

Building Better Futures: Prioritizing Child Play in UK Temporary Accommodation

OUR RESEARCH

Background

Building off of previous CHAMPIONS research, we wanted to understand where Play was situated in the policy and housing sphere and how families in TA are experiencing Play. Play is recognised as a fundamental right that children need in order to develop healthily and experience a joyful upbringing. For those in TA, whose basic rights are often unmet, play is often seen as a luxury and a childish whim. We seek to change this view.

Methodology

We employed qualitative research methods to delve further into the lived experiences of families in TA and the perspectives of key professional stakeholders. With the use of semi-structured interviews, we spoke with 16 professionals, with expertise ranging from health to education, housing and policy. Additionally, speaking with 3 parents of children-under-5 currently living in TA.

Key Insights

- Adequate physical space plays a vital role in the **physical development of children**, fostering their gross motor skills and capacity for engaging in play.
- Engaging in play promotes **the development of social skills, personal agency, and effective conflict resolution**, helping alleviate some of the adverse effects of isolation commonly associated with residing in temporary accommodation (TA).
- Temporary accommodation (TA) negatively impacts the psychological well-being of both parents and children, resulting in **emotions of guilt, dissatisfaction, and a diminished sense of agency**, ultimately hindering the ability to engage in play..
- Temporary accommodation (TA) exacerbates isolation and severs the connection between children and their peers.
- Temporary accommodation (TA) disrupts conventional developmental pathways.
- Families residing in specific types of temporary accommodation (TA) may find their needs disregarded or overridden.

Policy Recommendations

- **Introduce cost-effective, positive measures to address the immediate play requirements of individuals currently residing in temporary accommodation (TA).** Upgrade existing TA facilities to include play opportunities, particularly in outdoor spaces.
- **Promote play within temporary accommodation (TA) as a collaborative focal point across public, private, and third-sector entities.** Acknowledge the multifaceted nature of children's play needs, spanning the housing sector, as well as the realms of health, economics, and social dynamics. Align housing policies and urban planning with insights into children's health.
- **Emphasize the importance of human connections and relationship-building in addressing the housing crisis and better catering to children's play needs.** Prioritize the delivery of relational and caring services.

Policy Brief

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CHAMPIONS

The Reach Alliance

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Background

Building upon the work of CHAMPIONS

The CHAMPIONS project, led by Professor Monica Lakhanpaul, is a nationwide initiative that investigates the effects of COVID and the experience of living in lockdown on children under 5 residing in temporary accommodation (TA) due to homelessness. The project collaborated with families and professionals to jointly formulate recommendations for future support and optimal strategies. These recommendations are based on research evidence, aiming to assist families in their recovery post-pandemic and equip professionals for potential future pandemics.

What about play?

Therefore, following CHAMPIONS, we wanted to understand where play was situated in the policy and housing sphere and how families in TA are experiencing play. Play is recognised as a fundamental right that children need in order to develop healthily and experience a joyful upbringing. For those in TA, whose basic rights are often unmet, play is often seen as a luxury and a childish whim. With this research, we seek to change this view.

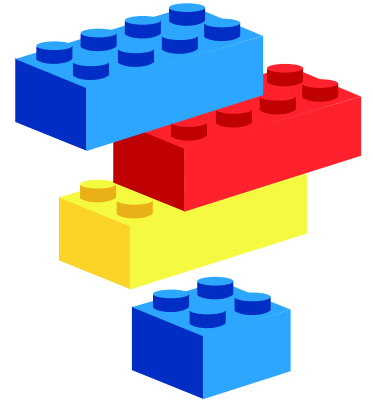
Our Methodology

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Key Findings

An overwhelming lack of space

Play facilitates a child's physical, psychological and social development and well-being. Current TA in the UK lack the necessary space to ensure that children simply have room to play. This lack of space is inhibiting the development of gross motor skills and restricting meaningful interactions with peers - skewing traditional development trajectories. This lack of space can also subsequently lead to affect the psychological well-being of parents who cannot play with their children, leading to feelings of guilt, unhappiness, and a loss of agency, ultimately inhibiting the ability to foster adequate, healthy connections.



