



Project Report | April 2024

BETTER START

The experiences of mothers living in high rise public housing



Acknowledgments

Better Health Network and Murdoch Children's Research Institute, acknowledge and pay respect to the traditional owners of the land on which this resource was developed, the Yalukut Weelam Clan of the Boon Wurrung people, and pay respect to Elders past and present.

This report was prepared by the Better Health Network and the Centre for Community Child Health at Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI). We would like to acknowledge and thank the following people for their contribution to the development of this project.

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A special thank you to the **Park Towers Resident Committee, the Community Connector's team and all stakeholders** who participated in interviews.

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A heartfelt thank you from Better Health Network to all the incredibly brave mothers who shared their experiences of raising children in high rise public housing with us. Without your open hearts, courageous spirits and willingness to share your stories none of this would have been possible.

Foreword

I am honoured to introduce this significant body of work, representing the culmination of years of discussions and collaborative efforts. Better Health Network has consistently championed a focus on equity and fairness, and we are dedicated to our work in public housing.

Recognising the importance of the first 1000 days in children's lives, our goal was to enhance our understanding, contribute to the evidence base, and make a positive impact on the lives of families in public housing.

I express profound thanks to the Murdoch Children's Research Institute for their partnership and City of Port Phillip for their invaluable contribution to this project. This initiative has been made possible with the support of Homes Victoria, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, and Tweddle. Their time and advice throughout the project has been instrumental.

Most importantly, I want to express our gratitude to the mothers and other residents of Park Towers who generously shared their time and insights. Your contributions have been invaluable in shaping our understanding of how we can enhance the lives of families in public housing.

We also aspire for this report to inform future decision-making about how best to create public housing that meets the needs of children and their families.

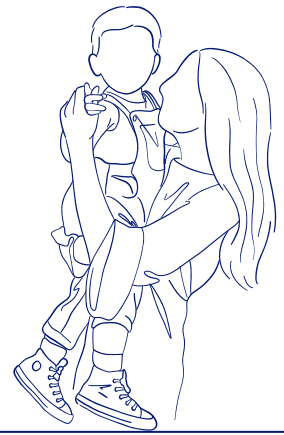
We sincerely hope that this work contributes to positive changes to ensure families can truly thrive in public housing.

Thank you for joining us on this transformative journey.

Damian Ferrie

Chief Executive Officer
Better Health Network

Table of Contents



INTRODUCTION

Executive summary	01
Recommendations for change now	04
Recommendations for future public housing design	05
Visual summary of what's important to mothers	06-08
Public Housing in Victoria	10-11
About the Better Start project	12
Engagement with mothers	13
First 1000 days pillars	15

KEY FINDINGS

Safe communities	17-21
Secure housing	22-25
Toxin-free environments	26-28
Green spaces	29-31
Opportunities to learn through play	32-35
Nutritious food	36-40
Loving and responsive relationships	41-44

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

Prioritise gender-sensitive design	46
Prioritise place-based initiatives	47
Social connection is vital for service access	48
Working in partnership with families	49
Final remarks	50

Executive Summary

The Better Start Project aimed to understand the experiences of mothers raising children in high rise public housing. It also sought to understand the impacts of living in this environment during the first 1000 days of a child's life (from conception to two years of age). In doing so, the project intended to inform innovative service delivery models, tailored to improve outcomes for families who may be experiencing a series of compounding challenges.

The project began in November 2022, led by Better Health Network (BHN), in partnership with the Centre for Community Child Health. The project was co-funded by the City of Port Phillip. To foster meaningful connections with families a Better Start researcher was based at Park Towers, a high rise public housing building in South Melbourne. A series of community engagement initiatives were facilitated, adapting to suit the needs of families. Alongside this, interviews with several local service providers were conducted.

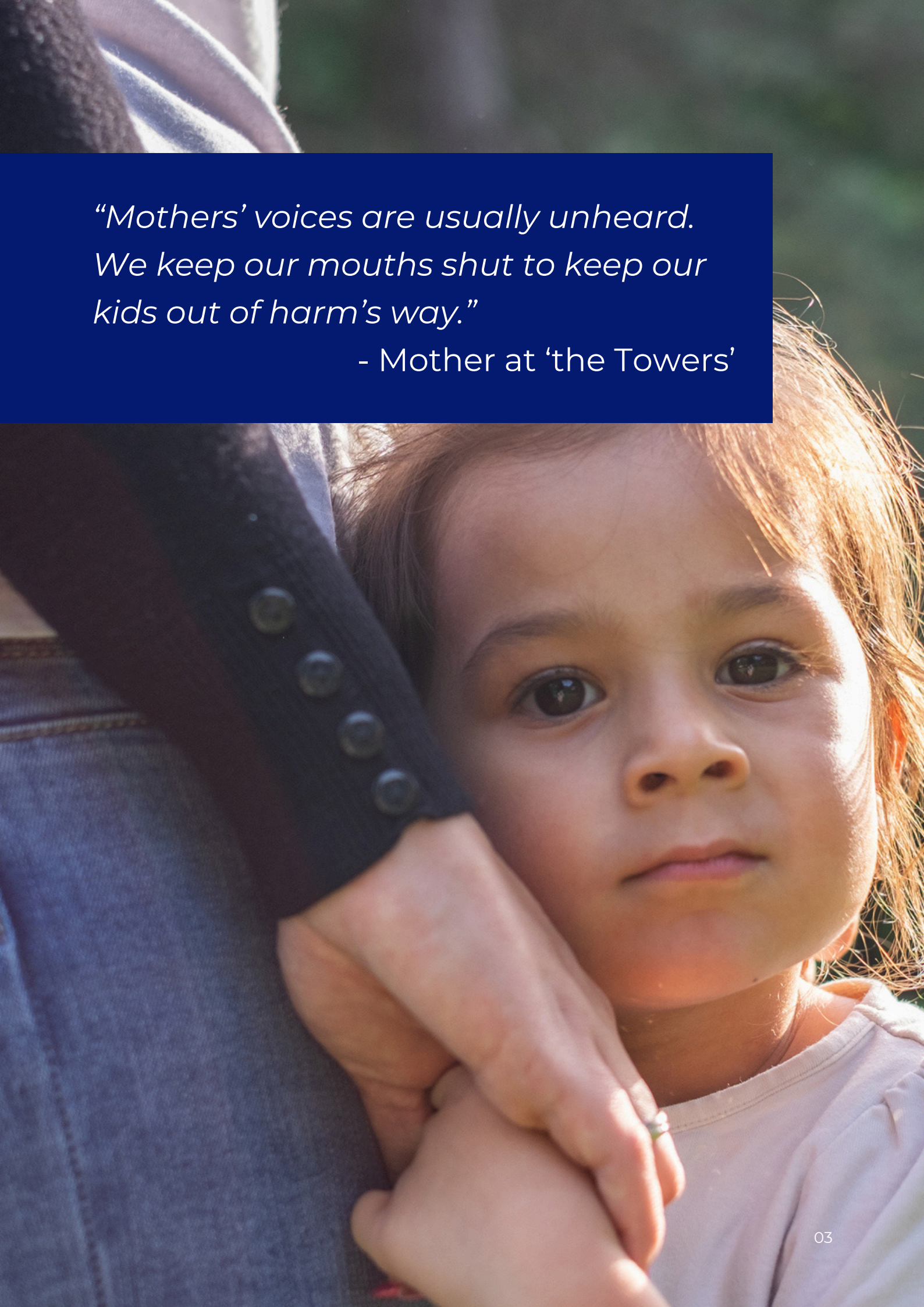
Overall, 22 mothers engaged with the Better Start project each to varying degrees, with over 50 community-based engagements. Mothers shared that they feel significantly unsafe in the building's communal spaces, limiting the way in which families engage with and utilise common areas. They voiced concerns about frequent incidents of violence, exposure to illicit drug use, and residents displaying challenging behaviour. They also shared photos and examples of substandard building maintenance which has led to increased exposure to environmental allergens. Such conditions can have strong adverse effects on the health and wellbeing outcomes of children. These findings highlight an urgent need to accelerate efforts to improve the living conditions at Park Towers to ensure that children have the best opportunity to reach their full potential.

