Insights Brief

How good housing ensures a good start for children and parents

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About the Author

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Prior to her current role as Senior Design Researcher at AtkinsRéalis, Tayo worked as a project officer and researcher at LSE Cities and as an architect at the Dublin-based commercial architecture practice BKD, where she specialised in large-scale residential design. Tayo has also published a number of research publications focused on gender, cities, regeneration and displacement. She serves as the youngest Trustee of Make Space for Girls, a charity dedicated to advocating for public spaces that better reflect the needs of young women, girls and caregivers.

Why housing matters for families with young children

Our formative years are spent in or near a place we call home – long hours of sleeping and growing, taking our first steps, and playing under the watchful eyes of parents. However, homes in many cities are anything but nurturing places for caregivers and children. Around the world, about a quarter of children are growing up in informal housing. An estimated 150 million people are homeless (Henry, 2021). The housing crisis is a global problem: it has been estimated that 80% of cities lack affordable housing options for a large majority of their populations (European Parliament, 2020). The first five years of a child's life are a window of opportunity during which brains grow rapidly, neural connections are malleable, and experiences shape their lifelong capacity for learning, emotional regulation, and behaviour (Tierney and Nelson, 2009). The physical environment in which children grow up deeply shapes their develop and potential.

For young families, the consequences of poor or unstable housing are profound. Children are more likely to be absent from school, or become ill enough to need hospitalisation. They also have fewer opportunities for social and economic mobility. Good housing, however, can support the cognitive and emotional development in children that underpins lifelong success (Mcdonald et al., 2013; Habitat for Humanity, n.d .; Levine Coley et al., n.d.).

Caregivers, too, need a home that contributes to their emotional resilience. Poor housing causes parents to feel immense pressure and stress, as becoming a parent is also a period of growth and transition that causes vast hormonal changes in brains and bodies. On a wider scale, family-focused urban planning approaches to delivering good housing create considerable societal benefits for human health, learning and wellbeing.

For decades, however, children's and caregivers' needs have been routinely overlooked in housing debates. Housing is increasingly treated as a financial commodity, constrained by inadequate public policies, poor urban planning, and ineffective regulation. Housing policy often reduces homes to 'units', rather than conceiving of them as nurturing environments for healthy development during a child's early years. In certain countries housing demands are driven by a mortgage market catering to the needs of single-occupancy homes or first-time buyers with no caregiving duties. The housing crisis is therefore deepening far-reaching challenges for early childhood development and family wellbeing.

This brief sets out to define how housing can support a good start for children and parents. It makes the case for reframing housing as an investment in societal health – a pathway for generational flourishing. It highlights why and how a range of stakeholders can embrace family-oriented approaches to housing policy, design and development. It warns that neglecting the importance of the early years in housing policy can perpetuate intergenerational cycles of inequality.

What is 'good housing' for a good start?

We use the term 'good housing' to refer to housing that intentionally creates a healthy and nurturing environment for families with young children. Good housing meets certain standards of quality, safety, affordability and suitability for families. It is safe, warm and dry. It gives people their own personal space. It offers proximity to transport, amenities and community.

Far from being a lofty ideal, good housing is a basic human right recognised by the United Nations (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1991; Mazzucato and Farha, 2023).

'Bad housing' is a term used frequently in the built environment industry to describe inadequate standards of housing related to quality, safety and affordability. However, the impact on children and caregivers is often overlooked. Sub-standard living conditions such as the presence of mould, overcrowding, lack of ventilation or insufficient heating are linked to chronic illnesses, from asthma to cardiovascular disease. Insecure housing, marked by frequent moves or threats of eviction, leads to anxiety and depression – affecting parents' ability to support their children emotionally, and increasing the risk of maltreatment (Chandler et al., 2020). A comparative study of housing characteristics found that 'poor housing quality is the most consistent and strongest predictor of emotional and behavioral problems in low-income children' (Levine Coley et al., 2013).

Despite this growing evidence, housing policy remains largely reactive rather than proactive. Governments often prioritise the delivery of 'affordable housing units', measuring success by quantity rather than overall quality or the long-term wellbeing of families. There is no denying that affordability is important, particularly for families whose costs rise rapidly when they have children – childcare, food, energy, and medical expenses all add financial strain. In the USA, for example, children in households where more than 30% of income goes towards housing are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities or have access to nutritious meals (Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk, 2011). However, as 'affordability' is typically defined in relation to income, this narrow focus risks marginalising parents who do not work. It also misses the other essential aspects of good housing that ensure strong foundations for families in the early years. When considering Megan Sandel's view of 'good housing as a preventive vaccine' (Habitat for Humanity, 2015), the impacts of bad housing lead to costs in other sectors, from financing emergency shelters to treating illnesses and providing additional support in schools. More broadly, it creates a societal toll of unrealised potential.

