



36 **H**IS FOR...

Today's episode is brought to you by the letter "H" – for home, help and healing. [Aimee Knight](#) meets the first Muppet to be portrayed as homeless, and looks at why it's so important to talk to kids about the hard stuff.

MEET LILY. AFTER losing their apartment, and spending time in a shelter, she and her family are staying on Sesame Street with their friend Sofia (Jasmine Romero, left) while they look for housing.

"I love watching Lily," says Kama Einhorn, senior content manager at Sesame Workshop, who speaks fondly of the "sweet, hopeful, optimistic" young Muppet she helped create.

Based in New York City, Sesame Workshop is the non-profit organisation behind *Sesame Street*. It strives to educate, entertain and enrich kids tuning into the longest-running children's show in America. With their program now aired in more than 150 countries, Sesame Workshop runs national and international impact campaigns that complement the stories unfolding on screen.

Since its debut in 1969, *Sesame Street* has reflected the diversity of urban life. Its human cast features folks from varied cultural backgrounds and people living with disabilities, alongside Jim Henson's beloved Muppets like Cookie Monster, Elmo, Ernie and Bert. In recent years, *Sesame Street* – and its many international co-productions – has also welcomed new puppets who are neurodiverse, HIV-positive, and, most recently, experiencing homelessness.

"We knew that homelessness was on the rise," Einhorn says, citing some heart-breaking statistics. "In the US, 2.5 million children go to sleep without a home of their own. Nearly half are under the age of six."

Sesame Street has always tackled difficult topics – hands up who remembers Big Bird grieving for Mr Hooper – and Sesame Workshop goes "wherever vulnerable children and families could most use The Muppets". Einhorn's group, US Social Impact, helps kids deal with divorce, incarceration, family violence – anything that could diminish their resilience.

As the rental market gets

increasingly competitive, families like Lily's struggle to find affordable homes. In Australia, poor investment in social housing and the lack of a national strategy for early intervention are factors causing family homelessness to spike. Data from the 2016 Australian Census showed that there were 15,872 children under 12 without a safe place to call home – an increase of 11 per cent since 2011. Of the growing number of Australians experiencing homelessness, 43,552 of them are under the age of 25.

Yet family homelessness is still largely unseen by those who don't experience it.

To many, homelessness means rough sleeping, but that's far too dangerous for families. They may stay at a refuge, in a car, or with relatives and friends,

they told us and we 'Sesamatised' it," she says, referencing that X factor that makes *Sesame Street* so charming, engaging and enduring. ("H" is also for "Happy birthday!" This year, *Sesame Street* celebrates a half-century on air.)

The next step was focus-testing. Einhorn's team took preliminary materials to social workers, teachers and health care professionals for feedback. After all, the resources can help them, too.

Lastly, they spoke to parents with a current or past experience of homelessness. "That was where the really poignant stories and insights worked themselves into the folds of the work," she says.

The Muppeteer behind – or, rather, below – Lily is Leslie Carrara-Rudolph.

"The 2016 Australian Census showed that there were 15,872 children under 12 without a safe place to call home."

but they're out of the public eye. These kids become, in Einhorn's words, "invisible children".

Sesame noticed a need for materials that explain homelessness to pre-schoolers. "We knew we could present this topic to the youngest children, in this special *Sesame* way," she says. "Because of The Muppets, we have a light touch with this heavy topic. We can present information from a child's perspective, offer them comfort."

They set about creating videos, articles, activity sheets – even a storybook starring Lily, written by Einhorn herself – to discuss homelessness with children. Now available on the *Sesame Street in Communities* website, there are resources for kids who have and have not experienced homelessness, all informed by rigorous research – "The lifeblood of *Sesame Street*," says Einhorn.

A national advisory panel helped inform Lily's story. "We took everything

What was it like, finally watching her bring Lily to life? "It was completely silent on set," Einhorn recalls. "There were chills. She was tearful. We watched the character we'd been thinking about and talking about come into existence. It's something you don't forget."

LILY FIRST TROD the boards at 123 Sesame in the 2011 special *Growing Hope Against Hunger*. Part of Sesame Workshop's response to America's malnutrition crisis, it showed Lily experiencing food insecurity – one possible precursor to homelessness. "If Lily's parents were struggling with poverty," says Einhorn, "it was likely that the dominoes might start falling. Shelter would likely be down the row. It was a sadly logical narrative."

While there's overlap between poverty and homelessness, the latter is also a specific trauma, with distinct risks and repercussions. Einhorn says

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS COUNTS

38%

of Australians experiencing homelessness are under 25 years old.

Source: ABS



26%

Increase in homelessness of people aged 12–24 since the 2006 Census.

Source: ABS



11x

more likely for Indigenous children aged 0–14 to be homeless than non-Indigenous children.

Source: Council to Homeless Persons



50%

of children who exit the state care system at 18 will be unemployed, in jail, homeless or a new parent within 12 months of leaving care.