Through our conversations with mothers and a comprehensive literature scan we learned that social conditions outweigh access to services in shaping health and wellbeing outcomes for children and families. Additionally, this report highlights the pivotal role of place-based initiatives in cultivating a sense of community.

Our recommendations demonstrate opportunities for change in public housing, to create homes that are safer, better resourced, and support the health and wellbeing outcomes of children during the first 1000 days and beyond.

Our findings are timely:

In September 2023, the State Government of Victoria announced the retirement and transformation of all public housing towers across Victoria. It is imperative that the perspectives and experiences of women are integrated into the new developments so that spaces are safe and inclusive for everyone. Therefore, we strongly recommend prioritising listening to the voices of women in current and future public housing and embedding gender-sensitive design principles.



*“Mothers’ voices are usually unheard.
We keep our mouths shut to keep our
kids out of harm’s way.”*

- Mother at ‘the Towers’

Recommendations for change **now**



The following recommendations are from mothers and carers, who live at Park Towers. They address housing quality concerns, including security and maintenance issues, as well as the need for families to feel safe in high rise public housing .



Improve security & safety

- Install surveillance cameras in all communal areas. Target high-traffic zones such as laundries, community rooms, stairwells, hallways, and lifts for comprehensive coverage.
- Add more layered lighting to laundry rooms for heightened safety and visibility.
- Conduct more regular security walkthroughs in communal areas during both day and night.
- Implement a centralised reporting system for community members to report community violence.
- Implement a controlled entry system restricting residents to designated floors.
- Upgrade monitoring systems for individuals entering and exiting the building and enforce rigorous sign-in procedures and access controls for heightened security measures.
- Increase the number of on-site safe disposal syringe bins and provide clear and concise instructions for safe drug use and proper syringe disposal to reduce unsafe practices.



Continue family and child initiatives

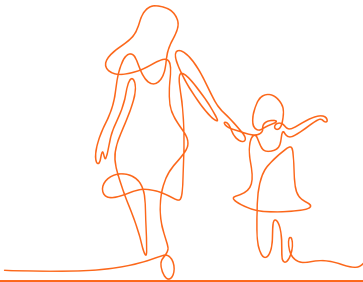
- Ensure all community spaces including outdoor areas are child-friendly.
- Provide activities and childcare (including for early years) at community events to enable parent participation.
- Advocate for ongoing funding for a Community Hub and resident committee.



Improve building maintenance

- Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) to continue to connect with Park Towers Resident Committee around priority building-wide maintenance issues.
- Improve systems for reporting and addressing building maintenance issues including live chat option.
- Review and optimise fire doors and alarm systems. Minimise disruptions while ensuring the continued safety of residents in the event of a fire.
- Improve the standard of building hygiene.

Recommendations for **future** public housing design



Women's perspectives and experiences need to inform and guide the future design and development of public housing

Addressing heightened vulnerability among women in public spaces necessitates integrating gender-sensitive design in public housing. Insights from the Better Start project highlight the critical importance of prioritising safety and quality housing for women and children, especially for women facing intersecting forms of marginalisation.



Prioritise place-based initiatives in high rise public housing

Place-based approaches enhance community health outcomes by tailoring interventions to meet local social and physical environmental needs. Our findings highlight the value of collaborative partnerships with community members, coupled with the strategic co-location of services. This approach embodies a more holistic, and prevention-first approach to health.



Work in partnership with families experiencing vulnerability

Working from a trauma-informed 'whole-of-family' approach requires collaborative partnerships with families, applying cultural sensitivity, and adopting flexible strategies that empower and celebrate their strengths. It requires deep listening, shared decision-making, and continuous learning and adaptability. In planning and running services for families, services need to engage parents as partners in co-design and co-production.

current CHALLENGES



What CREATES Community FOR FAMILIES?



the POSITIVE changes WE want to see





About Better Start



Context: Public Housing In Victoria

1850's



Before the development of the public housing towers, slums were scattered across Melbourne's inner-city suburbs [Carlton, Collingwood, Fitzroy, and Port Melbourne].

1930's

From the 1930's onwards it is in these areas that some of the first high rise public housing towers came to be.



Late 1960's

Park Towers was built 1967-69. The building comprises of 299 apartments across 30 floors, with a communal laundry facility on each floor. The building is managed by DFFH and is home to approximately 1000 residents from various backgrounds, cultures and ages.



2018 - 2023

A pilot program funded by DFFH in partnership with BHN (formerly Star Health) initiated the **South Melbourne Community Capacity Building Initiative** in 2018. The goal was to operationalise the social landlord model, addressing community trauma as a result of an increase in incidents of violence on the estate. This foundational project concluded in mid-2023. This led to the creation of the Community Hub which is a place-based initiative that provides services and supports for residents such as Artsbus, the Park Towers Community Food Pantry, Homework Club, Breakfast Club and exercise classes.

2020 - 2022

DFFH funded and BHN collaborated on the **High Risk Accommodation Response (HRAR)** program in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The project revealed gaps in information, access, and referral to support services. It concluded in July 2022.

July 2022 - Nov 2023

The **Community Connectors project** followed the conclusion of HRAR and was funded by DFFH in partnership with BHN. It involved employing residents with living experience as 'Community Connectors' to link other residents to health and wellbeing services, resulting in over 1000 connections.



Nov 2022 - Dec 2023



The **Better Start project**, funded by BHN and the City of Port Phillip in partnership with the Centre for Community Child Health, examines the impact of living in social housing on the first 1000 days of a child's life.

Sept 2023

The State Government of Victoria announced the retirement and transformation of all public housing towers across Victoria. Redevelopment plans will span three decades with the project expected to be finalised in approximately 2051.



In the planning for the redevelopment of Park Towers, community input will be crucial to alleviate any adverse effects and to ensure that the concerns and requirements of women-led families are carefully integrated in redevelopment plans.

About the Better Start project



The Better Start project aimed to understand parents' experiences of raising children in Park Towers to inform new ways to deliver services and supports to better meet the needs of families.

Parents and carers with children aged 0 – 12 years old living in Park Towers were invited to participate through interviews, a photovoice project and a community conversation.

Local stakeholders and service providers were also engaged to further understand the challenges they see for their clients living in high rise public housing.

Listening to the voices of mothers with living experience was at the centre, therefore, the project has been shaped in accordance with what is most important to them.

BHN funded this community-based research project with financial contribution from the City of Port Phillip and partnered with Centre for Community Child Health (MCRI) as experts in child health and development.

Project Principles

Authentic relationship building

Establish relationships by participating and contributing to community life at a pace that allows for trust and connection to build.

Listening with openness

Holding space with an openness to understand and learn what is most important to families. Marginalised women, predominately single mothers, do not always have their perspectives heard.

Valuing people's time and energy

Genuinely acknowledging the value of people's time and energy by providing vouchers, working flexibly, providing delicious food, and bringing a positive energy to catch ups and events.

Starting with strengths

Leading conversations with curiosity to see what interests are most important to each person. Understanding what skills and resources are alive in community and building rapport from there.

Engagement with mothers

The Better Start researcher was based at Park Towers. Over time, this allowed for deeper engagement and the fostering of new relationships with the community, resulting in over 50 touchpoints. For a detailed version of the project methodology see Appendix A.



The Better Start researcher attended the **weekly Breakfast Club**, delivered by City of Port Phillip staff alongside Park Towers resident volunteers (case study page 39).

Fortnightly Arts and Crafts group

began in April and was born out of a conversation with one of the mothers who loves arts and crafts and open to facilitating this. This became a way to relax, chat and create with other mothers both living in the building and in surrounding public housing.



Community events

Participating in community events was an informal, fun way to connect with families.



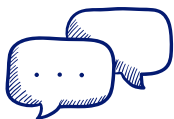
Photovoice

Mothers were invited to take photos to visually portray their "day as a parent". A reflection session was facilitated afterwards.



1:1 Conversations

Mothers preferred to share their experiences with the Better Start researcher at Park Towers or a local café.