Five arguments that make the case for 'good housing'

1. Caregivers need security and children need stability

Skyrocketing rents, precarious tenancy agreements and predatory landlords make it harder for parents to create a stable, nurturing environment for their children. When young families are pushed out due to rising prices, their family and community support networks are fractured, their access to livelihood essentials is disrupted, and their mental health and relationships come under pressure. Families need guaranteed, reasonable timeframes for their residence, coupled with secure tenure and protection from eviction or displacement.

Healthy child development also depends on secure attachment, which is threatened by insecure living arrangements. Research shows that children who move house three or more times their first five years are more likely to develop problems with attention and behaviour (Ziol-Guest and McKenna, 2013). Frequent relocations and financial insecurity increase the risk of 'adverse childhood experiences', which can lead to long-term physical and mental health issues including a higher risk of substance abuse and depression (Radcliff et al., 2019).

2. Families who feel safe are healthier and happier

Home should be a place of safety – both inside and outside. Families with young children want to feel secure in their homes and neighbourhoods. Parents experience higher levels of anxiety when issues such as crime, harassment, substance abuse and gender-based violence are prevalent in the area where they live. They are less likely to spend time outdoors with their children, depriving them of experiences needed for healthy development. Green spaces, safe streets and affordable housing close to local services lead to increased physical activity, better mental health and less strain on municipal healthcare systems.

Evidence shows that people living closer to green spaces are more physically active and children who play in green spaces have been found to maintain a healthy weight than children who did not have access to such amenities (Natural England, 2009). Neighbourhood safety around homes is thus a critical factor in shaping how families engage with their surroundings. Investment in well-lit streets, pedestrian-friendly pathways, public art and lively and accessible recreational areas can help create environments where families feel safe and supported.

The quality of buildings should also be considered. In many cities, population growth is outpacing the construction of adequate housing and infrastructure. Many housing developments are also not designed to withstand increasing climate-related challenges, such as floods and landslides.

As a result, many families live in self-built informal housing, exposing children to health risks from toxic materials, structural failure, inadequate protection from extreme weather, indoor air pollution, and lack of reliable sanitation or access to clean water.

Insecurity frequently stems from deeper issues of neglect, marginalisation and systemic injustice in cities. Young children inherit the struggles of generations before them – but good housing can break this vicious cycle. Interventions such as 'Plan Terrazas' in Bogotá (see case study), or deploying community and welfare support services and investing in safe recreational spaces for children and young people, can help make neighbourhoods more attractive for families, which in turn makes them feel more safe.

Case study: Bogotá

In the second half of the 20th century, the population of Bogotá increased tenfold as families self-built homes on unstable land at the city's edges. Plan Terrazas provided grants to retrofit these homes in ways that improve their safety – such as fixing roofs and building extensions to overcrowded dwellings – while also formalising property rights and placing urban development in public hands (Council on Urban Initiatives, 2023).

The case of Bogotá shows that the path to ensuring safe and high-quality housing begins with robust housing standards that are rigorously enforced, with accountability for landlords and property developers. Delivering a site specific programmes such as Plan Terrazas also requires a set budget allocation to guarantee continuity, publicity, training and sensitisation in its approach to communities, among other things.Where properties have been built before such standards, governments can also step in with targeted subsidies for landlords and low-income homeowners to make critical repairs or upgrades. (Council on Urban Initiatives, 2023).

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3. Access to services is a lifeline for parents

The availability of amenities near housing shapes the daily choices of young families. For example, if parents live near a community garden, they may be more likely to grow their own healthy foods while spending time with others in their community. Conversely, if housing developments are surrounded by fast-food outlets, time-poor parents are more likely to make unhealthy dietary choices.

Whether neighbourhoods offer reliable child-care services may determine how confident a parent feels about re-entering the workforce, with impacts on economic productivity. For children, regularly attending playgroups can help develop social skills, resulting in improved academic outcomes (Levine Coley et al., 2013; Sandel et al., 2020 ; McLean et al., 2022).

