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BRIEF

Hospitable by Design: Toward Institutions and Communities That Welcome Families

Unifying Family Policy series

By Elliot Haspel & Patrick T. Brown

Where should family policy in the United States head over the next five to 15 years?

The *Unifying Family Policy* series reimagines key areas of family policy as interconnected threads in a shared tapestry. The series challenges underlying assumptions and invites fresh thinking in light of the deep societal transformations underway and those still to come. Each brief explores how a specific policy area intersects with others and how, woven together, they can build a coherent, stable foundation for families in a rapidly changing world.

The current patchwork of family policies—including paid leave, child care, tax credits, health coverage, etc.—is fragmented, reactive, and out of step with the realities families face. Over the next decade, we must recast family policy as an integrated, future-oriented system—one that recognizes caregiving as vital infrastructure, addresses the real costs of raising children, and gives families true agency to make choices that align with their values, cultures, and needs.

This brief focuses on how policy can support communities and institutions in being more hospitable to families with children, and makes the case that:

- Both civic and physical infrastructure can be designed with hospitality to families with children, or with hostility to those families.
- When institutions and communities are built with families in mind, everyone benefits – and it's all the more important to ensure the enabling conditions for thriving families are in place in an era where families with children are shrinking as a proportion of the population.
- Making institutions and communities more hospitable does not need to break the bank: there are innumerable small, modest actions that signal to families they are welcome and vital.

Current Context and Trends

Families with children are the cornerstone of a society, as presidents from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama have long affirmed. Yet there is a mismatch between the importance of families and how our society is designed to welcome and integrate families. Family-friendly design and implementation doesn't just "happen." Our civic infrastructure—that is, the design of our communities and our democratic institutions—can either integrate children into community life or push them out. It can, in short, be hospitable to families or hostile. And approaching policy questions through a family-first lens has become more important than ever in an era of declining fertility, which increases the urgency both of creating enabling conditions for people to form the families they want and of maximizing the flourishing of existing families. States, cities, and even community organizations and businesses need to think harder about how to proactively include families in their design choices and operations. Families' needs shouldn't be an afterthought—they should be at the heart of how America's political and civic institutions operate.

Yet around the globe, we are seeing a worrisome trend in the opposite direction. Persistently low fertility has created a growing expectation that children are the exception, rather than the rule. In South Korea, demand for designated *nokijeu-jon* (kid-free zones) continues to rise, with 542 of them designated within the country so far—and counting. If the Victorian era taught that children ought to be seen, not heard, some factions of modern society would seemingly prefer they never be seen at all.

Apart from the outright hostility to children in small corners of the Internet (such as what the BBC once branded "consciously child-free influencers"), the greater culprit is thoughtlessness. Families with children, just like seniors, have particular needs and burdens that independent prime-age individuals do not. Yet market efficiencies too often make it more cost-effective to cater to households with fewer dependents and higher earning power.

We can already see demographic and economic forces pushing communities to favor the childless and unattached. Empty nesters and retirees boast higher purchasing power than many households with children still at home, while parents with young children tend to be earlier in their careers and have less disposable income and higher expenses. Without intentional counterweights, market forces will gradually shift public amenities and business attention toward older and wealthier adults. Current examples include the proliferation of age-restricted housing developments to the exclusion of ones that welcome children; a growing movement that seeks to exempt seniors from property taxes, which are the biggest source of funding for schools; and a gradual shift in societal expectations that sees children as an individual's private responsibility, rather than a civic and public good. We do not need to disadvantage the elderly or those without children in order to move toward family-friendly communities, but we do need to act to reorient ourselves in a healthier direction.

Parents bear the costs of raising children—but we all benefit from healthy families. Families are not just a demographic to be served; they are the load-bearing unit of a healthy society. When families thrive in public life, the entire community—including those without children—benefits from a more cohesive and resilient social fabric. Children contribute more than unifying laughter or a reason to join one's neighbors at a showing of *E.T.* in the park (to say nothing of a community's literal sustainability over generations): as play advocate Tim Gill says, children in public "exemplify a degree of tolerance and conviviality, the idea that life is about more than work and money and restless grown-up intensity." Gill is fond of quoting a former mayor of Bogotá, Colombia who asserted children are an 'indicator species' for the health of an entire community ecosystem.