To build the wider context for this project we also held **consultations with service providers** to gather their insights around family engagement.

Graphic Recorder

We employed a graphic recorder to visually represent mothers' priorities and solutions in a group conversation session. Illustrated on pages 06-08.



MCRI also completed a comprehensive **scan of the first 1000 days literature**. The report draws on the literature review findings in each section.



The best opportunity to build a strong foundation for lifelong health and wellbeing occurs during the first 1000 days – the period from conception, throughout pregnancy, and during a child’s first two years.



Better Start

First 1000 days pillars

Children living in public housing are more likely to be exposed to conditions that have an adverse impact on their health and wellbeing during the first 1000 days. The key factors that influence this stage of development and explored in this report are described below:



Safe communities

A safe community is a liveable community, where people can go about their daily activities in an environment without fear, risk of harm or injury.



Secure housing

Long term sustainable housing and a living environment that is safe.



Toxin-free environments

A space free from hazardous chemical substances.



Green spaces

An area of grass, trees, or other vegetation set apart for recreational or aesthetic purposes in an otherwise urban environment.



Opportunities to learn through play

Provide time, space and adequate play spaces to facilitate learning and development.



Nutritious food

Access to food that supports children to grow, learn and play.



Loving and responsive relationships

Secure relationships with primary caregivers who are able to provide the responsive caregiving needed to build secure attachments.



Key Findings

The following sections share the stories and experiences of mothers living in Park Towers within the context of the first 1000 days pillars.

The order in which these stories are shared reflect what matters most to the mothers who participated in the Better Start project.



Safe communities



Safe communities

The people, resources, and opportunities within neighbourhood environments affect families' capacity to provide their children with the conditions they need to flourish. Key qualities that make communities supportive include social capital, level of community trust and sense of safety (Moore et al., 2017).



Violence and unpredictable behaviour

"A lot of [violence] happens [in the building]. My son, now when somebody's fighting, he runs away from me. He's scared...he's not feeling safe." - Mother

Families who participated in the Better Start project expressed deep concerns about safety within their community, including exposure to violence, threatening behaviour and illicit drug use, and feeling unsafe in communal areas such as the lifts and laundries.

For mothers living in Park Towers, the unpredictable behaviour displayed by some residents and visiting parties significantly impacts their ability to keep themselves and their children safe. Parents report that the building is home to a number of people who have unmanaged symptoms of severe mental health, high risk substance abuse, or connections to the criminal justice system.



Children's exposure to violence

"Because I'm so desensitised, someone wielding a knife doesn't bother me, but that's not a normal response. It's not normal to not be scared of that and that's how these kids are going to grow up. And that's not healthy at all." - Mother

Some mothers are concerned that their children may become desensitised to certain behaviours, such as knife violence, as a result of being exposed to violence and antisocial behaviour at Park Towers.

"He's really scared to live here. He says all the time to me, "Mum, why do we live here? Mum, why do you make me live here?" - Mother

Parents shared that their children are fearful of living in the building. Many children have witnessed their parents being verbally abused or racially vilified. One mother shared how her child was chased by a resident.



Lifts are unsafe environments

“My kids are petrified to go in the lifts. There are people that live in the building. They come into the lifts...and what they say to the children it makes you want to grab the children and just run out of the lift.” – Mother

Park Towers has three lifts all accessed by one main foyer. Mothers shared that the lifts are a dangerous place for families and that their children are terrified of entering the lifts due to unpredictable behaviour in an enclosed space. Some mothers described being verbally abused and threatened by other residents. Others reported that some residents have been robbed and violently attacked while in the lifts on their own. There is at least one known account of a woman being sexually assaulted in the lifts. Mothers also expressed feeling unsafe in the hallways and stairwell of the building.



Laundries

“Some guy that clearly didn’t live here, that was clearly here for the wrong reasons, was just chilling in my laundry. And then he had the audacity to just be like, “Hey, do you want some [drugs]?” - Mother

“I don’t feel safe [in the laundry]. My kid [comes] with me. If I leave her in the home she cries. And when I do laundry I am looking outside like this and that is very hard.” - Mother

There are no cameras in the laundries, and they are often used by residents and visitors as spaces to use drugs. One mother reported they do not use the laundry facility because syringes and nitrous oxide bulbs are commonly discarded in there. Another parent reported seeing a resident using the laundry as a temporary living space, and another described entering their laundry space and being offered drugs by a person that does not live in the building.



Research Insights

Research shows that women are more likely to feel unsafe in public spaces than men, particularly women who experience intersecting forms of marginalisation such as women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, women with a disability, older women and those who identify as LGBTQI (Women’s Health East, 2020).

When planning and designing spaces, it is important to consider women’s experiences and perceptions to ensure spaces are safe and inclusive for everyone (Women’s Health East, 2020). Mothers’ safety concerns at Park Towers highlight the importance of integrating a gendered perspective into the future design and development of public housing.





Drug exposure

“What happens if [my daughter] touches the needle... she can get infected you know? You never know what [could] happen.” - Mother

It is common in public housing for used syringes and other drug paraphernalia, such as nitrous oxide bulbs to be discarded around the building and in spaces where children play. Mothers worry that their children are at increased risk of needlestick injuries and possible exposure to blood-borne viruses.

“There was a group of six middle-aged people just using, and there was a needle in the girl's arm just looking at us and I'm like, are you serious? I said to [my daughter] don't look, keep walking because she is curious. And then the lady goes, yeah, keep walking and spat at us. And the spit got me, and I was holding onto my little one.” - Mother

Mothers shared that they witness residents conducting drug deals in lifts, and that they are offered drugs in front of their children. One parent described witnessing a group of people using intravenous drugs outside the building as she was entering with her young children.

“Children are going to be affected when they grow up. I just try my best to protect them and to give them more positive feedback.” - Mother

Some mothers are fearful that exposure to drug use will increase the likelihood that their children will experiment with drugs later in life.

Photovoice



“[Syringes are found] usually in the gardens around the playground but more out the back near the bins. You find [drug paraphernalia] everywhere in the building.” - Mother



Problems reporting issues

“I went to the police and they said because you weren't physically hurt we can't do anything.” - Mother

Many mothers feel hopeless and frustrated by the lack of support provided when they report incidents of violence to the police. Some are frightened to report instances of abuse and other anti-social behaviour out of fear that they will be further vilified or there will be repercussions for their family.

Clare* shared the impact that gender based violence has on the health and wellbeing of her family.

Clare is a solo parent with three children. Clare's family have lived in public housing and private rentals in Port Melbourne for many years. After facing financial hardship and being unable to afford their private rental, they requested to move into low density public housing near the children's school. Instead, they were moved into Park Towers.

Clare and her children have encountered a series of distressing incidents at Park Towers, including being offered drugs, encountering individuals with weapons in the elevator, inappropriate remarks, verbal threats, attempted break-ins to their apartment and a physical assault by fellow residents.

In one incident a resident in the building approached Clare's thirteen-year-old daughter while making sexual advances. After the incident occurred, the resident frequently knocked on the family's apartment door and followed them into the lift. In distress, Clare lodged police reports and visited the local housing office where she received confirmation about the resident's previous conviction of child sexual abuse. Clare demanded to be moved out of Park Towers or she would go to the media.

The family were moved within the week.

Clare and her children having been severely impacted by these events and the unsafe environment at Park Towers. Clare experiences high levels of anxiety, and expresses feelings of hopelessness. Her three children all display signs of fear and mental distress including withdrawal, anxiety and thoughts of self-harm.

**Please note, pseudonym names have been used throughout the report.*





Secure housing



Secure housing

Stable housing is essential for the wellbeing of families and children, providing a secure environment necessary for participation in education and community life. Specific housing-related challenges include housing mobility, which can disrupt a child's sense of security and social connections; overcrowding, which can affect autonomy, health, and school performance; and housing quality, with poor conditions contributing to adverse child outcomes (Moore, 2023).



Overcrowding

There are a number of families living in overcrowded apartments in Park Towers. Some parents have their extended family members living with them and/or their adult children and their children.

