



Design and Planning Policy for Family-Friendly Apartment Living

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To achieve sustainable increases to population density and create vibrant, walkable and well-connected communities, apartment living must be re-envisioned as a desirable housing choice for all stages in life, including raising children. For this to be realised, planning policy and apartment design guidelines must first be revised to address the needs of families with children living in medium- and high-density neighbourhoods.

Over the past two decades in Australia, state governments have pursued policies of urban consolidation intended to improve the environmental, social, and economic impacts that are often negatively associated with suburban sprawl.^{1,2} Within this context, the number of apartments and small units in major Australian capital cities has increased rapidly through in-fill developments and large-scale urban renewal projects.

More than 60% of all housing development in Greater Sydney over the last five years has been apartments³, signalling a significant shift in the urban future of Australia's capital cities.

As developers and planners have sought to redesign the 'Australian Dream' into a more vertical and compact vision, there has been significant negligence in planning for the needs of families with children, with "new higher density centres being built essentially for the childless in mind."⁴ A lack of suitably sized apartment dwellings, communal play space, storage and soundproofing are some of the design oversights which hinder liveability for families raising children in apartments.^{5,6} To date, no city in Australia has an explicit policy for family-friendly, high-density residential design, and acknowledgements within existing apartment design guidelines lack meaningful consideration or statutory weight.⁷

The reasons why families with children have been excluded from the compact city vision are complex and span cultural, economic and social factors. As urban consolidation policies became widely accepted, assumptions were made on the demographic most suited to apartment living based on an ageing population, fewer people having children and more single professionals.⁸ The predominant supply of detached dwellings was seen as the desirable housing type for families with children, while smaller units and apartments were aimed at filling the housing gap for older 'empty nesters', so-called DINKS (dual income, no kids), and single households.^{9,10} The notion that apartments are transitional homes before or after raising a family and moving to the ultimately desirable detached dwelling, continues to persist in planning policy.^{11,12}

Alongside demographic and cultural assumptions, an investor-driven apartment market has further propelled the design of smaller dwellings marketed to a childless demographic. Given the high financial risks carried by speculative developers, minimising apartment sizes and the required communal amenity is seen as the most effective way to maximise yields and provide competitive market value to investors.¹³ As such, the appetites of investors who form almost 50% of apartment owners (compared with 17% of detached dwelling owners) do not always align with the needs of the end-users.¹⁴ Features marketed as 'peace of mind' for investors, such as maintenance-free open space, minimal communal amenity and strict usability by-laws, are often at the expense of liveable environments—particularly for residents aspiring to remain long-term.

Nonetheless, families with children are increasingly choosing to live in more compact neighbourhoods due to issues around affordability and a desire to live in vibrant, walkable neighbourhoods which are located close to public transport and high-quality amenities. At the same time, older, lone households have shown little desire to 'downsize' to apartment living as they prefer to age in place.^{15,16} Consequently, aligning household type to dwelling size is complex and "not an issue of averages, but one of choice and constraints,"¹⁷ with families often sacrificing dwelling size for location or amenity.¹⁸ Overall, the number of families with children living in apartments in Australia has increased by 56% between 2011 and 2016, and in Sydney, 25% of apartment households are families with children under the age of 15.¹⁹ These trends are visible not only in inner-city areas but also in satellite cities such as Parramatta in NSW, where 25% of preschool-aged children live in high-density housing.²⁰

Additionally, we are yet to see how the COVID-19 pandemic may affect urban development and the lifestyle choices of families with children. With trends such as working from home likely to remain commonplace post-pandemic, homebuyers may be less restricted by home-work travel patterns, while prioritising local amenity as they spend more time within their immediate neighbourhoods. Regardless of how living trends and buyer preferences may shift, the development of new and existing neighbourhoods must be done sustainably, avoiding car-reliant suburban sprawl through liveable environments at medium and high density.



Apartment living with outdoor communal play space.

Sketch by Natalia Krysiak

In order to provide a viable compact city vision, neighbourhood planning policy and apartment design guidelines must be revised to ensure liveability for diverse demographics—including families with children.

Lessons from other jurisdictions and options for treatability

Even though issues surrounding the delivery of affordable medium- and high-density housing for families are complex, good planning policy and design guidance has the potential to ensure liveable outcomes for diverse demographics.

Through a Churchill Fellowship in 2019,²¹ I had the opportunity to review global design policies which aim to improve liveability for families with children. The more successful policies addressed needs holistically and at various scales including neighbourhood-scale planning policies, as well as building/apartment-scale design guidelines. In both Sydney and Melbourne, this would require updates to existing apartment design guidelines to address specific needs of families with children (further explored below), as well as supplementary policies addressing neighbourhood-scale considerations.

