

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY CITIES: A REVIEW

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Abstract

This paper describes the features that make a city „family-friendly”. The actuality of the topic is given by the fact that the preferences of some young parents for choosing a place of living have changed in recent years, and families increasingly want to live in cities, close to urban cores. The study reviews the main characteristics of family-friendly cities in the light of some initiatives aimed at creating family-friendly cities. It reveals the aspects of UNICEF’s „Child-Friendly Cities Initiative”, some American approaches and strategies for creating family-friendly environment, and the criteria for joining the „European Network of Family-Friendly Municipalities”. Based on all the above, the study summarizes the key features of family-friendly urban development. In the author’s interpretation, creating family-friendly cities means building a sustainable community that integrates the environmental, social and economic needs of the families living there. It is a multifaceted task which can only be realized within the framework of a long-term development strategy. The author of the study emphasizes the role of cooperation between municipalities, local companies, civil society, as well as the importance of involving families in urban planning and development process.

Keywords: family-friendly cities; urban development.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the general view of cities, and especially of downtown areas, has developed in way that they are not ideal for family life and raising children. During the period of the Industrial Revolution, cities became overcrowded and polluted because of the settlement of immigrants who settled mainly in the poorest urban neighborhoods, where epidemics and the number of crimes increased due to poor living conditions. Overcrowding, noise and pollution have become features of urban cores (Drianda, 2018; Skrede & Andersen, 2021). At the same time, many of the families moved to the suburban areas, which provided them with much better living conditions (Calvert, 2014).

One of the main motivations for families to live in the suburbs is the availability of more spacious, affordable, self-owned housing (Hayden, 2003). Compared to the urban cores, the suburbs are less crowded and much safer. In addition, the proximity of green areas and pollution-free environment are some factors that make these areas more attractive to families. Living in the suburbs offers ideal conditions for raising children, but it can also bring difficulties for families. Transportation options are limited in the suburbs, the daily commute to work and school is expensive and takes time out of families’ lives. It can be very stressful and affect negatively the health of family members (Silbaugh, 2007). Also, the families contend with the lack of accessible child care and other services in the suburbs (Israel & Warner, 2008).

Today, with the large-scale employment of women, traditional family roles have been transformed, and the two-earner family model has spread (Czibere, 2020). With the increase in the number of two-earner families, it becomes more and more important for young, working parents to create and maintain a balance between work and family life, so the proximity of workplaces, schools and other services increases in value. Nowadays, there is an emerging trend which indicates that young people and also families choose to move into city-areas (Bowles et al., 2009; Boterman, 2012; Karsten, 2013). This trend shows that young parents prefer to give up better housing qualities, more spacious and self-owned houses so that they can choose urban life, where their family and work obligations can be more easily balanced (Booi et al., 2020). So these families prefer urban life to suburban spaces because they enjoy the availability of jobs and services, participation in social networks and cultural life, and last but not least the shorter commuting time between the workplace and their home (Hjorthol & Bjørnskau, 2005).

Additionally, according to UNICEF (2018), approximately 60% of the world's population will live in cities by 2030, which means more and more children will grow up in cities. Based on this tendency, the author of this study believes that cities should be developed in such a way that they meet the needs of families and children in all aspects.

How can family-friendly urban milieu be created? What features make cities family-friendly? What does family-friendly urban development mean? The purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical overview of family-friendly cities, and sets out to examine the key factors that make a city ideal for families. In addition, it intends to formulate recommendations on how to create more family-friendly cities.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND – CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY CITIES

The literature mainly focuses on the organizational approach to the family-friendly concept, and there is only a limited amount of literature specifically focused on family-friendly cities. This paper examines some initiatives and strategies, from America to Europe, aimed at creating cities and communities that meet the needs of families with children. Based on these, the study attempts to summarize the key characteristics of family-friendly cities and to create a theoretical model of family-friendly communities.

2.1. UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative

The idea of child friendly cities was created at the second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, Habitat II, in 1996. Based on this, UNICEF founded the Child Friendly Cities Initiative which pays special attention to the creation of cities that meet the needs of children worldwide (Riggio, 2002). The initiative encourages city governments to make their decisions in the interests of children, and to create communities that are committed to fulfill the rights of children. The concept of child friendly cities

is a framework to help cities worldwide to become more child friendly in all aspects of their governance, services and environment. Child friendly cities are committed to implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2004).

The criteria for child friendly cities can be seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1 – CRITERIA FOR CHILD FRIENDLY CITIES

Criteria for Child Friendly Cities
<p>A Child Friendly City guarantees the right of every young citizen to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Influence decisions about their city ▪ Express their opinion on the city they want ▪ Participate in family, community and social life ▪ Receive basic services such as health care, education and shelter ▪ Drink safe water and have access to proper sanitation ▪ Be protected from exploitation, violence and abuse ▪ Walk safely in the streets on their own ▪ Meet friends and play ▪ Have green spaces for plants and animals ▪ Live in an unpolluted environment ▪ Participate in cultural and social events ▪ Be an equal citizen of their city with access to every service, regardless of ethnic origin, religion, income, gender or disability.