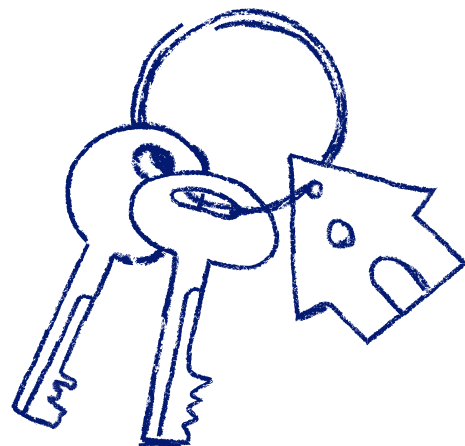
The lack of space that children experience when living in crowded conditions can negatively impact their sense of autonomy, social behaviour, health, developmental outcomes and school performance. Children in overcrowded houses are also less likely to have sufficient space for play and may also experience greater risk of abuse due to the greater difficulty they face in removing themselves from potentially volatile situations. Moreover, when parents have to cope with overcrowding it impacts their parenting behaviour and can lead to increased conflict between children and parents, as well as influence marital conflict (Moore et al., 2017).



Repairs

"If you call people for fixing stuff, they don't come to fix. They just say, oh, is it dangerous? And if you have kids or even for yourself... it's still dangerous because it's not fixed. They take ages and ages. Even if you call them, they just don't bother." - Mother

Mothers shared challenges organising essential repairs to their apartments. They reported that broken items such as cupboards and doors often go unrepaired even after multiple attempts at contacting maintenance. Mothers felt that broken items in the family home are hazardous for small children. They voiced concerns for their children's safety and felt frustrated that they cannot have these matters resolved efficiently.





Noise levels

"If you are on level 2 and there is something happening...an argument/physical fight or someone is screaming or yelling, the way the sound works in the building everyone can hear it...It's very sensitive in terms of sound. One resident said her 10-year-old child cannot sleep. Hasn't been able to sleep for years." - Service Provider

Noise levels within Park Towers are a significant issue for families. Sound travels between the top and bottom floors of the building indicating that the insulation at Park Towers is inadequate to protect families from noise pollution.

Many children living in Park Towers have difficulties sleeping due to people verbally abusing other residents, loud music, and people banging on doors late at night.



Fire alarms and exit doors

"She doesn't want to live in the building because she wakes up at night now hearing the sounds of the alarm." - Mother

Fire alarms within the building are regularly set off by cigarette smoke, which is highly disruptive. There is a lack of clarity around the official fire procedure protocol amongst residents.

"All night they open, they close [the fire exit door]. I can't even sleep, especially my kids, they never sleep at night because they open, they close it." - Mother

Mothers also reported that fire exit doors in the building are frequently being used by residents and visitors during the night. The weight of the doors makes a loud banging noise, which impacts on families' ability to sleep. It is vital that fire doors and fire alarms are monitored to minimise disruption.



Research Insights

The impact of noise levels on children's ability to sleep is a significant concern to families. Sleep, of good quality and of sufficient duration, is a cornerstone of physical, cognitive, language and emotional development.

While short-term sleeping problems in young children are common, unresolved problems are associated with poorer child health-related quality of life, more behaviour problems, higher rates of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and can have adverse effects on socioemotional development and language development. Resolving sleep problems early is critical (Moore et al., 2017).



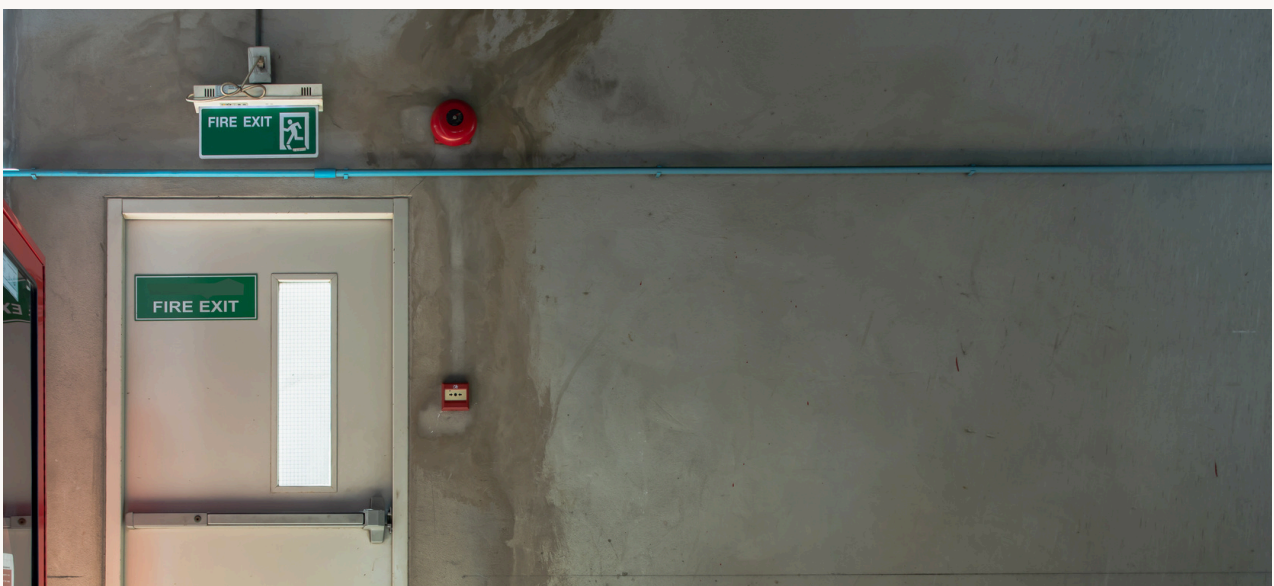
Mothers shared with us the challenges faced by families and older residents evacuating the 30-floor building during frequent fire emergencies.

Residents report the fire alarm goes off frequently at Park Towers, with the fire brigade attending most weeks. Cars frequently occupy the emergency parking zone, which restricts the fire brigade's access to the building. While many fire incidents are controllable, a tragic fatality occurred this year when a resident lost their life in their apartment due to a fire.

One grandmother, living on the 26th floor, described the distressing experience of evacuating their 10-month-old grandson and dog down 26 flights of stairs. Recently they had to evacuate at 11pm when a trolley containing rubbish was on fire in the stairwell.

***'Small fires in the trolley usually happen when someone is getting bashed, or their door is kicked in. It's a drug and gang tactic.'* - Mother**

The presence of trolleys filled with rubbish is a common issue, due to residents leaving trash in stairwells instead of using the bins on the ground floor. A resident pointed out that trolley fires are often associated with incidents involving violence, break-ins, and drug-related activities. This highlights the additional safety concerns residents have to deal with during fire emergencies.





Toxin-free environments



Toxin-free environments

While some exposure to dirt and bacteria is beneficial for children, excessive exposure to environmental allergens has strong adverse effects, and respiratory health may be determined by such exposure during the first year of life. Living in housing that is vermin-infested or mouldy increases the risk of children experiencing health problems (Moore et al, 2017; Moore, 2023).



Cockroach infestations

"If you've noticed that when you've been living here, you're getting very sick in your digestive system, sick in your lungs, sick in your nose, throat, eyes all the time...mainly it's the cockroaches...the bad airflow, and the mould, but it's mainly the cockroaches, because you are literally breathing in and swallowing their urine, their faeces, their dead body parts. You can get asthma from it, you can get all sorts of lung issues and nose issues, throat issues, and digestive issues." - Mother

Mothers felt deeply distressed about the number of cockroaches and grasshoppers in their homes and are concerned about the impact of infestations on their family's health. Some mothers report that they are using excessive amounts of insect spray to try and control the number of cockroaches in their houses and have needed to increase the frequency of their apartment cleaning to reduce the spread of disease. One mother reported that she has had to move all her kitchenware from cupboards into plastic tubs due to the significant number of cockroaches in her kitchen.