Public transport systems also play a role in good housing. Caregivers often make complex daily 'trip chains', such as combining a school run with a doctor's visit and grocery shopping. These trips are easier if facilities such as metro stations have ramps, free step access or baby changing facilities. When children have to travel long distances to school, absenteeism is higher (Stein and Grigg, 2019).

Thoughtfully designing supportive environments around housing can allow parents to spend less time navigating logistical hurdles and more time engaging with each other, reducing their levels of stress. Public investment in areas such as childcare and healthcare hubs can make neighbourhoods more connected and reduce disparities faced by lower-income families. Affordable housing with amenities accessible through walking or biking can benefit physical health and reduce transport carbon emissions. Green spaces near homes also reduce the urban heat island effect and the risk of flooding.

4. Housing can rebuild villages of support for families

Good housing can encourage interactions that build trust and create meaningful connections, which brings benefits beyond families and supports entire communities. The trend towards 'cellularisation', as housing units get smaller, is pushing communities towards a culture of individualism and isolation (Council on Urban Initiatives, 2023). New parents are especially at risk of loneliness and depression if they have relocated away from family members and friends who can provide emotional support or practical assistance.

'Third spaces' within housing developments – such as communal gardens, play areas, and multi-purpose rooms – bring neighbours together, providing opportunities to build support networks that can be particularly transformative for young parents. Having play spaces near home is especially valuable for children, enabling a routine that establishes consistency and rhythm, and aiding autonomy and independence (Kyttä, 2004). Shared green spaces encourage play, exploration, cognitive development and physical activity (Cole and Hussain, 2023), as well as giving caregivers a space to recharge.

Shared spaces contribute to families developing a feeling of connection with their neighbourhood, putting down roots and investing in the community. They enable a diverse social and economic mix of residents to develop relationships, which helps to create more resilient, interconnected cities where all generations can thrive together including elder populations. Housing units should be designed for intergenerational living, considering mobility, flexibility of bedroom sizes and layouts, as well as typologies of homes that fit beyond the nuclear family.

Case study: Copenhagen

The 'co-housing' communities of Copenhagen offer a compelling model for countering isolation. Known as bofællesskaber, these communities combine private living spaces with shared facilities such as kitchens, gardens and play areas to foster interaction and shared responsibility. Bofællesskaber also offer practical benefits, such as cost saving through centralising resources and reducing energy consumption (Larsen, 2019).

5. Engaging parents and children in housing decisions strengthens community spirit

The 'good' in 'good housing' evolves in response to changing needs, values and societal challenges. Effective housing management needs to include mechanisms for residents to continuously share feedback, experiences, insights and recommendations. Management systems must go beyond tick-box exercises, instead empowering residents to play an active role in shaping and co-creating their communities.

Such mechanisms build trust, signalling to families that their voices matter. Studies show that families who participated in advisory committees or decision-making processes in co-housing developments felt a sense of ownership and strengthened bonds between neighbours.

Alongside the collection of data to assess the effects of housing improvements, engagement with residents can point to small yet profoundly impactful changes. For example, perceived issues around safety at a local park could be mitigated by better lighting and more neighbourhood activities rather than increased security to monitor outdoor play areas.

The stakeholders that shape good housing

Community organizations and social enterprises have a deep understanding of local needs and an ability to reach parents, convening people to make their insights invaluable for designers, developers and local authorities. They can spearhead initiatives such as developing co-housing schemes, setting up community land trusts, squatting to reclaim land, or lobbying for stronger legal protections. We encourage them to continue amplifying the voices of families and to demand accountability from policymakers in order that policies reflect the experiences of children and caregivers.

Architects can shift industry priorities, positioning themselves as key drivers of both market success and people-focused design. Their work directly impacts the lives of children and caregivers through decisions on everything from the selection of construction materials to the configuration of floor plans that are sufficiently flexible to evolve with changing family needs. While client and investor preferences and market forces create limitations for architects and their decision making, promoting 'good housing' principles also opens opportunities – particularly in addressing the pressing demand for family-oriented housing. By expanding their expertise on child development and parent wellbeing, architects can add tangible value, not only by improving living environments but also by offering a unique selling point to residents.

Housing associations and housing management entities make decisions that impact the lived experience of families. They can advise investors to regularly collect feedback from residents, which could benefit all parties in decision making and allocating finances. They should establish robust monitoring systems for rapid-response repairs and schedule routine checks – for instance, regularly inspecting the safety of play equipment in playgrounds. Incorporating family-centred initiatives such as seasonal celebrations, playgroups, or parent–child workshops into housing management strengthens community ties and social support for young families. Participatory decision making ensures that residents feel their voices are being heard and valued.