Internationally, cities which are experiencing similar urban consolidation transitions, such as Vancouver or Toronto, are increasingly recognising these shortfalls and implementing supplementary guidelines.

The City of Vancouver has been at the forefront of planning for the needs of this demographic, with the document *High-density Housing for Families with Children Guidelines* first released in 1979. These guidelines specify in-depth considerations such as minimum provisions for outdoor play space and the location/percentage of larger family-friendly units for residential developments of 75 units or more per hectare in density. Planning policies also specify a minimum mix of family-friendly units in new rezoning projects at a target of 35% (25% two-bedroom and 10% three-bedroom units) to ensure that diverse housing options are available for families in new, higher density developments. Academics have credited the guidelines with helping to make Vancouver one of the most family-friendly cities in North America with "over a third of inner city households being made up of families with children, and a third of these living in high-density housing".^{22,23}

More recently, the City of Toronto released guidelines *Planning for Children in New Vertical Communities* (2020). Similar to the Vancouver guidelines, this document addresses the needs of children through design consideration at a neighbourhood, building and apartment scale. Other cities, such as London, have explicitly addressed children's needs within supplementary guidelines such as *Shaping Neighbourhoods: Play and Informal Recreation* (2011), which is outlined in the London Plan. Importantly, the document stipulates minimum outdoor space provision for all new residential developments of 20 units or more.

In both Sydney and Melbourne, the quality of high-density housing is regulated through state-based apartment design guidelines. In Sydney, the *NSW Apartment Design Guide* sets out the principles of the State Environmental Planning Policy No 65 (SEPP 65) while in Melbourne, the *Apartment Design Guidelines for Victoria* document is used to assess multi-unit residential developments. This includes minimum sizing for apartments, minimum requirements for storage space and outdoor communal and private open space—all of which are vital components of ensuring high-density neighbourhood liveability.

Nonetheless, when it comes to the needs of families with children, both the NSW and Victorian design guides lack meaningful consideration. Within 180 pages, the *NSW Apartment Design Guide* refers to children just three times, as outlined below:

- Communal spaces for children should be safe and contained (p 57);
- Balconies should be designed to be safe outdoor spaces for children (p 92 & 94); and,
- Ground floor apartments should suit families with small children (p 108).

The *Apartment Design Guidelines for Victoria* refer to the needs of children only once:

- Accessibility in design promotes equal access to apartments for all community members including those with limited mobility, families with young children (p 73).

These are suggested acknowledgements that lack statutory weight or an in-depth recognition of the needs of families with children. Overall, there is little consideration of how specific needs should be addressed, such as the storage of prams and larger toys, indoor and outdoor play, and the co-location and layout of family-sized units.



Figure 1. Examples of outdoor communal play space

Left: A communal garden with children's playspace in Vancouver, First Avenue Co-op Housing Estate.

Right: A communal garden with children's playspace in East London, Ocean Estate designed by Levitt Bernstein Architects.

With regard to the provision of play opportunities within communal areas, neither document stipulates any minimum requirements or design benchmarking. Given the vast benefits of play to children's healthy development and wellbeing,²⁴ the neglect of this consideration within statutory design guidance can have a profound effect on liveability for families living in apartments. Although minimum benchmarking for communal play space must be considered alongside a more holistic overview of family-friendly apartment design, this issue has been highlighted as an example within [Table 1](#) by comparing international policies from London, Vancouver and Toronto alongside current policies from Melbourne and Sydney.

As minimum communal outdoor space is stipulated in both Melbourne and Sydney, the additional overlay of play space requirements may not necessarily increase the overall provision, but simply put the onus on designers to ensure that the needs of children of various age groups are thoroughly considered within the design of communal areas. By overtly addressing these needs, an important recognition is made that families with children are and should be part of a sustainable compact city vision.

Alongside amendments to the apartment design guidelines, a review of state-based strata scheme by-laws must be considered, to ensure that the health and wellbeing of

children is prioritised. As the legal form of medium- and high-density developments is through strata and community title, private by-laws (which are agreed upon by majority vote) inevitably regulate communal space. As has been highlighted by industry and academics, "even when development occurs on large master-planned estates and recreation space is included in accordance with public planning law, private by-laws can nullify the benefits of that space for children. There is almost no limit on the content of by-laws in most states and by-laws can and do ban and restrict children's activities."²⁵ Essentially, play on communal property can be restricted or banned without any consideration for the health or wellbeing of children,^{26,27} often causing anxiety and stigma to families raising children in apartments.²⁸

Amendments to existing state-based apartment design guidelines which address needs at a building/apartment scale, should be considered alongside supplementary policies addressing needs at a neighbourhood-scale. These might include considerations such as neighbourhood play strategies, child-friendly travel routes and the distribution of child-focused social infrastructure. Prioritising the needs of families with children will have numerous positive impacts to the future viability of our urban cities, ensuring a successful transition to a more compact and sustainable urban future.