Photovoice



"They're bugs that I found inside the house. I couldn't get a photo of cockroaches because I'm petrified of them. And we're getting cockroaches everywhere now. I had one on the couch, it was on my leg. So literally I stayed up five hours. I went to bed at five o'clock that morning because I was cleaning behind the couch and everywhere, so they don't come. There's nothing you can do because the building's infested with them. And the commission has pest control people that come in, but they don't come in straight away. You have to wait months and months." - Mother



Black mould and sewerage

“Simple things...you know how there’s exhaust fans in the bathrooms in each apartment. Even though they’re there, this is what you get, it’s black mould...all the time. So, then you have to soak the roofs and the walls with bleach and then you have to put up with that which isn’t healthy.” - Mother

Mothers also raised concerns about black mould in their apartment and the impact of needing to regularly clean their bathrooms using harsh chemicals. Furthermore, parents reported that the building has major plumbing issues causing sewage to leak through residents’ apartments and communal spaces, leading to the temporary closure of the community room.



Cleanliness of building

Mothers report that some residents urinate and defecate in the stairwells and the stench can be unbearable. Mothers also described issues with rubbish being littered throughout the building. Accessing ground floor bins is difficult for residents living on higher levels, leading to rubbish in hallways, the stairwell, and the lifts.



Photovoice



“That there, that’s urine. And that’s every stairwell. They just piss in the stairwells. I was in the lift and there was a lady next to me and she just started urinating. Fully clothed, just standing there. Didn’t look like she was on drugs, just there... but again that could be mental illness, that could be anything.”

- Mother



“So that is people dumping their rubbish. And that’s in our stairwell. And then you’ve got it in our hallway next to the lifts because they’re too lazy. They don’t want to go down to the bin. Or they’ll just dump them in the lifts. Literally there’s anything and everything in the lifts. Sometimes when you get in there, you’ve got your little one going to pick things up”.

-Mother



Green spaces



Green spaces

Access to nature and green spaces provides children with an increased ability to concentrate, better educational attainment and reduced stress. Green spaces have also been shown to increase social interactions between families and children, promoting social trust and community perceptions of safety (Moore et al., 2017). Children need a safe and stimulating environment to play and explore.



Helps families connect

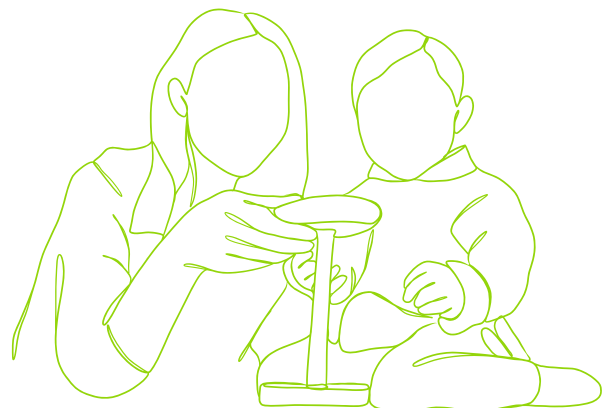
"The outdoor area is amazing for children. It's huge. And there's so much freedom for them. I wouldn't let them down there by themselves though. Half of [my daughter's] school friends live in the building too. So, they're always out there playing. It's lovely." - Mother

Park Towers provides a range of green spaces for residents including a new playground, grass areas, and community garden. There are also beaches and other parks such as the Melbourne Sports and Aquatic Centre (MSAC) and Skinners Adventure Playground close by. Some mothers expressed appreciation for accessible areas where their children can play. Others reported that they meet other families outside the building in the park and they felt the playground was a good place to connect with families and for their children to play with other kids.

Photovoice



"I always search beforehand [for needles]. I always search. Definitely. You can't trust...you can't let your guard down there. Which is really sad, but you can't. But no, it's good and it's huge. We're practicing roller skating there." - Mother



Families feel unsafe in the playground

"Everyone can look at you and there are a lot of men that come and sit and stare. There was one man inside the playground with his shirt off, sunbaking."
- Mother

"I know...why do they keep putting benches staring right at the playground?" - Mother

"I don't want to go there anymore."
- Mother

Many families feel unsafe in the playground. According to mothers, there are bench seats facing towards the playground that are often being used by men. One mother said they have taken their children away from the playground a number of times because of men hanging around. Another said they find the park unnerving - the way it is positioned below the building. She expressed feeling exposed because people living in apartments that face the play area can view the playground from above. These findings reinforce the need for gender sensitive design in the development of public spaces.

"Sometimes [children] take off their shoes and walk in the grass. I say don't do that because you never know what's in the grass, there could be a needle or something." - Mother

Additionally, some mothers raised concerns about discarded syringes found in the Park Towers playground and overgrown grass containing glass and other hazards. Some parents felt that the play area outside the building is unsafe for small children and suggested that the lawns need to be maintained more frequently than they currently are. Other feedback provided by mothers was that they feel the play space is too small for the number of children living in the building and that the playground is catered towards younger children (for example the swing is suitable for a baby only).

Research Insights



According to Moore (2023), families living in high rise accommodation need to get out as often as they can, more so than families living in low density housing with their own garden and play space. It is important that the surrounding environment includes enclosed playgrounds as well as safe green spaces and gardens.

Young children need opportunities to play and be physically active. Increased physical activity is associated with better physical health and motor and cognitive development, while the decline in opportunities to play has been associated with a rise in mental health problems in children and young people.



Opportunities to learn through play



Opportunities to learn through play

During the first 1000 days, a child's brain undergoes rapid and significant development. Play stimulates various parts of the brain, fostering neural connections that lay the foundation for cognitive, social, and emotional development. Families of young children need access to a range of family-friendly facilities and safe places for children to play. This is particularly important for families living in high rise apartments with limited space for play and exercise. Having child-relevant neighbourhood destinations, facilities, and services within easy reach of families is positively associated with young children's physical health and wellbeing and social competence (Moore, 2023).



Community Hub

"I think the Artsbus is really impactful, especially for the kids in the building. It makes everyone socialise. And when they're here, they make a really good presence. I really like the Artsbus."
- Mother

The Community Hub initiative offered various children's activities for families living in Park Towers. These included the weekly Artist for Kids Culture (Artsbus), and soccer, basketball, and tennis programs. These activities supported children to make friends and play with each other and have helped create a sense of community at Park Towers.

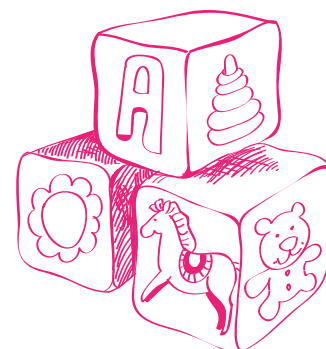
Children's arts activities and sports programs also alleviated financial and accessibility pressures for some families.



Local opportunities

"I don't drive so it's easier if [the sports programs] are at Park Towers." - Mother

In addition to Hub activities, mothers reported there are local activities for children in the City of Port Phillip including the library which offers Story Time and Toddler Time, as well as the Toy Library, Skinners Adventure Playground and MSAC. The Y(Our) festival was also highlighted by one parent as a great local initiative that offered children activities and opportunities for families to sing and dance. In addition, Planetshakers Church was cited by some mothers as a place that offers a variety of activities for children.





Limited early years activities

“The basketball, soccer...he needs to be 5 to play. There are a lot of families in the building in the same boat who miss out on the children’s activities because they aren’t pitched to younger children.”

- Mother

Some mothers with younger aged children reported that their kids are often too young to participate in some of the activities offered at Park Towers, particularly the sport programs. Mothers expressed a need for more children’s activities onsite, particularly for children under the age of five.

Previously at Park Towers there was a supported playgroup facilitated by the City of Port Phillip and BHN, however stakeholder and parent feedback indicated that the space where the playgroup was held did not ensure privacy and was not child and family friendly. The supported playgroup now operates across the road from Park Towers in the South Melbourne Community Centre.

After the move, the attendance increased from 23 attendees in Term 1 to 59 in Term 3 (BHN Early Help, 2023).

The feedback shared around the new space highlights the importance of child and family friendly spaces.