If we are indifferent to the asymmetries between the vital need for families and the lack of family-friendly infrastructure, we run the risk of asking parents to bear the burden of raising children without being able to draw on the support of a community. And if we aren't intentional about creating economic and civic infrastructure that balances the scales in favor of families, we run the risk of building spaces that cater to the autonomous individual at the expense of the messy, loud realities of family life. For instance, some American cities lack safe spaces that give families the opportunity to gather. Others prioritize amenities that appeal to those at other stages of life, ignoring the unique needs of families with children, or sending a subtle signal about who is welcome and who is merely tolerated.

Building institutions and communities that intentionally welcome and support families isn't primarily about raising fertility rates, though—it's about signaling our priorities. Without careful attention, it's too easy for our built environment, community institutions, and economic system to naturally tilt toward households without children. Integrated, intergenerational communities, on the other hand, will offer safe, varied routes to school; small-scale parks embedded in neighborhoods; transit systems that are welcoming, safe, and accessible to strollers; businesses and amenities that prioritize family-friendly pricing; well-ordered public spaces with bathrooms and changing tables; and much more.

Designing places and institutions that support children and parents comfortably participating in public life is more than sentimentality. It's creating a future in which parents have places where they can come together, find community, and make raising a family just that little bit easier.

The Opportunity

The contours of public life are shaped by formal and informal institutions. Formal institutions, like cities, coffee shops, and community centers, establish physical space and rules that can set the conditions for families to flourish. Informal institutions—the regular community we find at an after-school playgroup or

post-worship social hour or simply a shared set of local norms and customs—are where much of daily life is experienced.

Formal institutions alone can only lower some of the friction associated with family life, but they can also lay the groundwork for civic, religious, and community groups to form webs of support around parents. A clean, safe public park can host any number of playdates or after-school meetups, while one that is in disrepair or haunted by high crime rates will struggle to serve in the same way. Sidewalks with curb cuts for strollers and wheelchairs can welcome a variety of ages and abilities to the streets, whereas conventional street design too often leaves parents dependent on cars to get around town. A hospitable community provides more than just utility; it offers "civic grace": beautiful, safe spaces that signal to parents and children that they are valued members of a permanent community, not just transient consumers.

While policymakers have some control over formal institutions, they generally can't guarantee that families will find those informal communities that lead to friendships, social support, and meaning. But they can make design and policy choices that make those relationships easier to form, through zoning codes, administrative programs, or business practices.

This can start from the top, in the form of documents and procedures aimed at cultivating more family-friendly environments. For instance, a state or city office might request a "family impact statement," similar to an environmental impact statement, that assesses proposed rules or policy changes by how they might make it easier or harder for families to flourish or find community. A new government service or program might have the best of intentions, but if it is not implemented with an eye towards how parents with young children will actually apply for, navigate, and use the program, it will fail to achieve its desired ends.

Authentic hospitality often fails not because of explicit hostility towards families, but because no one intentionally designed systems and structures with families in mind. This is where formal institutions can help. Changing mindsets to proactively welcome and support families, rather than treating the modal user or consumer as an unattached individual, requires new thinking. This approach recognizes the importance of using formal institutions to set the preconditions where informal communities can do what they do best.

Similarly, when families with children face extra financial pressure—for instance, higher utility bills because of the presence of many household members—the stress can get in the way of engaging in family and civic life, either because parents are making sacrifices like taking on an extra gig job in order to make ends meet, or because they are simply too exhausted to make their way to movie night in the park. But if policymakers aren't thinking through that lens, they will treat households as fungible. We even see this in government statistics; to paraphrase the late senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, an unemployment report treats the man with children the same as a twenty-something fresh out of college. This is a mistake, but we have an opportunity for correction.

Ultimately, this mindset shift is essential for a community value of prioritizing family life. We might make an analogy to the choices before policymakers to dining at a restaurant. Some restaurants cater to the upscale couple or single business traveler looking for a fine dining experience; some offer a kids' menu; some pride themselves on kids eating free. In a similar way, not every city or neighborhood needs to compete for families in every case; dog parks and urban nightlife have their place. But without a collective focus on which investments are being made, city planners will naturally gravitate towards a model that caters to residents with fewer dependents and more purchasing power; in some cases, they do so deliberately. Alternatively, when families are at the center of planning, there is suggestive evidence from places like Tyler, Texas—which is growing significantly faster than surrounding East Texas communities—that many people find such an approach attractive.

We need to include, if not prioritize, families in our menu of public amenities and policy offerings.