Developers can improve their projects by learning from pre- and post-occupancy feedback loops. These may involve asking questions such as: 'Which space do you use the most when you are feeling anxious?' or 'How often do you use the nearby playground?' Such research can support their understanding of which spaces are successful for caregivers and children and identify potential pain points. Developers should seek to engage meaningfully with community organisations or social enterprises to understand residents' concerns and aspirations, using tools such as the Social Value ROI toolkit and the Family Voices Toolkit. (ZCD Architects, & Van Leer Foundation, 2024).

Investors can prioritise long-term value and integrate social impact criteria into their investment decisions, to drive the development of family-friendly housing. This includes funding projects that offer ample green spaces, safe play areas and community-focused designs. Investors can request developers to actively engage with local families and organisations, ensuring that housing solutions are tailored to meet their needs. By leveraging impact measurement frameworks such as Social Return on Investment (SROI), investors can track the benefits of good housing for families, demonstrating that ethical investments yield sustainable financial returns. Through responsible investing, they can help shift industry standards towards more inclusive urban environments, fostering resilient communities.

Local governments can put good housing for children and caregivers at the top of their delivery agenda. Local governments serve as the main point of contact for community-based initiatives (Farha, 2014). They can introduce and enforce clear standards for landlords and developers in order to protect caregivers from unsafe living conditions, unfair evictions, and displacement. They can reverse policies promoting short-term rentals that have increased rental prices, and apply tax incentives for real estate investment trusts (Garcia-López et al., 2020; Farha et al., 2022 ; Jover and Cocola, 2022 ; Gil Garcia and Martínez, 2023). They can use bidding and procurement processes to ensure that projects engage people, adhere to quality standards, and deliver social value. Zoning reforms can prioritise housing development near essential services such as schools, hospitals and public transport hubs, while managing the risk of gentrification.

National governments must embrace their role as market shapers (Mazzucato, 2013) . Rather than reacting to markets, they should set out to curb financial speculation through mechanisms such as subsidies, tax reforms and accountability systems. Governments can align a range of policies – including taxation, urban planning, financial regulation and public health – to realise the right to housing for young families. They also have a role in enhancing international, regional and local accountability mechanisms, including by fostering partnerships with private developers, NGOs and communities (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1991; Mazzucato and Farha, 2023).

Universities, international bodies and networks can provide national and local stakeholders with advice, capacity building, technical support, and access to the latest evidence on how to embed child- and family-focused principles into housing practices and policies at scale – see Urban95 (Van Leer Foundation, 2025). Such initiatives provide evidence-based frameworks that guide national and local authorities in adopting inclusive housing policies. They can facilitate partnerships for cities to learn from one another's successes, challenges and innovative approaches. We also see universities as key contributors of research and evidence that explore the long-term impact of 'good housing', thereby expanding on existing but limited evidence on the social and economic impacts of housing policies.

Case study: New Zealand

The **New Zealand Healthy Homes Initiative (HHI)** exemplifies how local governments can make a difference by allocating small grants to fix minor housing defects, such as replacing doors or buying curtains to prevent draughts. The initiative delivers targeted interventions to those most at risk – especially pregnant women and low-income families with young children who have been hospitalised due to housing-related conditions. Assessors inspect homes and work closely with families to identify and implement home improvements, such as installing insulation, providing adequate bedding, and offering financial support for heating and power bills. In cases where homes remain unsuitable, assistance in securing alternative accommodation is also provided. The impact of the HHI shows a significant reduction in school absences for medical reasons, and has led to a measurable decrease in hospitalisations among referred children. With social benefits outweighing programme costs, and a return on investment achieved within a year, the HHI stands as an effective, evidence-backed model for improving child health and housing conditions in New Zealand (Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora, 2025).

Bringing it home: a call to gather, listen and reimagine

Good housing should be reframed as a public good, like healthcare or education, in which strategic investment pays long-term dividends in societal wellbeing. The framing of how 'Good Housing' for a good start provides a vision for shaping urban environments (both inside and outside) for young families that are nurturing, accessible, safe, and flexible enough to adapt to changing needs. Policymakers should integrate principles of good housing into policies in a range of sectors from public health to transport.