Access to kindergarten services

There are a number of kindergarten services available to families in South Melbourne, however there are limited spaces available in sessional kinder. It was reported that sometimes families are not aware they need to register the year before their child is eligible and by the time they go to enrol they have missed out. Two mothers, however shared that they were aware of the enrolment process but still faced accessibility challenges, resulting in their children starting mid-way through the term.

Photovoice



“As a parent, it’s good to be engaged in community [activities]. It helps yourself and your kids to get connected with what’s happening around the community. And they feel more happy, connected with other people and other kids. You get to meet different people and do different things. We went over to Y(Our), so we get to do more activities. They do lot of stuff like singing and dancing. And a lot of activities for the kids. If you let kids enjoy what they want to do, then they feel more like their personality. She loves going to the Artsbus when it comes.” - Mother

St Kilda Mums donated toys and early learning resources for children to use at Park Towers.

Mothers expressed that the community spaces in Park Towers need to be more inclusive of children and families; and that they could be improved by adding children's toys and other early years resources for kids to play with.

In response to this feedback, the Better Start researcher reached out to St Kilda Mums, a not-for-profit organisation that rehomes essential baby items, to ask if they could provide toys and early learning resources for children to use at Park Towers.

St Kilda Mums provided the following resources to Park Towers:

- A wide variety of toys suitable for children aged 0–4 years
- Wooden tables and chairs for 1- 4 year olds
- School bags with resources for 2–5 year olds
- Over 100 books for ages 0–16 years old
- Soft sofa
- A highchair
- Sensory playmats for babies
- Sofa toys

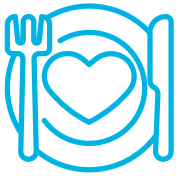
The early years resources have been well received by community members and are currently being used in relevant community programs and events.

'It's more appealing when you're going to an event as a mother and there's things there for your children to be stimulated. It's peace of mind for parents to not have to say come here, don't touch that. It's stressful!' - Mother





Nutritious food



Nutritious food

Access to a variety of nutritious food is essential during the first 1000 days and early childhood for brain development, growth, and the establishment of positive eating behaviours (Moore et al., 2017).

Data from the Community Connectors program demonstrates that food insecurity is a significant issue for families living in public housing with ~ 60% of connections made link to financial support and food access.

Food insecurity is driven by three factors: food access (the capacity to buy, transport and cook nutritious food), food availability (price, quality, and variety of available food) and food use (food-based knowledge and skills).

Park Towers and other inner-city Melbourne public housing buildings are situated in areas whereby nutritious food is often not affordable for low-income families.

The current initiatives at Park Towers such as the Park Towers Community Food Pantry and Family Breakfast Club provide families with increased access to, and availability of food, and facilitates social connection between residents.

It is of great importance that these projects receive sustainable funding to continue in order to alleviate food insecurity experienced by families living in Park Towers.



Park Towers Community Food Pantry

“The concept was never to fill your cupboard, it’s just to help you out. But now it’s a variety [of items]...from fruit, vegetables, frozen foods to staples...it’s basically a supermarket now.” - Resident & Park Towers Community Food Pantry Lead

The Park Towers Community Food Pantry was established in 2022 as part of the South Melbourne Community Capacity Building Initiative (SMCCBI) and led by a resident at the Towers. Fortnightly, residents are offered a selection of breads, dairy, meat, toiletries, feminine hygiene products, nappies, laundry products and snacks for children’s lunchboxes. In addition, residents are offered a fresh vegetable and fruit box weekly.

Currently the food pantry supports 500 people within the building and operates with an open-door policy, no questions asked. Some members of the Park Towers Resident Committee had experienced food insecurity themselves and they understand the stigma that can be associated with receiving food from emergency relief organisations. Having access to the food pantry allows mothers to spend money they would have usually spent on food on other essential items for their family.

“The hardest thing is having no food and having to go ask for it. I’m not here to ask. Just come in.” - Resident & Park Towers Community Food Pantry Lead

Since its inception, the Food Pantry has built an extensive network of local partners and supporters including Foodbank, It’s the Little Things, The Good Vibes, Port Phillip Community Group and Secondbite. With the support of these partners the Food Pantry have also organised “Farmers to Families” market days. The Food Pantry also offers a space for residents to volunteer and build their skills, particularly residents who are experiencing unemployment. Some mothers felt that since the opening of the Food Pantry, theft and violence in the building has decreased.

When asked what’s the best thing about the food pantry, the resident replied, “It’s a service for tenants by tenants. I think that’s the probably the best thing.” - Resident & Park Towers Community Food Pantry Lead



The Family Breakfast Club

“They do breakfast on a Friday...literally any type of breakfast you can think of they do. They're amazing. Eggs and bacon, pancakes, fresh fruit, coffee. They're there for the families on a Friday before they take the kids to school just to help out by the end of the week. It's really good.” - Mother

In 2022, the City of Port Phillip Youth Services team partnered with residents from the Park Towers Committee as part of the SMCCBI to create the Breakfast Club. Although the SMCCBI has finished the residents will continue to co-run this program on a voluntary basis with the City of Port Phillip. They offer a weekly breakfast for families every Friday morning before school.

The Breakfast Club helps support families by alleviating stress around food access. It also minimises the stress of getting their children ready for school. There is a sit-down or to-go option. The program has grown over the last year as it has become more embedded in community.

***“More recently these numbers have been around the 20 mark, however, the last few weeks we've had numbers in the 30s and even 41 two weeks ago.”
- City of Port Phillip Team Lead, Youth Services***

“I've been there three times now, because we're not really big breakfast eaters. Sometimes I'll just go down there to socialise. Or if we're running a little bit late, I'll go in there and say, anyone wanna lift to school? So, I've got all the kids in the car. I've made amazing friends from the school that live in the building.” - Mother



The Nappy Collective Fathers Day campaign supplied 6,390 nappies to public housing in Stonnington and Port Phillip.

The resident who manages the Park Towers Community Food Pantry, reported that nappies are an item that is in demand, however, is not well resourced with donations only being made every few months.

To increase the number of nappies available for new mothers, the BHN Better Start researcher reached out to the Nappy Collective to assess their capacity to supply nappies to the Park Towers Community Food Pantry.

The Nappy Collective was enthusiastic about partnering with the Park Towers Community Food Pantry and suggested the Better Start researcher setup a nappy collection point in South Melbourne. A request was made to the City of Port Phillip Maternal and Child Health Centre who offered to set up several collection points.

The Nappy Collective will lead the promotion of the new initiatives to raise awareness throughout the City of Port Phillip. Volunteers will collect and drop the nappies donated to the MCHC collection points to the Park Towers Community Food Pantry intermittingly throughout the year. In addition, The Nappy Collective coordinate two major donation drives each year (Father's Day in September and Mother's Day in May) in which organisations can put in a request for as many nappies as needed, within the scope of available donations. These nappies will be shared between Park Towers, Emerald Hill, and Horace Petty public housing estates.





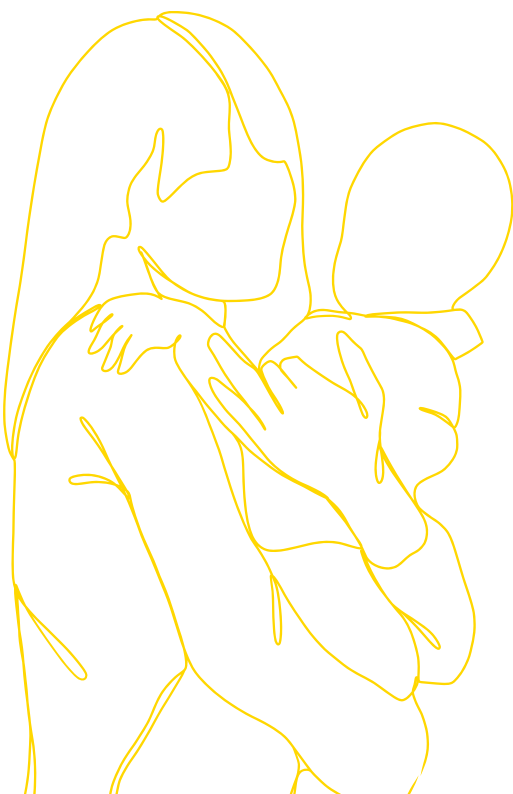
Loving and responsive relationships



Loving and responsive relationships

Positive health and developmental outcomes for children depend on caregiving that is responsive, warm, and consistent. Loving and responsive relationships lay the groundwork for healthy emotional, social, and cognitive development, setting the stage for a child's future wellbeing (Moore et al., 2017).

