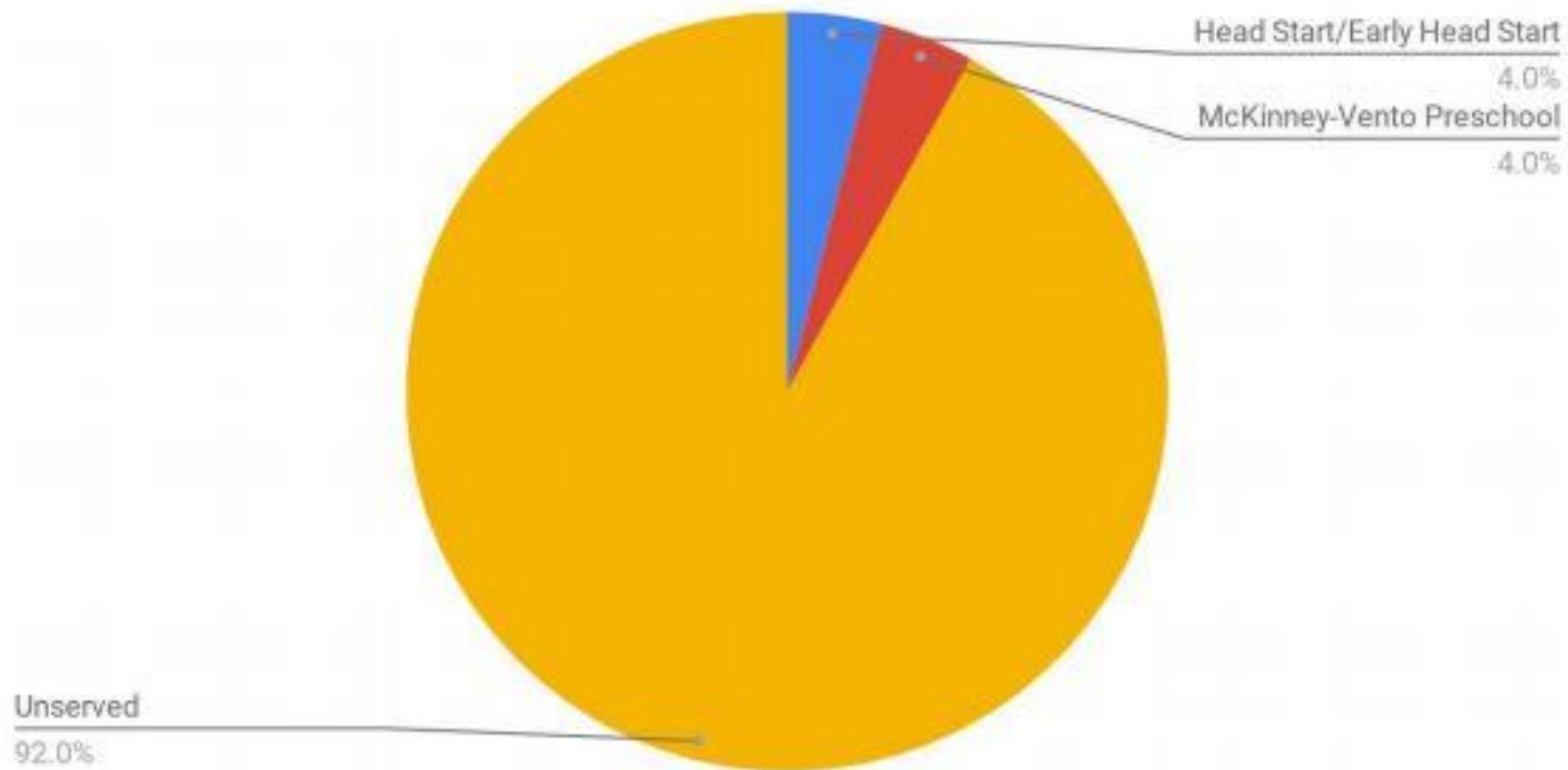
- More likely to have:
 - emotional and behavioral problems
 - developmental delays
 - repeat a school grade, be expelled or suspended or drop out of school