What To Do

There are steps that both governing institutions and communities can take to increase hospitality to families with young children without requiring a major new outlay of funding. We are offering here a sample of actionable policies, but this is hardly a comprehensive list; policymakers at every level should engage in brainstorming and listening sessions with parents to hear about challenges, needs, and opportunities. Capita tested a subset of these policies in its February 2026 *Quarterly Insights from America's Families* survey, where they all received majority support among parents. (Recommendations marked by a * were tested in the survey.)

State and federal recommendations

- Reduce property taxes for families with minor children who have low or moderate household income: This policy received some of the highest support in the survey, with 69% support and 42% saying it should be policymakers' top priority.*
- Reduce utility bills for families with dependent children. This policy also received very strong support among parents.*
- Create express "family lanes" in airports and for in-person government services like Medicaid or passport renewal.*
- Improve air, train, bus, and car travel for families by more widely adopting high-quality play areas in airports and train stations and on trains*, building more playgrounds at highway rest areas*, and providing free luggage carts (common in many European and Asian airports).
- Ensure car seat regulations align with the best current research so it does not present an undue burden to family transportation, and consider instituting a per-rental cap on rental car charges for car seats.
- Adapt government statistics to include widespread disaggregation and reporting by family structure (e.g. unemployment rates of individuals by number of dependent children).

- Make "family impact statements" a common part of the legislative process to highlight the potential impact of policy proposals on families with children and protect families from unintended consequences.

Local recommendations

- Create a flat family pricing structure at museums and theaters where families do not have to pay a per-child fee. Not only did this garner strong support in the poll, but 61% of respondents also said they would be "very" or "somewhat" willing to see taxes raised to pay for it.*
- Invest more in public libraries, public pools, and public splash pads to extend their hours and in the maintenance and safety of public parks.*
- Improve walkability and "strollerability" in neighborhoods by prioritizing sidewalk repair and curb cuts in areas with many families and adding sidewalks where there are gaps.
- Adopt "slow streets" near schools and child care programs that limit vehicles' speed and idling, if not entirely closing them off from through traffic during school hours.
- Use planning and community development mechanisms to encourage co-locating family and children's services (as well as elder care services) or "care blocks" that centralize services such as child care, laundromats, legal aid for women, and so on.

The Tough Questions

- **How can communities balance the need to be family friendly with changing demographics?** Families with children are becoming a smaller part of the population in many communities, relative to those without children and older adults. This may create or exacerbate rivalry between these populations. Our survey results suggest that policies which do not feel like taking from one group to give to another are more likely to be politically viable.
- **How can family-friendly ideas be socialized in the broader community?** Change is often resisted, which is why it's notable many of our suggestions can be implemented on a trial basis. For instance, the city of Freiburg, Germany, has held one-day slow street events where they shut streets near schools to cars, throw a block party for the neighborhood, and have police on hand to direct traffic to alternate routes; these efforts have helped show community members that slow streets are not overly disruptive to daily life.
- **How can smaller streams of funding be secured for family-friendly improvements?** While none of the proposals we list in this brief require multi-billion-dollar annual commitments, they still come with costs at a time when many local and state budgets are tight. Communities will therefore need to wrestle with finding creative funding sources (for instance, existing infrastructure grants that may have a remaining balance but have not been thought of for these types of uses), and the federal government may want to consider small-scale family-friendly community block grants or family-friendly infrastructure funding.

Recommended Reading

For more reading on the research base and different perspectives on this topic, we recommend these five outside articles. You can find the top lines on our survey questions related to family-friendly communities HERE.

1. This Albanian City Should Inspire America to Go Big on "School Streets," *StreetsBlogUSA*
2. Every Interstate Rest Stop Should Have a Playground, *Family Matters*
3. The Decline of America's Public Pools, *The Atlantic*
4. Parent Safety Perceptions of Child Walking Routes, *Journal of Transportation & Health*, Evers et al. (May 2014)
5. The Family Impact Rationale and Handbook, Family Impact Institute

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Connections

The hospitableness of communities is one factor that shapes individuals' choices around FAMILY FORMATION.

Communities that are more deliberately family-friendly will take a family lens to HOUSING policy.

Hospitable communities and institutions can provide a buffer against ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE-driven disruptions to family economic stability.

When communities are built in ways that are welcoming to families, parents can take fuller advantage of the bonding time with their young children during PAID PARENTAL LEAVE.

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