The core conditions that children need to develop well include secure relationships with primary caregivers who are able to provide the responsive caregiving needed to build secure attachments, and protection from relationship stresses such as abuse, neglect, and family violence (Moore, 2023). Research also shows that supportive and inclusive communities play a pivotal role in creating positive conditions for families of young children.



According to the 2023 Australian Bureau of Statistics, women living in a one-parent family with children under 15 years of age were the most likely to have experienced violence by a partner (9.3%), emotional abuse by a partner (18%), and/or economic abuse by a partner (17%).

In Victoria, a child or children were present at approximately 30% of family violence incidences between July 2019 and June 2020 (Safe and Equal, 2023). Threats to a caregiver are one of the most psychologically destructive traumas for children; witnessing family and domestic violence can be extremely distressing for infants and negatively impact brain development and emotional regulation (Moore et al., 2017). Infants who hear or witness anger and/or violence, can show symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, including eating problems, sleep disturbances, lack of typical responses to adults and loss of previously acquired developmental skills (Moore et al., 2017).

Given the significant impact that exposure to violence can have on children's health, it is important that families experiencing family violence have adequate access to prevention and support services including early intervention services and post-crisis support.

Michelle shares the significant challenges survivors of family violence face.

Michelle has been living in Park Towers with her children and partner for approximately two years. Michelle's partner is a survivor of family violence and moved into public housing after leaving their abusive relationship. However, not long after moving to the building, their abusive ex-partner discovered where they lived, causing significant stress.

The Better Start researcher connected with Michelle and after a conversation asked if they would be interested in speaking to a professional about their experiences, she agreed. Michelle was then referred to general counselling services as she specified this, however because they required more specific family violence counselling her referral was not accepted and they were put on the waitlist to receive specialist support.

At the time of the referral Michelle was told it would take three months to receive support from a family violence service. Eventually, after 4.5 months Michelle was connected to a family violence counsellor. During that time, Michelle and her family applied to go on the priority waitlist list to be transferred out of Park Towers due to their increased risk of family violence. After almost one year of waiting there has been little progress and the family remain in the building.

This case study highlights the considerable challenges that survivors of family violence face in accessing critical support services and safe accommodation options. Currently in Victoria, ***the average wait time for public housing, for people escaping family violence is close to 2 years (23.6 months) an increase of 17.1 months since 2021-22 (DFFH, 2023).*** In addition to this, only ***109 private rental properties across Victoria are classified as affordable for single people earning minimum wage*** (Safe and Equal, 2023).

BHN strongly stands with Safe and Equal urging the Victorian Government to take immediate action to ensure every person escaping violence has timely access to safe and affordable housing options.





Creating a sense of community

The Community Hub

“The Community Hub has done so much over the last few years to try and bring the food pantry, and the events, and the Wednesday groceries that they do. Without that, I don’t think as many people would be in contact or would have met each other face to face...or know each other.” - Mother

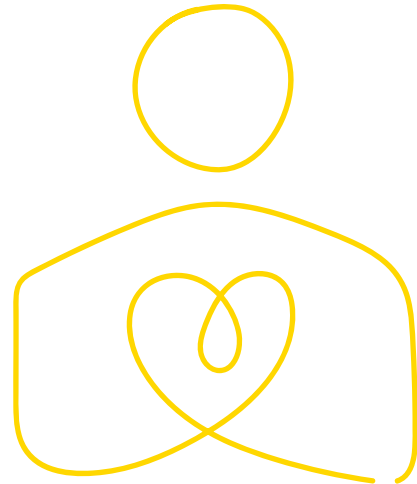
Mothers felt that social and recreational activities and events, organised by BHN, the Park Towers Resident Committee and Community Hub, have helped create a sense of community by promoting connection and social interaction between residents. Family friendly activities have also provided opportunities for children to meet and play with each other. As a result of these initiatives, parents felt that some residents were more approachable and more likely to engage in conversation with other residents.

“I think [community events] have helped boost the morale in the building, because [there has] been clothes, and free food, and also free lunch, and just a good spirit around. I feel like everyone, even people that are not necessarily social in the building, will come out at that event and socialise. It’s like a very neutral space to hang out within the building.” - Mother

Community Connectors Program

“Receiving information [from Community Connectors] about what’s happening in the local area helps people to feel a sense of belonging.” - Mother

In addition to Community Hub activities, some parents felt that the Community Connectors program and the resident-led ‘Welcome Committee’ have been helpful to connect people to the community.



While these initiatives are appreciated by families, it’s important to note that not all families participate in events and activities at Park Towers. Furthermore, the community spirit that these events and activities promote does not diminish the sense of fear and lack of safety many families experience.

Given the number of challenges raised by mothers in this report, it is vital that place based initiatives that create safe spaces and promote social connection continue.

Opportunities for change



Prioritise gender-sensitive design for future public housing

The significant safety concerns raised by mothers highlight the importance of incorporating a gendered perspective into the future design and development of public housing. This approach not only meets the unique needs of women-led families but also contributes to creating a safer and more supportive living environment for everyone.

Research shows that women are more likely to feel unsafe in public spaces than men, particularly women who experience intersecting forms of marginalisation (Women's Health East, 2020). This reflects the experiences of women we engaged with throughout this project.

To address mothers' priorities for change, there is a critical need to enhance safety measures and improve the overall housing quality and hygiene in Park Towers.

Housing Allocation Review:

Evaluate and revise housing allocation process with a focus on family needs. Consider designating family-only floors to create safer living environments for families.

Right now, we have a timely opportunity to build new public housing facilities that centre the experiences of women and children. Our public housing system needs to raise the standard to promote equitable, inclusive and safe homes for women and children. As it stands in Victoria single parents are the largest population living in public housing, and what our data shows in Park Towers is that single parent families are predominantly headed by women (DFFH population data, 2018). This further reinforces the need to protect the rights of women.



Prioritise place-based initiatives in high rise public housing

Place-based approaches aim to address complex health and psychosocial problems by focusing on the social and physical environment of a community, and on better integrated and accessible service systems (CCCH, 2011).

The two place-based initiatives funded by DFFH and implemented by BHN; the SMCCBI and the Community Connectors program were well received by mothers who participated in the Better Start project.

These initiatives engaged with community in discovering local solutions to support people in public housing through better connections with health and community services and leveraging other community supports. Amongst a lengthy list of community-led actions is the creation of the Community Hub, which has now been operating for five years. The Hub delivers psychosocial and wellbeing programs facilitated by internal and external providers, for varying age groups.

The legacy of the SMCCBI has built advocacy capacity within the Park Towers Resident Committee to strengthen resident voices and create meaningful change.

According to mothers engaged in Park Towers place-based initiatives, these programs have supported connection and positive interactions between residents and helped create a sense of belonging to the wider community. This is particularly the case for Park Towers Community Food Pantry.

What we know is further collective action requires long term commitment, sustainable funding, and a committed network of local service providers who centre the voice of community members as co-partners in bringing about long term change.



Social connection is vital for service access

The Community Connectors program began at the same time as the Better Start project. It employed residents to facilitate access to preventive and early intervention health and social services. They also organised community events and weekly drop-in sessions to promote social connections.

Initially both projects believed service access held more weight in determining child and family health and development outcomes. What we found was social conditions, including safety, housing quality, and social connections, have a greater impact on child health and development outcomes. The Better Start literature scan on the First 1000 days reinforces that providing services alone hasn't substantially affected families experiencing disadvantage (Figure 1).

The Community Connectors program highlighted the value of social connection in terms of enhancing service information, access, and referral. This is particularly impactful for single mothers at Park Towers.

An average of approximately 107 linkages were made to internal and external services each month. In addition to this, over 450 social connections were facilitated by the community connectors.