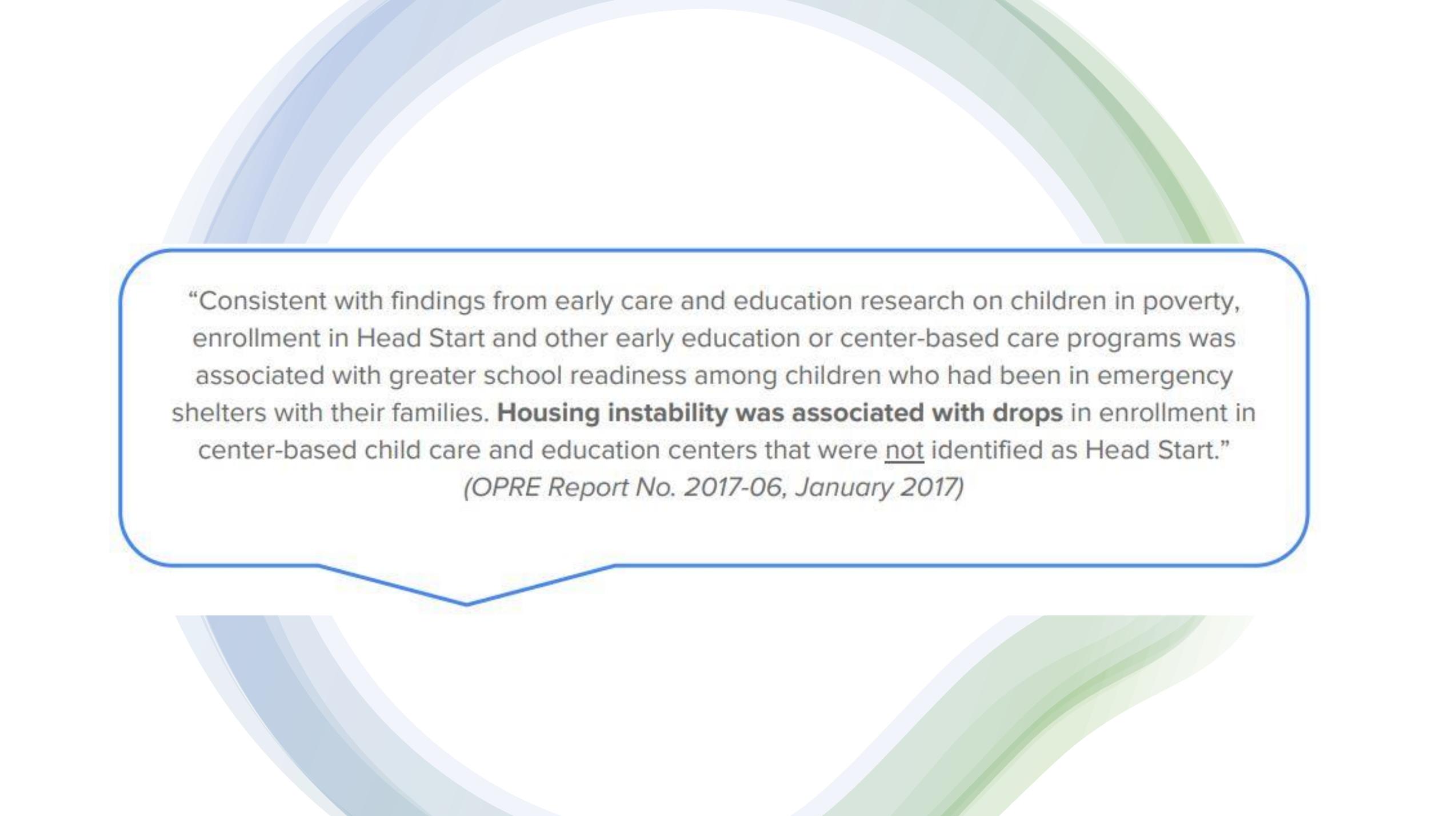




- Caregivers experiencing homelessness have higher rates of depression, severe traumatized history and posttraumatic stress disorder
- Mobility, loss of routine, chronic inconsistency
- Lack of security and basic needs such as eating and sleeping
- Greater exposure to stress and potential trauma