1. Listen to Parents

Listening to parents is crucial for designing housing that truly meets the needs of families with young children. By utilising tools such as the Family Voices Toolkit, developers and planners can gather valuable insights directly from parents. This toolkit provides methods for conducting surveys, focus groups and community meetings, ensuring that parents' voices are heard and considered in the design process. Engaging parents in meaningful dialogue helps identify specific requirements, such as safe play areas, accessible services, and family-friendly layouts. It also brings parents and caregivers living in a community together and can be the foundation of fostering stronger caregiving networks.

2. Intergenerational Housing

By designing housing that accommodates multiple generations, we can create environments where families can support each other and share resources. This type of housing encourages interactions between children, parents and grandparents, enhancing social bonds and providing mutual care. Features such as shared communal spaces, adaptable living units and proximity to essential services can facilitate intergenerational living. This approach not only supports the physical and emotional health of residents but also strengthens community ties, making neighbourhoods more resilient and cohesive.

3. Community Spaces and Programs

Consider the important role of a community manager who can facilitate programmes that cater to the needs of young children and their caregivers, such as pop-up play, residents' meet-ups or health services, and can further enhance the benefits of community spaces. These initiatives can significantly improve quality of life for families and contribute to the overall wellbeing of the neighbourhood.

Good housing may be one of the most effective investments a society can make. It is as important for our growth and development as food and water. This brief is not just a call to build more housing; it is a call to reimagine how housing can shape childhoods and communities.

Learn more about the Family Voices Toolkit

Better Housing, Better Cities

Investing in 'good housing' that prioritises children and their caregivers can yield the following transformative benefits for cities.

Healthier communities = healthier cities

When a city provides young families with housing schemes that have access to green spaces, safe streets and local services, residents benefit from increased physical activity, better mental health and longer lives. This means parents miss fewer workdays, and children attend school and play more consistently. This helps cities benefit from a more engaged and productive population and reduces the strain on municipal healthcare systems, by preventing illness and saving public health expenditure. Cities also improve the health of residents by ensuring families can make healthier choices including diet, exercise and health care near their homes.

Economic and educational productivity

Cities benefit from improved economic stability when they deliver 'good housing'. When parents and other primary caregivers have supportive networks and services in place, they have the confidence to return to work. Decent housing close to schools and childcare centres reduces stress for caregivers, relieving them of the pressure of commuting and boosting reliance on local services. The availability of affordable housing in particular reduces financial stress on families. For children, the regular routine of attending playgroups and daycare can lead to improved social skills with their peers, better academic outcomes and, in the longer term, higher skills development (Levine Coley et al., 2013; Sandel et al., 2020). These gains directly shape the city's future workforce, skillset make-up and resources, building resilience in preparation for the challenges of an evolving economy. Moreover, 'good housing' enables cities to attract and retain essential workers such as teachers, healthcare providers and service sector employees, who are increasingly priced out of expensive housing markets.

Strong social and cultural cohesion

'Good housing' in cities drives inclusion and social cohesion. For a start, family-friendly neighbourhoods equipped with shared spaces, playgrounds and safe environments allow residents to connect, reducing isolation and building support networks which the city can leverage to deliver services and build resilience within communities. Affordable housing also lowers the barrier of entry to home ownership and encourages people from all backgrounds to take part in the making of a city. Inevitably, this will lead to a diverse social and economic mix of residents and as a result we may witness in cities the narrowing of economic disparities, reducing the risk of social tensions and poverty-related crimes and discouraging socio-spatial segregation. As families put down roots, cities will benefit from greater stability, reduced population turnover, and the formation of intergenerational relationships. For cities facing challenges related to an ageing population, such investments also ensure that older caregivers, such as grandparents, who often play a vital role in supporting parents, can remain in the lives of their grandchildren and actively contribute to family life while maintaining their own independence and wellbeing.

Environmental sustainability

Environmentally conscious housing design not only supports global climate goals but also fosters longevity for inhabitants. Sustainable housing design incorporates energy-efficient materials, ensuring durability and lower utility costs for families. Green spaces incorporated to improve mental and physical wellbeing for residents can also serve as natural buffers against urban heat islands and flooding. These spaces create cooler microclimates, promote biodiversity, and encourage outdoor physical activity, all of which enhance the overall liveability of a city. The provision of good housing within city centres also curbs urban sprawl. When families have access to reasonably priced housing near workplaces, schools and important services, this reduces long commutes, car dependence and traffic congestion. Moreover, when housing developments are designed to be close to public transport links, and are equipped with safe walking and cycling routes, families are empowered to adopt more active, sustainable mobility habits.

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