

Family hubs change how children and caregivers experience parks in Jordan

Parents and policymakers in Irbid now see real value in local public places



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How can you combine physical and programmatic design ideas to improve cities and facilitate community connections? In 2022, key municipal staff from Irbid, Jordan, including the city's Mayor, participated in an Urban95 study tour of Copenhagen organised by the Van Leer Foundation.¹ We were there to learn how to design public urban spaces to better accommodate caregivers and young children.

It was on this trip that we came up with the idea for the [Family Hub model](#), a new vision of urban planning that reimagines public parks to foster healthy development and a sense of community for the whole family. We believed that such efforts would help young children in Irbid flourish, giving parents a chance to get out of the house and connect with other caregivers. Importantly, these public spaces are accessible to all, regardless of income.

Returning home, we decided to turn the idea of the Family Hub into a reality and Irbid is the first city in Jordan to create such a project.

The Family Hub model is dedicated to improving services in parks, including more play equipment, better public toilets and more accessible pathways without high kerbs, as well as shade through trees or canopy structures. The first Family Hub, in Al-Ashrafeyeh Park, transformed a disused library building into a space for activities such as a summer camp for young children; and an adjacent unused concrete area now features seating under shade sails for caregivers and sensory play areas for children. We are setting an example that we hope will inspire other cities to follow. This model that started in one area has now been replicated in five other locations in Irbid and we are always working on driving this vision further to other municipalities.

← Young children and their caregivers enjoying the newly renovated Al-Ashrafeyeh park

¹ Urban95 is a programme, initiated by the Van Leer Foundation, that works with city leaders and urban professionals to create healthy, safe and vibrant cities where babies, toddlers and their families thrive.

This initiative comes at a time when families in Irbid face a number of challenges. In addition to the decline of a number of social services during the pandemic, the city has taken in a large number of refugees from neighbouring countries – increasing the demand for early childhood programmes. Research tells us this kind of programming can play a significant role in parental wellbeing and children's healthy development.

Another challenge parents in Jordan face is the often prohibitive cost of activities for children. By making the Family Hub free for all, we help alleviate such concerns. As Ahlam, a mother of 4- and 5-year-old children from Irbid, shared:

"The Family Hub offered a free-of-charge space for our children to play, which allowed us as parents to bring our kids out without financial pressure as the other places are costly."

Educating the community about the importance of early childhood

To ensure the Family Hub model served parents, we invested time in orienting partners and stakeholders – including local NGOs, the communities themselves, and departments in the municipality – around the specific needs of younger children and families. Not all of them understand the importance of serving this community.

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To do this, we set up the Early Childhood Development Unit, a multidisciplinary team of city officials within the municipal government, to foster a collaborative approach across departments. This unit worked with the staff of various municipal departments to increase enthusiasm for the project. We also held participatory sessions for municipal government workers and local councils to help us

design the programmes and spaces. In turn, these sessions helped participants better understand the unique needs of children from newborn to age 3 and their caregivers, as well as the importance of adapting programmes for this particular demographic.

As Suha Alwahasheh, an engineer in the municipality, put it:

"We had never thought about the concept of early childhood development. The project has provided us with so much to think about and presented a lot of potential to consider in our future plans."

Additionally, we conducted interactive sessions to foster engagement between families and the municipality – playful, community-centred gatherings that both facilitated data collection and increased community buy-in. For example, a local music and entertainment band for children was included in all these events. Their music and dances are well known within the community and even hearing their music from outside the park attracted caregivers and children to join us. Importantly, data collection was also done through observation of behaviours of children and caregivers playing, not just filling in surveys. We involved experts from the local community to ensure that the language and approaches used in these sessions were relatable and grounded in the caregivers' everyday experiences. Using easy-to-understand terminology has been key in ensuring people have a clearer idea about what the Family Hub model is and how it benefits caregivers and their young children.

Another important step we took to ensure the model's success was to build collaborations with many people, including nurseries and kindergartens that use the parks for excursions, local charities, NGOs, religious centres and health centres. We also worked to connect service providers with their users, finding people with expertise in areas such as parent coaching and offering them space in the hubs.

Today, parks with Family Hubs offer a wide range of activities for both children and caregivers. These include awareness-raising sessions for caregivers, from road safety and first aid to responsible use of

smart devices, as well as sessions on health topics such as nutrition, breastfeeding, and breast cancer awareness. We also created workshops to encourage bonding between caregivers and children through activities such as arts, crafts and cooking, including pottery painting and growing plants.

Listening to caregivers to support them better

The Family Hub model continues to evolve with feedback from parents in the community, which we collect through group chats for individual hubs. We collect caregivers' phone numbers when they visit, and add them to the group if they wish to receive news about activities. After each session, we ask them to provide feedback using a suggestions box or on our Instagram page.

For example, parents and other caregivers told us that they wanted the hubs to be open outside normal working hours, so that parents who work during those hours could also benefit from them. Lack of public transport also came up as an issue for parents living far from the parks. One of the solutions for this was to bring Family Hub programming to them by scaling mobile Hubs and pop-up play events.

Early results from the Family Hub model have been encouraging. Before the intervention in Al-Ashrafeyeh Park, for example, observations revealed that caregivers with young children never used the park. When the project team asked local caregivers why, they mentioned factors like a lack of play areas and seating, litter, and concerns about safety and security. Now, observations show that 40% of the park's visitors are aged between newborn and 5 years.

The most interesting behavioural shift we have observed, however, has been an increase in older siblings taking care of their younger brothers and sisters while in the park. By designing places that are safe, enjoyable and meet the needs of children as



↑ Fun all around at the Family Hub in Al-Ashrafeyeh park

well as those who care for them, we are letting older siblings do their bit while parents take some much-needed time off.

People from all walks of life who have given it thought realise, as we do, that looking after kids is easier in places designed for it.

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