Source:
ACF 50 State Profile (2017)





“Consistent with findings from early care and education research on children in poverty, enrollment in Head Start and other early education or center-based care programs was associated with greater school readiness among children who had been in emergency shelters with their families. **Housing instability was associated with drops** in enrollment in center-based child care and education centers that were not identified as Head Start.”

(OPRE Report No. 2017-06, January 2017)



EARLY CHILDHOOD HOMELESSNESS: AN OVERVIEW

[updated February 2020]

Many Young Children Experience Homelessness

- Infancy is the age at which a person is most likely to live in a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) shelter.ⁱ
- 1.1 million children have an 18- to 25-year-old parent who experienced homelessness during the past year.ⁱⁱ
- According to the U.S. Department of Education, in 2017–2018, there were 1,455,537, or one-in-16, children under six years old who experienced homelessness. Six percent of children under age six were experiencing homelessness.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Approximately half of children staying in HUD homeless shelters are under age six.^{iv}

Public Schools and Head Start Programs Have Enrolled More Young Children Experiencing Homelessness in Recent Years

- In the 2015–2016 school year, public schools enrolled 43,559 homeless children ages 3–5 in preschool programs run by school districts.^v This is a 9% increase over the previous year.
- In the 2015 program year, Head Start and Early Head Start programs served 52,708 children experiencing homelessness, which represents 4.9% of all children served.^{vi} This is a 5% increase over the previous year.

Many Parents Who Experience Homelessness are Youth and Young Adults

- Forty-three percent of homeless young women ages 18–25 are pregnant or parenting.^{vii}
- Youth who are parenting are three times more likely to experience homelessness than non-parenting youth.^{viii}
- Over 27% of families in HUD shelters are headed by someone under the age of 25.^{ix}
- Homeless teens are at particularly high risk for pregnancy, with as many as 20% becoming pregnant.^x

Homelessness During Pregnancy is Harmful to Child Development

- Pregnant women experiencing homelessness are less likely to receive adequate prenatal care, and their children are at increased risk for low birth weight, which can harm cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development.^{xi}
- Children who experience homelessness before birth are more likely to have been hospitalized since birth and were in fair or poor health compared to those whose mothers had never been homeless.^{xii}

Homelessness Hurts the Health, Development, and Education of Young Children

- Homelessness in infancy is associated with early harm to children's health and development, poor caregiver health and maternal mental health, and additional material hardships for families.^{xiii}
- Experiences of homelessness and housing instability in early childhood are associated with delays in children's language, literacy, and social-emotional development.^{xiv}
- Homeless children begin Head Start behind their low-income peers in cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development.^{xv}
- The longer a young child experiences homelessness, the more that negative health outcomes are magnified, causing lifelong effects on the child, and in turn, the family and community.^{xvi}

Thank you Dr. Bethany Watson!

The Story of Family X

A family arrives at your housing program
the youngest child acts out and hits other children in Bright Spaces
mom sleeps all day and can't seem to take action to gain employment no matter how much you encourage her

