

Good housing can make parenting less lonely

Three lessons from listening to caregivers about their homes and neighbourhoods

Dinah Bornat

Director

ZCD Architects
London, UK

Irina Ivan - van der Kwaak

Representative, Mission-Related Investing

Van Leer Foundation
The Hague, Netherlands

Babies, toddlers and their caregivers spend around 80% of their time in or near their homes. This means that housing and neighbourhood spaces greatly influence family wellbeing and the development of young children. Housing insecurity, for example, is one of the biggest contributors to parental stress and, in many cities, families with young children are being pushed to urban outskirts – often away from their communities – and still struggle to find good-quality, stable and affordable homes.

To better understand how housing can play a role in supporting families to flourish, the Van Leer Foundation and [ZCD Architects](#) came together to discover best practices in engaging a population frequently left out of conversations on housing needs: parents and caregivers.

Listening to, working with, and even co-designing with communities is increasingly important to deliver urban development projects that best serve the people living in them. Housing design, delivery and management is one of the areas where engaging with local people can and should have a real impact, creating better homes and neighbourhoods, and adding to the health and wellbeing of whole communities.

With this in mind, in 2024 ZCD developed an engagement toolkit, with the aim of truly listening to the voices of families with young children. It consists of a series of questions and best practices designed to effectively engage parents and caregivers. The [Family Voices Toolkit](#) is publicly available online for professionals working in the housing sector, which could include planners, architects, developers and investors. Flexibility is an important characteristic of the toolkit, which can be used for different types of engagement from early research into a wider site area to engaging in post-occupancy feedback reviews.

While developing and piloting the toolkit, we were asked the question: why focus explicitly on young children and their caregivers? This group comprises up to 20–35% of city populations, which is significant (UN, 2022). UK-based research has found that children are also more likely to be living in poverty than any other age group in society (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2024) and the younger the child, the greater the risk of poverty in the family as a whole. Housing costs play a part and push families with young children further into poverty. This means that we should grasp whatever opportunities we have in the housing sector to alleviate some of the impact of poverty on children.



Photo: Madeleine Waller

The toolkit was created by tweaking existing techniques and then, importantly, tested and refined with five different groups of parents at community consultation sessions in London, Dublin and Chicago in real estate projects led by PATRIZIA Sustainable Communities, Bridges Fund Management, Jonathan Rose Companies and the Earls Court Development Company. This allowed us to work out how best to reach out to, and then host a group of parents, along with their young children. We learned that to reach this population effectively, it is best to provide food, pay everyone for their time, and have trained childcare on hand too so that the parents can focus on the session. We took the participants on walking tours, and found that, overall, small group sizes, multiple sessions, and a relaxed and comfortable setting allowed the participants to open up about what was important to them.

Listening to parents has revealed what matters to them and gave us new insights and approaches that we intend to carry into our work from now on.

Our three lessons from listening to parents

Lesson one: Urban life changes when you become a parent

1

We heard from many of the participating mothers how their lives had changed dramatically since having their first child as did how they experience and interact with their city. During the mapping exercises of their local area, for example, they revealed the routes they now took to play areas, the shops and other places they would not have visited before. They talked about the services they needed most and their challenges of living in smaller spaces in dense urban areas, including the extra storage space they needed particularly for buggies/strollers and bikes. It brought us practical feedback on housing design, from open-plan living to kitchen areas, balconies and neighbours, and the problems and benefits each of these can bring.

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Photo: Madeleine Waller

Lesson two: Housing design can address loneliness

2

We were quickly struck by the level of isolation many parents suffered from, whether that be due to: moving away from extended family networks to find affordable housing; overall lack of community; limited places to meet people; or no available childcare. In some instances, it was all of the above. We started to realise that parent and caregiver wellbeing comes from the support they receive from others in a similar position, as well as more formal services and facilities. This is important for housing providers and designers to hear for themselves, as they should be creating and maintaining spaces and places where parents can meet other parents and their children can play. It is also about prioritising childcare where families live and the benefit this can provide for the entire community instead of one additional rental unit.

Lesson three: Harness opportunities for connection that already exist

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When we took parents on local walking tours, they could tell us specifically about a certain place that mattered to them. Through this, we were able to pay closer attention to the spaces for connection that already existed, and how parents make use of them. In Chicago, for example, we stopped in the residents' own shared courtyard and heard how children played out there, while they, the mothers, sat on their stoops and got to know each other. This chimed with ZCD's own research into doorstep play – a shared space directly outside a home is one where children will play from a very young age and one which can foster a strong community. It also resonated with the design principles of the Van Leer Foundation's Urban95 initiative. This new perspective helps developers, architects and designers to make better use of existing community infrastructure, and identify what kinds of details need to be considered for future projects.

We believe in the fundamental shift in perspective that can occur after deeply listening to family voices. Our hope is that the partners involved in the pilot programme will use it widely themselves and encourage others to do the same. Just two sessions can make a difference. In London on a completed project, we sat and chatted with the children and parents around us. The architect who designed the housing development heard what it was like to live locally and to visit the park with small children. Afterwards he said that he had known he needed to design for this group but that “before that meeting

I was making assumptions about their needs in my own head; now I can learn first-hand and see my designs through their perspective too”.

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References

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