

Parenting in Proximity to Others: The Importance of Transitions, Temporalities and Trajectories

Jennifer L. Kent (University of Sydney), Melissa Mason (Western Sydney Local Health District), Natalie Virgona (Western Sydney Local Health District) and Helen Ryan (Western Sydney Local Health District)

Introduction and Background

Healthy built environments are often conceptualised as higher density environments. For example, higher residential density has been associated with increased uptake of physical activity, more social interaction within the community and with providing better access to healthy food options.

For many Australians, and particularly in some stages of life, the cultural and practical default is the detached dwelling as a preference. Living in density throughout the whole life course therefore challenges the status quo and requires transition in Australian cities. To facilitate a transition that realises the health benefits associated with density, and minimises any harm from disruption, it is imperative to understand the experiences and identified barriers to higher density living, particularly for groups traditionally associated with lower density housing (Raynor 2018).

Parents of young children represent one such group (Easthope et al. 2011), and this study contributes to a growing body of qualitative research that records the experiences of parents in density (for example Kerr et al. 2021; Andrews et al. 2018, Andrews et al. 2019; Opit et al. 2021). Its points of departure are the structural and cultural barriers to parenting in density identified by previous research.

Previous research demonstrates that density in Australia is not designed to accommodate families. Bathrooms are too small balconies are hazardous and common areas are uninviting for play. Neighbours unaccustomed to children living in density resent the intrusion of toys, bikes and prams in common areas, and parents are concerned about conflict with neighbours over the normal noises of childhood.

Our study adds a temporal dimension to these established barriers through two specific obstacles characteristic of the process of densification in Australian cities. These are related to the timing of both the construction and occupation of density, and they have the potential to derail the ability to build healthy built environments in Australia.

Method

The Healthy Higher Density for Children project examines the perceived health effects associated with living in higher density housing for children (0-5 years) in the

City of Parramatta (CoP) local government area (LGA). Qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interviews with 20 parents. Parents identified positive and negative experiences of living in an apartment with young children (Mason et al. 2021).

Results

The first aspect of temporality we found problematic is that the temporality of childhood is at odds with the timeframes of the property development and planning systems, which detracts from the experience of raising children in density.

It may seem obvious, however for families to live well in a higher density environment, density itself needs to exist as a structure. The fact our case study area of Parramatta contains higher density housing reflects a rapid process of urban activation initiated by the rezoning of commercial land to residential uses. The construction of apartment buildings to fulfill this opportunity has dragged on, as construction in a developer driven planning system tends to do, echoing the highs and lows of the housing market. The legacy is that the area is a perpetual hive of building activity.

Of relevance to families living in 'Parramatta under transition' is that this creates an environment of instability, and experiences of the negative externalities of construction such as dust, noise, and dangerous footpaths. These material outputs of the densification process make parenting in density difficult. The noise interrupts daytime sleep, and the constant dust forces windows closed.

Walkability of the immediate neighbourhood environment is compromised by the clutter of parked construction vehicles and damages the footpath itself. While the impact is seemingly temporary to the development industry and the planning process, to the timeline of childhood its experience is a lifetime. This impact needs to be considered seriously in assessing the staging of development.

The second aspect of temporality flagging a potential barrier to densification through the life course is that many study participants indicated their ambition is to transition out of density towards a larger home as children age. Participants described a sense that their ability to care for children not yet of school age was not compromised by space limitations, but as children grow this may become problematic:

I think we feel that we would be denying our child something if we raised her in an apartment setting. I think that kids need places to play and I think that apartment buildings don't have that. They don't have a backyard, they don't have fresh air.

For many study participants living in density was temporary, yet for the potential of density to be realised, our cities need these parents to remain.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these two aspects of temporality relate to both structural and cultural components of the densification process that will need to be addressed for the transition to higher density cities in Australia to become a reality. By highlighting a temporal dimension to the shift, new avenues to encourage living in density through the life course can be explored.

References

- Andrews, F., J. Shelley, S. Rich and A. James (2018). "Mothers' ideals and experiences of raising children in inner and outer suburban Melbourne, Australia." Community, Work and Family **21**(1): 17-32.
- Andrews, F. J., E. Warner and B. Robson (2019). "High-rise parenting: experiences of families in private, high-rise housing in inner city Melbourne and implications for children's health." Cities and Health **3**(1-2): 158-168.
- Easthope, H. and A. Tice (2011). "Children in Apartments: Implications for the Compact City." Urban Policy and Research **29**(4): 415-434.
- Kerr, S.-M., N. Klocker and C. Gibson (2021). "From backyards to balconies: cultural norms and parents' experiences of home in higher-density housing." Housing Studies **36**(3): 421-443.
- Mason, M. and N. Virgona (2021). Healthy Higher Density for Kids: A Qualitative Study. Sydney, New South Wales Health.
- Opit, S., R. Kearns, K. Witten and E. Fergusson (2021). "Density in the Suburbs: Families with Children Adapting to Living in a Medium Density Social Housing Development." Urban Policy and Research.
- Raynor, K. (2018). "Social representations of children in higher density housing: enviable, inevitable or evil?" Housing Studies **33**(8): 1207-1226.