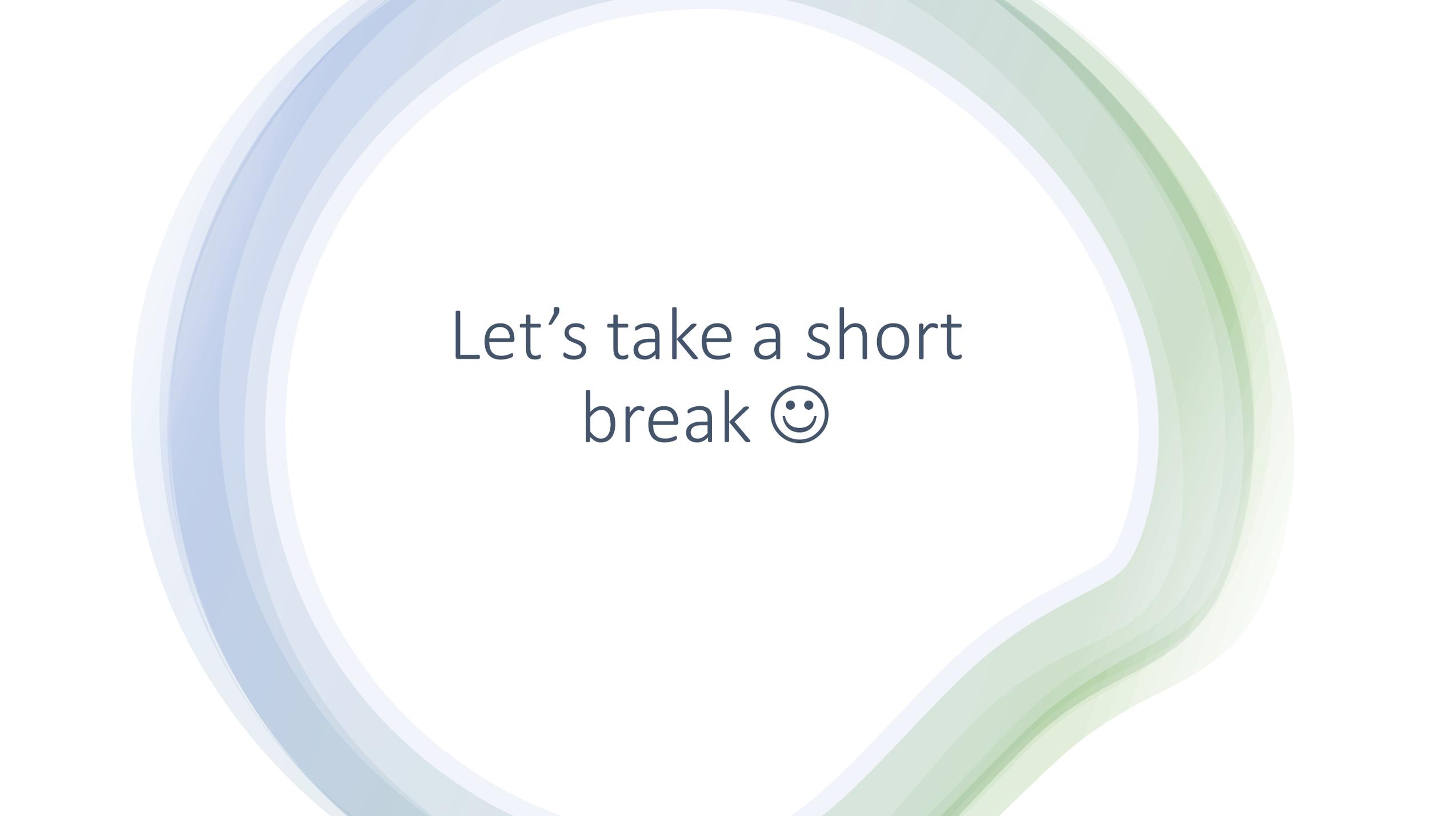
the teenager starts arguments with other teens
when you talk to mom about it she yells at you and tells you to mind your own business and to not tell her how to parent
even though you were just trying to help

The Story of Family X

A family arrives at your housing program **having just escaped domestic violence**, the youngest child acts out and hits other children in Bright Spaces **modeling the behaviors that he observed his father display**, mom sleeps all day and can't seem to take action to gain employment no matter how much you encourage her **due to being up all night due to nightmares about her former partner finding her and worries that she has failed her family and will never be able to live independently**, the teenager starts arguments with other teens **because one time when she ran away, she was sexually assaulted and has never told anyone which has resulted in pent up anger**, when you talk to mom about it she yells at you and tells you to mind your own business and to not tell her how to parent **because she is so overwhelmed and does not know how else to cope** even though you were just trying to help

Case Studies

Will receive two in the chat (20 mins)

A decorative graphic consisting of several concentric, overlapping curved lines. The lines on the left are blue, and the lines on the right are green. The lines are semi-transparent and have a soft, glowing effect.