A complex housing crisis

The complexities of the housing crisis are inhibiting the ability of service providers and families to meet the needs of children. There is a lack of integration between services which fails to meet the dynamic needs of families, negatively impacting them...

TA is viewed as a monolith structure, in reality the needs of adults and children are vastly different. This along with a lack of funding and generally poor awareness of vulnerable groups in TA only exacerbates worse outcomes for both adults and children.



Prioritisation of people

At its core, current TA systems have failed to place people at the centre of their regulations and policies. Oftentimes, decisions are made based on the need of convenience or cost-cutting mechanisms. Indeed, sometimes families living in certain types of TA may have their needs overridden due to stringent and rigid TA rules and regulations.



Policy Recommendations

What? Implement affordable, effective interventions that serve the immediate needs of children in TA. Retrofit TA with adequate spaces for play, especially outdoors.

Why? Often times, it is thought that immense resources are needed for policy developments, this is not necessarily the case.

How? Preserve and prioritize children's access to communal play space, support management referrals to community service providers with play support specialities, maintain and expand stay-and-play provision in local neighbourhoods, create secure, accessible storage space for strollers, introduce transect walks as a co-design tool for policymakers to identify spaces where play areas can be adequately developed, and provide those in TA free access to local services that support play needs, such as leisure centres and private park areas.

What? Embed play in current TA policy as an interdisciplinary focus area with opportunity to collaborate across sectors including public, private and third sector. Understand play needs as a phenomenon that exist across health, economic, social and housing domains.

Why? Breaking silos and introducing a new way of working could decisively bolster public capabilities and change the way policy is practiced in the long-term. In this case, it could align housing policy and urban planning with children's health insights.

How? Resource play and leisure as a pillar for healthy social and psychological development, alongside other basic needs around children's health and well-being, ensure minimum standards are in place for play in new builds and conversions, provide outdoor play opportunities near TA accommodations, and break down policy silos within local authorities: housing, health, leisure, youth.

What? Prioritise relational and caring service provision. Restructure current housing policy with a patient-centered approach that places the needs of families first and can better facilitate children's play needs.

Why? There is an urgent need to rebuild the distance that the Covid-19 pandemic has created.

How? Bring back face-to-face check-ins with housing unit management when families (and individuals) move into a TA, do not let the council's first interaction with those in crisis be because of a conflict, develop an induction pack for people in TA with local information, that is, the resources available to them, separate the needs of families living in TA from the needs of individuals, and be intentional and considerate with visitor policies: prioritise the needs of people over buildings.

The Team

This research was also born from a collaboration with The Reach Alliance, created in 2015 by the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, in partnership with Mastercard's Center for Inclusive Growth.

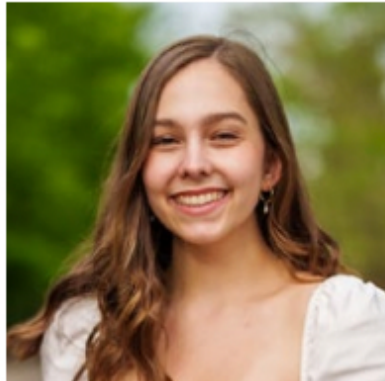
Researchers worked in partnership with three families living in temporary accommodation and sixteen professional stakeholders, representing sectors ranging from health to academia. The findings are based on semi-structured interviews.

Researchers also had the opportunity to work on the field and visit different TA blocks in London and Manchester.

Researchers were supervised by academic mentors Dr. Monica Lakhanpaul and Dr. Celine Lewis, along with academic advisor Dr. Nadia Svirydzenka. The research was also aided by the invaluable input from the Shared Health Foundation.



Lorenzo Dall'Omo graduated from UCL with a Master of Public Administration in Innovation, Public Policy and Public Value and is interested in the intersection between policy and development.



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