Single mothers were the second highest cohort that linked in with Community Connectors program reinforcing how valuable place-based approaches and lived experience partnerships are when it comes to families, particularly women-led families, when seeking support.

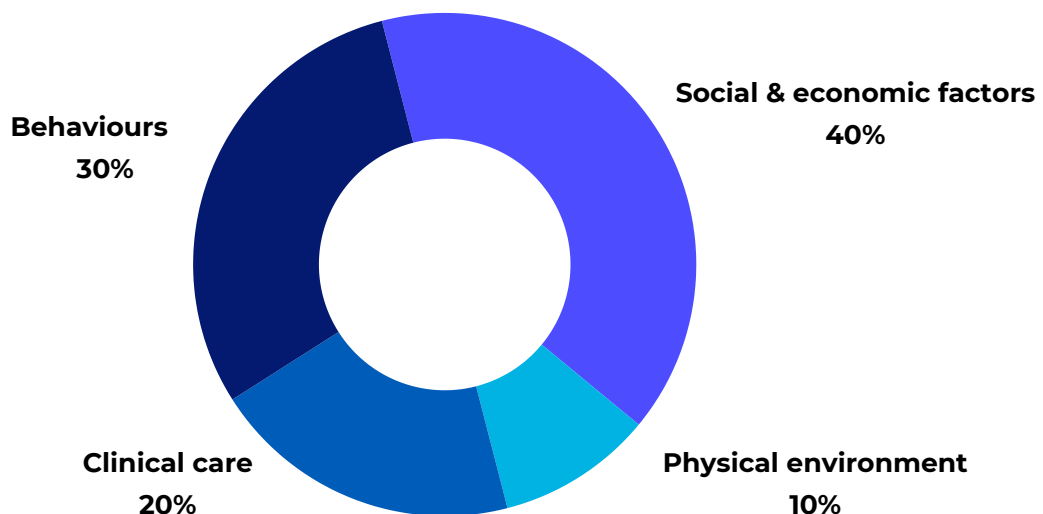


Figure 1. Social conditions have greater impact on outcomes for children and families than do the services they receive. Prevention Institute (2019)

Working in partnership with families experiencing vulnerabilities

When working with families experiencing multiple challenges or marginalisation it's important to consider the following:

Engage families as co-partners

How services are delivered is as important as *what* is delivered. In planning and running services for families, services need to engage parents as partners in co-design and co-production (Moore, 2023).

Building relationships takes time

It takes time to build trust and genuine relationships. When this type of engagement is facilitated, you can adapt services to meet the unique needs of families, particularly families with complex needs.

Build staff capacity

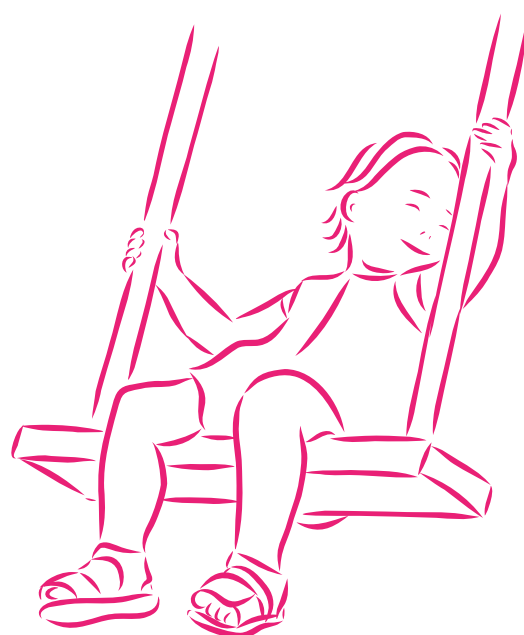
Part of working in a respectful and trauma-informed way is ensuring all onsite staff receive education programs, including drug harm reduction education, safe needle disposal and trauma-informed training.

Establish child and family hub

Establishing a space or hub where families can meet each other and access a range of universal and specialist services is incredibly significant. This can be fulfilled through the establishment of a local integrated child and family centre.

Acknowledge the impact of gender-based violence

Acknowledging the profound impact on families with a history or living experience of gender-based violence is critical when developing community based initiatives and services. This will enhance their sense of safety and willingness to engage. This can be implemented by ensuring women play a predominant role in client-facing service delivery.



Final remarks

In the here and now and moving forward, public housing design must integrate women's perspectives to ensure their living environments are universally safe and inclusive.

The Better Start project aimed to deeply understand the experiences of mothers raising children in high rise public housing. This report highlights the urgent need for improvements in community safety and housing conditions at Park Towers for the health and wellbeing of families and the optimal development of their children.

In summary, our research strongly advocates prioritising family safety in service delivery and housing design. Alongside this is the importance of engaging parents as co-design partners, emphasising sustained commitment, and urgently addressing the rights of women through investing in gender-sensitive public housing design. In addition to this, we also highlight the value of place-based initiatives to support community building initiatives, and increasing access to supports and services.





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Appendix A: Methodology

Getting to know families

The Better Start researcher spent several months building rapport and developing trust with families. They used various channels to meet and connect with families, such as attending Community Hub activities, supporting community events, facilitating one-on-one meetings, and establishing an arts and crafts initiative. Flexible meeting options were exercised to best meet the needs of each family. To ensure the project adopted a family-inclusive approach the community room was set up with resources for children.

Twenty-two mothers (with children aged 0-12 years) took part in the project. Some mothers participated in a single activity whilst others participated in multiple activities. Families who participated in data collection activities received gift and visa vouchers to recognise their time and valuable contribution. Written and verbal consent was received from all mothers participating in the project. A check in was facilitated by the Better Start Researcher after an interview and a list of support services was shared after the group conversation session.

One on one conversations with mothers

Our focus was to get to know each parent interested in participating in the Better Start project. Initially, the questions were kept broad and centered around their interests and hobbies. Utilising a strengths-based approach in conversations with mothers allowed us to build trust and maintain engagement. Seven mothers participated in in-depth interviews that explored parents' hopes and dreams for their children, parental concerns, community needs and positive aspects of living at Park Towers.

Photovoice

Mothers were invited to use photography to visually portray their "day as a parent." To promote the photovoice activity, the Better Start researcher worked with the Community Connectors team to develop a flyer to share with their networks. Mothers were advised they could interpret the photovoice activity in any way they liked and were encouraged to share both positive and negative experiences of parenthood. Once mothers had taken their photos, they were provided with the opportunity to connect with Better Start researchers to share their reflections and provide context to the photos they had taken. Five participants completed the photovoice activity.

Appendix A: Methodology continued...

Community Conversation

To further understand parents' priorities and to identify parent solutions, Better Start researchers organised a two-hour community conversation with mothers engaged in the Better Start project. Overall, thirteen mothers participated in the community conversation.

Service Provider Interviews

Thirty-minute interviews with eight stakeholders were conducted to understand how their services support families living in Park Towers, what barriers and enablers families face in accessing services, and how services could better meet the needs of families.

First 1000 days Literature scan

A scan of the literature was undertaken to understand the essential needs of parents and children during the first 1000 days, effective engagement strategies, and ways services can engage with vulnerable families to effectively support children and families during this critical period. This report draws on the literature review findings in each section.

Strengths and limitations of the research

The design of the Better Start project has predominantly worked with parents living at Park Towers that are engaged in community initiatives. Therefore, the findings may not fully represent the wider population of parents. The Better Start researcher was the sole person based predominately onsite to engage with families. While this contained the number of people they could engage with, it meant that deep relationships were able to be formed.

The Better Start researcher didn't share the same cultural background as many of the participants. This may have meant that some mothers may not have been comfortable engaging with someone outside their own culture. We sought to address this by engaging with a bi-cultural program. However, they did not have bi-cultural workers in Park Towers. In addition to this, the Community Connectors team did not have the capacity to assist with the level of engagement required for this element of the Better Start project.

While this project had a number of limitations, it has nonetheless provided rich and detailed insight into the lives of mothers living in Park Towers including, their fears, desires, challenges and hope for the future and for their children.