Let's take a short
break 😊

RESEARCH ARTICLE

WILEY

Perceptions of support in shelter environments for caregivers and young children experiencing family homelessness

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Abstract

Background: Young children who stay with their families in homeless shelters face chronic challenges related to extreme poverty and acute risks from stressful events surrounding the loss of housing and move to shelter. These adversities increase the likelihood of a range of poor developmental outcomes. Consistent with the risk and resilience perspective, however, many children who experience family homelessness succeed, functioning as well or better than their non-homeless peers. As such, efforts to support resilience should consider how best to enhance protective factors, such as supportive environments within shelter settings.

Methods: With data from 60 caregivers of children ages birth to 5 years recruited from family shelters, we assessed caregivers' perceptions of community support as well as child and family well-being in terms of recent adverse experiences, parenting stress, access to social support, and child social-emotional functioning.

Results: Many caregivers experiencing family homelessness perceived negative aspects of the shelters where they were staying with their children. Furthermore, children whose caregivers had more negative perceptions of the shelter environment displayed worse social-emotional functioning, even when accounting for differences in parenting stress, recent family adversity, and other sources of social support.

Conclusions: Because young children rely on their caregivers as primary resources for nurturance and support, we encourage family homelessness service providers to work in partnership with caregivers to create more inclusive and empowering practices within the shelter context. Doing so is likely to improve children's developmental outcomes and the overall well-being of the families.

KEYWORDS

adversity, homelessness, parenting stress, resilience, risk

1 | INTRODUCTION

Among the approximately 291,000 U.S. children who stayed in emergency shelters for families experiencing homelessness in 2017, 49% were children under the age of 6 years (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2018). These numbers are predicted to increase substantially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Coughlin et al., 2020). When staying in homeless shelters with their

families, young children face numerous forms of adversity. These challenges include not only the chronic risks associated with extreme poverty but also acute risks from the stressful or traumatic events that precipitate or accompany the loss of housing and move to shelter (Cutuli & Herbers, 2014; Haskett & Armstrong, 2019). Together, these adversities increase the likelihood for poor developmental outcomes across domains of physical health, cognitive functioning, social relationships, academic achievement and mental health compared with

- 
- A photograph of a man and a young child. The man is wearing a blue patterned shirt and glasses, and the child is wearing a white shirt. They are both flexing their arms in a playful gesture. The background is a large window with a grid pattern, letting in bright light. A white circular graphic is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing text.
- Children under 6 years of age make up almost 50% of the population of families staying in emergency housing
 - Let's talk about **resilience** and **protective factors**