Table 1. Global policies addressing minimum outdoor play space provision within apartment developments.

Location, Reference Document	Minimum Outdoor Play Space Provision for Multi-Unit Residential Developments
Sydney <i>Apartment Design Guidelines (2015)</i>	None* <i>*Communal open space has a minimum area equal to 25% of the site. No minimum provision of play space is required.</i>
Melbourne <i>Apartment Design Guidelines for Victoria (2017)</i>	None* <i>*Developments with 40 or more dwellings must provide a minimum area of communal open space of 2.5 m² per dwelling or 250 m², whichever is lesser. No minimum provision of play space is required.</i>
London <i>Shaping Neighbourhoods: Play and Informal Recreation: Supplementary Planning Guidance (2012)</i>	A minimum of 10 m² of dedicated outdoor play space per child <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A supplied 'child yield' Microsoft Excel tool is used by developers to project child occupancy rates for each development • In developments with an estimated child occupancy of fewer than 10 children, appropriate financial contributions to play provision within the vicinity of the development should be made in lieu of achieving minimum provisions on the development site • Play provision area is in addition to other standards for open space required within Local Development Plans
Vancouver <i>High-Density Housing for Families with Children Guidelines (1992)*</i>	Total outdoor play area should range in size from 130 m² to 280 m² which should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preschool children's play areas: minimum of 50 m² or 1.0 m² per bedroom, excluding the master bedroom • Elementary and teen aged children play area: minimum of 85 m² or 1.5 m² per bedroom, excluding the master bedroom • Preschool play areas should be located near common indoor amenity areas and laundry rooms where they can be overlooked by adults <i>*Guidelines applicable for residential developments of 75 and more units per hectare in density.</i>
Toronto <i>Planning for Children in New Vertical Communities (2020)^</i>	A portion of required amenity space (min. 25%) should be designed for children and youth, based on the number of large units in the building: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Located adjoining or directly accessible to the indoor amenity space • Minimum amenity space as outlined in Zoning By-law 569-2013 at 4.0 m² for each unit of combined indoor and outdoor amenity with a minimum of 40 m² of outdoor amenity space <i>^ Applicable for apartment developments of 20 units or more.</i>

Policy recommendations

The following recommendations are put forward with the aim of creating more liveable higher density housing for families with children:

Research

Further research is required to establish the needs of families with children living in apartments based on local consultation and global best practice.

Building/apartment scale considerations

Evidence-based amendments to existing apartment design guidelines are necessary to address the needs of families with children. Amendments should address both building-scale and apartment-scale considerations including the following:

- Provision of indoor and outdoor communal play space.
- Minimum percentage and location of larger apartment dwellings.
- Apartment layouts suitable to the needs of families with children.
- Indoor and outdoor storage of children's toys, bikes/scooters and prams.
- Suitable soundproofing considerations around indoor and outdoor play areas.

Regulatory reforms

A review of private by-law regulations must be considered alongside training for building and strata managers to ensure that conflicts relating to the use of communal amenity within apartments prioritise children's health and wellbeing.

Neighbourhood scale considerations

A holistic review of existing planning policy is required to ensure that the needs of families with children are considered at a neighbourhood scale. A supplementary planning document which addresses child-friendly neighbourhood design should be implemented at a state level, including considerations such as neighbourhood play strategies, child-friendly travel routes and the distribution of child-focused social infrastructure.

Training for planners

Additional training for planners assessing development applications is required to provide knowledge and understanding around the needs of families with children.

Stakeholder consultation

For policy to be amended and successfully implemented, consultation is recommended with several stakeholders including the following:

Community

- Parents and children living in apartments
- Strata Committees
- Owners Corporation Network
- Tenants Union
- Public health practitioners

Industry

- Property Council Australia (PCA)
- Australian Institute of Architects (AIA)
- Planning Institute of Australia (PIA)
- Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA)
- Australian Property Developers Association (APDA)
- Urban Development Institute of Australia (UDIA)
- Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI)
- Strata Community Association (SCA)

Government agencies

- Local governments
- Government Architects Office NSW and Victoria
- Greater Sydney Commission and other relevant state-based agencies
- Department of Health
- National Children's Commissioner

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