Source: The Home Stretch

Where are young people staying?

59%

severely crowded dwellings

9%

boarding houses

18%

supported accommodation for the homeless

3%

rough sleeping

10%

staying temporarily with other households

Source: ABS, for young people aged 12–24



20,000+

people aged 15–24 sought homelessness services in 2017–18.

Source: Council to Homeless Persons

25%

of homeless young people (15–24) experienced domestic or family violence.

Source: ABS

homelessness is a “layered trauma”, the first tier being the circumstances that put a family at risk. Next is the ordeal of actually losing the home. Then there’s the distress of homelessness itself, and the related dehumanisation.

In Australia, family violence is the primary cause of women and children’s homelessness. Compounded by unaffordable housing, it’s also a key factor in youth homelessness, which has increased 26 per cent over the past decade. People aged 12 to 24 now account for almost a quarter of all Australians staying in supported accommodation, and a third of those living in severely crowded dwellings.

Kate Colvin, acting CEO at the Council to Homeless Persons, says “it’s very difficult for a young person to rent in the private market, so they’ll end up couch-surfing”. Moving disrupts study and disconnects young people from natural support networks. “That can be really traumatic. Instability has a devastating effect on young people.”

Colvin says adults who experienced homelessness as children are much more likely to be long-term unemployed. This, in turn, catalyses various physical and mental health issues.

“All trauma creates a public health risk,” says Einhorn. “Homelessness is one of the more complex ones. We talk a lot about ‘help, hope and healing’. Our Sesame stance is about kindness, empathy and compassion – building smarter, stronger, kinder kids.”

FASCINATED BY CHILDREN’S worldviews, Sesame Workshop wanted to glean the age at which kids start to notice some people don’t have homes. When does that recognition become stigma?

“We learned that there’s a continuum of bias development,” says Einhorn. “Part of that is simply how the human brain works. We sort in ‘same’ and ‘different’, by colour, shape, size. That’s a go-to cognitive strategy that happens pretty early.”

She says a child as young as three may ask, “Why is that man lying on the ground?” or “Why are that woman’s clothes dirty?” Honest, age-appropriate questions. Adults should give concrete

answers – “He doesn’t have a place to live right now” and “People without homes don’t always have a place to shower” – without stigmatising or judgement.

When discussing homelessness with kids who haven’t experienced it, Einhorn suggests waiting for the child to broach the subject. Pay close attention to what they’re thinking and feeling. You might need to ask *them* a question to find out what they’re really wondering.

“If they’re walking by a person on the street without permanent shelter, [kids] might read adult body-language and cues to be scared,” Einhorn says. If a child is not being compassionate, the adult should counter that directly.

“We never shy away from tough topics with kids. They’re dealing with the same world we are. They need a caring adult to explain things honestly; to feel like they can ask difficult questions.”

SO WHAT CAN kids and adults do to address family homelessness in their communities?

Colvin says, “Be an active citizen. This is a major issue for Australia. Not just for people who are experiencing homelessness, but for people on the cusp of homelessness because they pay so much in rent.” As the national spokesperson for Everybody’s Home – a campaign to fix Australia’s broken housing system – she urges people to demand governments deliver affordable social housing and provide better support for young people struggling at home.

If your child is keen to help, Einhorn recommends donating pocket-money or clothes. “When we’re cleaning out our homes, make a special effort to consider who’s vulnerable,” she says, adding, “It’s not ‘us’ and ‘them’. Everyone wants to feel safe, happy, healthy and loved.”

AFTER EVERY INITIATIVE launches, Sesame Workshop conducts research to measure its reach and impact. “We’ve had some really beautiful stories,” says Einhorn. “They all speak to this idea that The Muppets have a straight line to our hearts – and that’s not just for children. Most adults have their favourite Muppet.” Hers is Grover.

“They have a special power, so it’s



TOP ROSITA SHOWS THE WAY.
BELOW BIG BIRD HELPS OUT.
BELOW RIGHT ELMO WHISPERS A SECRET.



not surprising that kids relate to them. That’s why Lily looks more like a human rather than a monster Muppet,” she says. “We really needed kids to see themselves in her.”

Real-life children like Lily feel “a profound sense of dislocation and isolation, like this is only happening to them”, says Colvin, moved by the warmth that Sesame Street’s residents extend to their newest neighbour. “If a child feels as though Lily represents them, then that care can be transferred through watching the show. They can feel that people care about them.

“Seeing their situation represented, seeing that other families struggle

with these issues, will make a real difference,” Colvin adds. “It helps them make meaning.”

In true *Sesame* style, Lily’s family surmounts their crisis. “That’s what we hope for every child and adult who comes through trauma,” says Einhorn.

To pay her good fortune forward, Lily gifts Elmo a visual reminder of her survivor’s pride: her rainbow ribbons of – remember the letter of the day? – hope.

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