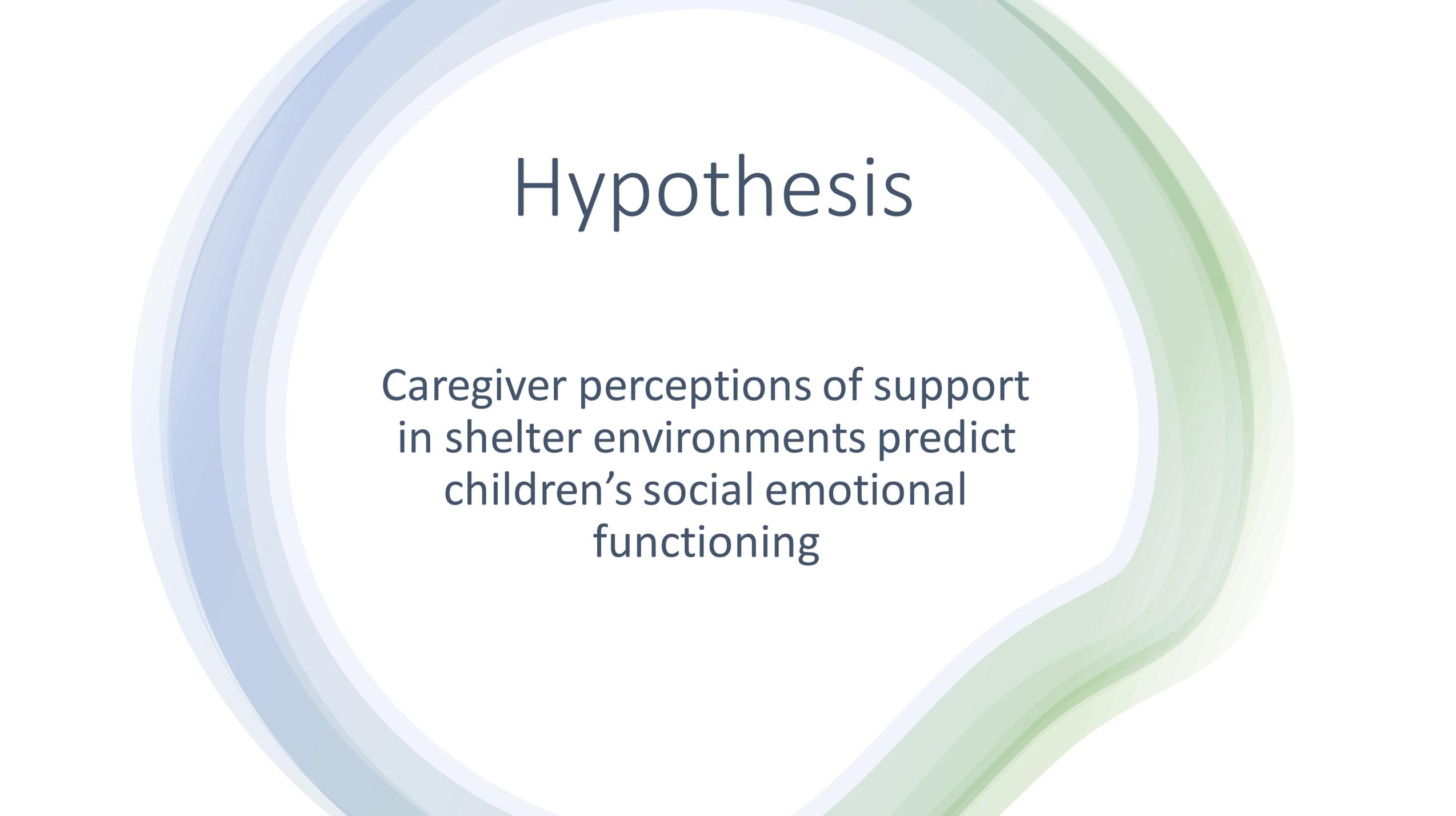
What do you think are
some protective
factors for young
children?

Some background...

The Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters

What if we considered the caregiver perspective on these domains?





Hypothesis

Caregiver perceptions of support
in shelter environments predict
children's social emotional
functioning

Participants and Procedure

60 caregivers recruited from 5 Philadelphia family housing programs with at least one child birth to age 5 (child of focus)

Structured Interviews

Children of focus ranged in age from 3 months to 71 months

Caregivers ranged in age from 18 to 47 years

Measures

- **Parenting Stress**

- 12 item Parent–Child Dysfunctional Interaction subscale of the Parenting Stress Index, Fourth Edition (PSI-4-SF; Abidin, 2012)

- **Social Support**

- **Adversity**

- Life Events Questionnaire (LEQ; Masten et al., 1994)

Measures

- **Children's Social-Emotional Functioning**
 - Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA: LeBuffe & Naglieri, 1999)
 - Infant, toddler, and preschooler
- **Perception of Shelter Community**
 - 14 self-report items describing sense of community within the shelter context (Vrabic, 2018)

New Items

“I feel this community follows a schedule that supports my needs and goals as a parent.”

