

The place effect: Building cities that support our youngest citizens



Social Equity Research Centre researchers

Dr Karen Villanueva, Ms Tasma Eddy,
Dr Amanda Alderton, Professor Hannah Badland

Project partners

Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Royal Children's Hospital, Jesuit Social Services, Cardinia Shire Council, Mitchell Shire Council, City of Port Phillip, Australian Urban Observatory, Play Australia, Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation, VicHealth

Funding body

VicHealth Impact Research Grant



What does it take for a child to thrive — not just at home, but where they live, play, and learn?

Using data from over **47,000 five-year-olds**, our researchers looked at how the neighbourhood **built environment** — things like parks, housing, traffic, childcare, and shops — shapes **early childhood development** across Melbourne.

The findings were striking. Children living in the most disadvantaged areas had the poorest development outcomes. Children growing up in outer suburbs and growth areas often lived in places with

Fewer local services.
Less access to public transport.
Fewer childcare centres.

These differences can affect a child's development and life trajectory before they even start school.

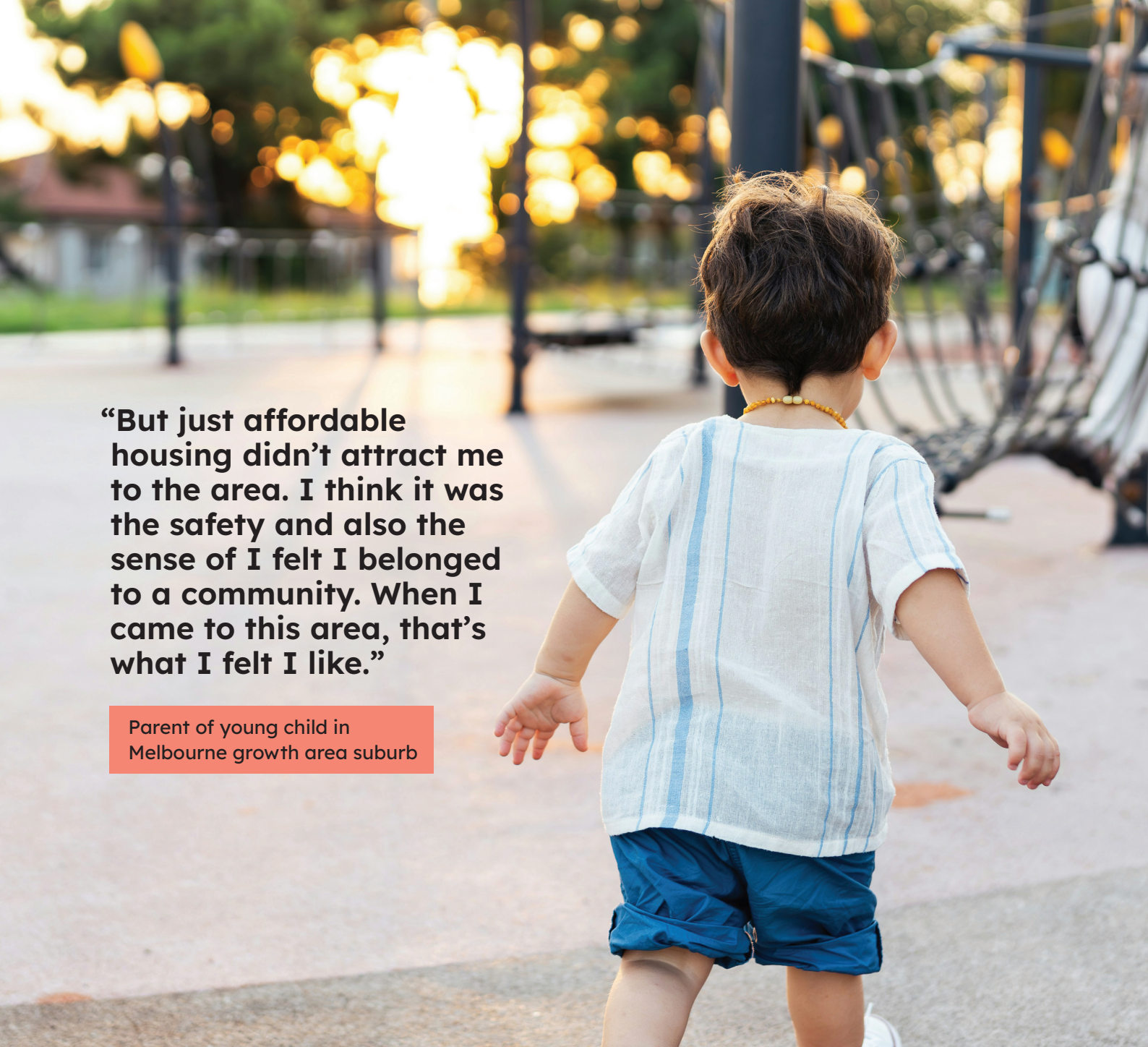
But the team didn't just crunch the numbers. They listened.

In growth areas like Cardinia Shire, they spoke with parents about their everyday lives — the long drives, the libraries and playgroups that made them feel connected.

Their stories added depth to the data. One thing was clear: places matter. And families knew exactly what they needed.

This mix of **big data and real stories** is now being used to guide smarter decisions. With partners including **VicHealth, Cardinia Shire, Mitchell Shire, City of Port Phillip**, and **Jesuit Social Services** along with **Play Australia** and **Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation**, the research is shaping policy conversations about urban equity, early development, and child-friendly design.

Because if we want all kids to have the best start, we can't just focus on schools and services. We need neighbourhoods that grow with them — full of safe, welcoming places to play, learn, and belong.



“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. When I came to this area, that’s what I felt I like.”

Parent of young child in
Melbourne growth area suburb

When we transform the places children grow up in, we change their opportunities. And when we centre equity in every street, service and system — we change the story, for everyone.