

Designing neighbourhoods to support early childhood development

Lived experiences of families

living in growth areas of Melbourne: a case study

Young children benefit from neighbourhood environments that provide resources and opportunities for positive and stimulating experiences. Growth area* suburbs on the urban fringe may lack essential services and infrastructure, raising concerns about how health-promoting they are for young children's health, development and wellbeing. We explored the lived experiences of parents of young children living in one growth area of Melbourne, Australia.

What did we do?

Parents of young children aged 0-8 years old were asked about their neighbourhood experiences and how supportive their built environment was for their child's health, development and wellbeing.

- Study site: Growth area of Cardinia Shire, located on the urban fringe of Melbourne, Australia.
- Participants: One face-to-face focus group of five parents, 2 online parent interviews. All were mothers of mostly girls.
- Parents discussed neighbourhood features perceived as important for families with young children living in their area.

'But just affordable housing didn't attract me to the area. I think it was the safety and also the sense of I felt I belonged to a community...'
(Parent, INT01)

What did we find?

- Five liveability domains were identified by parents as important: Housing, Public open space, Family-friendly destinations and services, Early childhood education and care services, and Street connectivity.
- Social and community infrastructure (e.g., libraries) encourages families to connect and form supportive local relationships.
- The quality of urban amenities may considerably affect child development.
- Walkability wasn't a major factor in using destinations or services if they were accessible within a 15-30 minute car drive.



What do these findings mean?

- Family-friendly destinations and activities like libraries, parent groups, and playgroups are important places for families to connect and build supportive local relationships.
- Delivery of high-quality amenities (e.g., public open space, early childhood education and care services, libraries) should be a priority, particularly in more disadvantaged growth area neighbourhoods.
- Car access is essential for families in outer growth areas that lack locally available neighbourhood infrastructure: the perceived importance of physical ‘accessibility’ via car, rather than ‘walkability,’ may reflect family preferences and high car ownership in car-dependent neighbourhoods.

Where can I find out more?

Full report:

Villanueva, K., Turrell, G., Alderton, A., Davern, M., Brinkman, S., Gauvin, L., Goldfeld, S., Badland, H., (2025). The built environment and children's development in different urban contexts of Melbourne: VicHealth Early Data to Decisions project report. RMIT University: Melbourne, Australia. Read it [here](#).

Contact:

Dr Karen Villanueva (karen.villanueva@rmit.edu.au)

*Commonly defined as “greenfield sites on undeveloped land on the outskirts of cities” (Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, 2017).



This study was supported by The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (2022 VicHealth Impact Grant OPP-25184).

We thank the individuals and partner organisations (e.g., Cardinia Shire Council) who contributed their time and resources to the project. We express our gratitude to the families from Cardinia Shire, who shared their experiences of their neighbourhoods. Images from Adobe Stock.

Professor Hannah Badland is supported by an ARC Future Fellowship FT230100131. Dr Amanda Alderton is supported by RMIT University Vice Chancellor's Postdoctoral Fellowship, Professor Sharon Goldfeld is supported by a National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Practitioner Fellowship #1155290.

Suggested citation: Villanueva, K., Alderton, A., Davern, M., Brinkman, S., Gauvin, L., Goldfeld, S., Badland, H. (June 2025). Policy brief. Designing neighbourhoods to support early childhood development: Lived experiences of families living in growth areas of Melbourne: a case study. RMIT University: Melbourne, Australia.