“I feel this community supports the enrichment and growth of my child.”

“I feel I have a voice among this community’s staff (e.g., case managers, social workers, etc.)”

ECSA Items

“We follow a schedule that allows infants, toddlers, and preschoolers to attend child care, Head Start, IDEA Part C early intervention or Part B preschool or other early care and learning programs.”

“We have onsite early childhood enrichment programming for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.”

“We encourage and incorporate parent feedback regarding our facility’s policies towards the safety and development of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.”

“We have a clear process to receive feedback and/or file grievances relating to the shelter’s policies and practices concerning infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.”

Perception of Shelter Community

- Incorporates themes from the Self-Assessment
- Items modelled after existing measure of general community support,
- Sense of Community Index II (SCI-2; Chavis et al., 2008)
 - 4 subscales based on membership, influence, reinforcement of needs, shared emotional connection

I feel my child is
safe in this
community

Items with the highest scores

This community gives
me opportunities for
private time with my
child

Items with the highest scores

This community and I
are working toward a
common goal

Items with the highest scores

Items with the lowest scores

I feel listened to and respected when I talk about my problems to this community

Items with the lowest scores

I feel I have a voice
among this
community's staff

Items with the lowest scores

When helping me solve my problems, I feel this community puts my unique perspective first

Results

30% of children scored a full standard deviation below average on social-emotional functioning

Toddlers and preschoolers more likely to score below average



Results

Perception of shelter community was significantly correlated with children's social–emotional well-being

Parenting stress had a strong and significant negative correlation with children's social–emotional functioning

Perception of the shelter community and parenting stress significantly predicted children's social–emotional functioning



What does this mean...

Caregivers endorsed items pertaining to shared goals and children's health and safety

Items pertaining to trust and empowerment were rated lower

Children of caregivers with positive perceptions of shelter environment displayed better social-emotional functioning...

even when accounting for a strong effect of parenting stress and potential confounds of recent family adversity and other sources of social support



The background features a series of concentric, semi-transparent circles in shades of light blue and green, creating a ripple effect. The overall color gradient transitions from a light blue on the left to a light green on the right.

Thoughts?

What are some
recommendations you
have based on these
results?

Recommendations

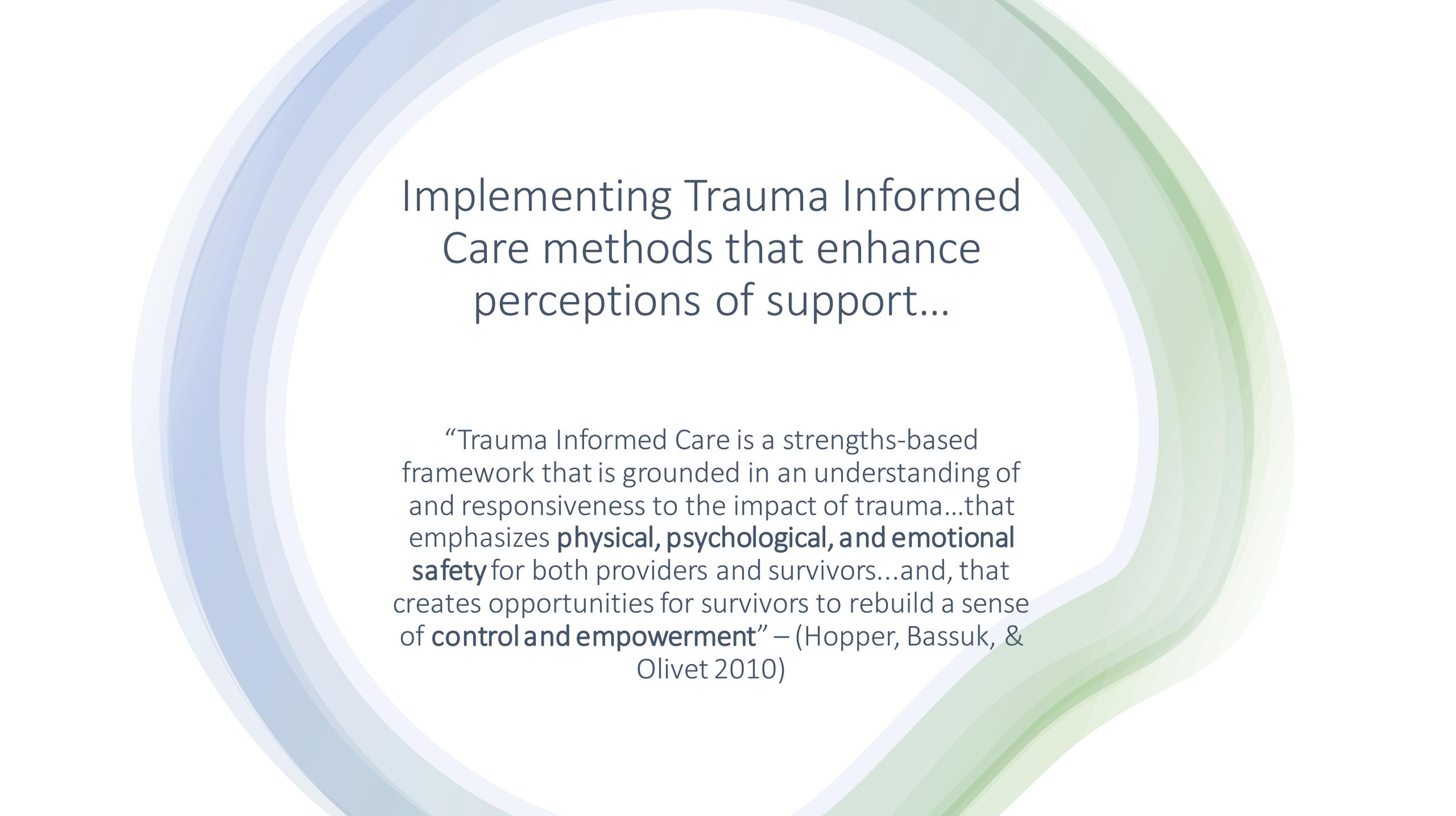
- Implementing Trauma Informed Care methods that enhance perceptions of support
 - Include caregiver perspectives when assessing shelter services and policies
 - Implement a Participant Advisory Council
 - Value Participant input when determining the rules or shared agreements for the shelter community
 - Help families maintain their individual family routines



Recommendations

- Cross-systems collaboration
- Include multiple systems in trainings and workshops – why we're here today!
- Regularly assess and reflect on practices and environments that serve children and families
- Try to have conversations about housing, using sensitive language
 - Perhaps including housing questions at intake/initial application
- Develop partnerships with your local schools and McKinney-Vento Liaisons





Implementing Trauma Informed Care methods that enhance perceptions of support...

“Trauma Informed Care is a strengths-based framework that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma...that emphasizes **physical, psychological, and emotional safety** for both providers and survivors...and, that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of **control and empowerment**” – (Hopper, Bassuk, & Olivet 2010)



It is so important
to take care of
ourselves

Resources

- Sarah Vrabic
 - svrabic@hopephl.org
- SchoolHouse Connection's Report on Infants and Toddlers Experiencing Homelessness
 - <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/SHC-Infant-and-Toddler-Homelessness-2022.pdf>
- Administration for Children and Families' Self-Assessment Tool for Early Childhood Programs Serving Families Experiencing Homelessness
 - <https://www.earlychildhoodwebinars.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Self-Assessment-Tool-for-Early-Childhood-Programs.pdf>
- Administration for Children and Families' Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Shelters
 - https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ecd/ec_self_assessment_tool_for_shelters_v5_21_2020.pdf
- Head Start's decision-making tool to determine a family's housing situation
 - <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/decision-making-tool-family-homeless.pdf>



Thank You!