Source: The author's own compilation based on UNICEF (2004)

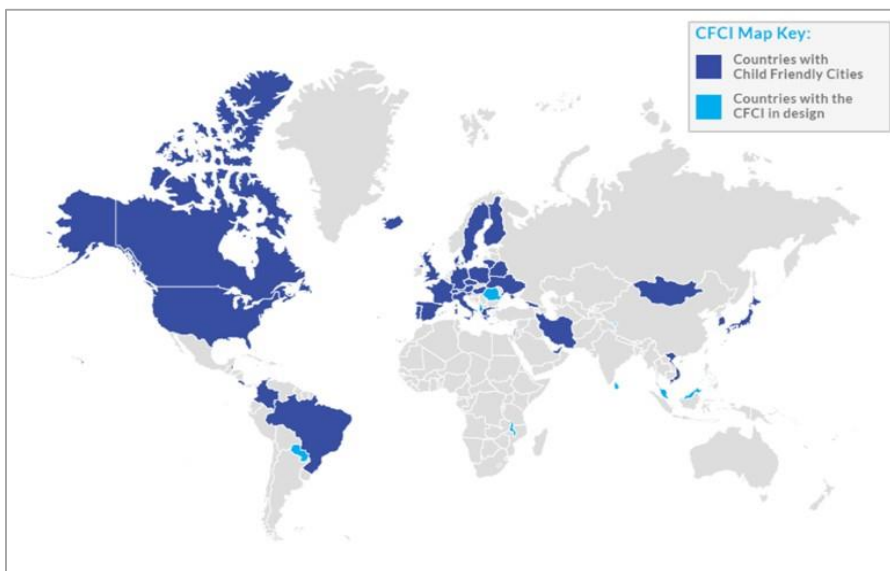


FIGURE 1 – UNICEF CHILD FRIENDLY CITIES INITIATIVES

Source: Childfriendlycities.org (2022)

Today, Child Friendly Cities Initiatives can be found all over the world, however, most child friendly cities are located in North America and Europe as we can see in Figure 1. The website of the initiative reports on many good practices, for example, in some cities, children and youth councils, networks and parliaments have been established to promote the participation of children and young citizens.

Furthermore, in family-friendly cities we can find good examples of the development of social services, the reduction of child poverty and also the creation of a clean, safe and sustainable environment with green areas and playgrounds for all children.

At the same time, the Child Friendly Cities Initiative does not necessarily motivate young citizens to stay in the cities and raise a family there. The child friendly concept focuses primarily on children and does not consider the needs of other family members, such as parents. It does not focus on themes such as balancing work and family life, developing family-friendly work policies, or access to childcare services, which are very important to today's modern two-earner families (Feeney & Stritch, 2017; Drianda, 2018). That is the reason why the study focuses exclusively on family-friendly cities in the following.

2.2. Family-friendly Cities in America

„Family Friendly Communities” was the name of the project of the American Planning Association (APA) focusing on the opinions of planners regarding family-friendly urban planning (Israel & Warner, 2008). In his study "Improving Urban Living Options for Families – A Comprehensive Analysis and Recommendation on Making Cities Family Friendly", Calvert (2014) examined American cities from the perspective of family friendliness and summarized the key features of family-friendly environment.

Table 2 presents the results of the two researches.

TABLE 2 – KEY FEATURES OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT (AMERICAN VERSION)

Key features of family-friendly environment (American version)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ housing at affordable prices ▪ child care ▪ parks to play in ▪ pedestrian pathways ▪ quality public schools ▪ safe neighborhoods ▪ other features that promote family well-being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ accessible green space ▪ cultural amenities ▪ accessible and relative close proximity of educational facilities ▪ accessible and relatively close proximity of daily services ▪ safe neighborhoods ▪ overall accessibility via transportation options

Source: The author's own compilation based on Israel & Warner (2008) and Calvert (2014)

In America, one of the most important elements of family-friendly communities is affordable housing. It is also a basic expectation that families with children have access to affordable and high-quality child care and educational services (e.g. public schools, libraries) near their homes. In addition, another component of family-friendly environment is safety which means both protection against crime as well as safe transportation. Furthermore, every family member in a family-friendly community finds recreation opportunities, from outdoor activities in parks to participation in cultural events.

Vancouver, Seattle, and San Francisco are some examples of American cities that have already recognized the need for family-friendly urban development and have begun to transform cities to better meet the needs of families (Calvert, 2014). For example, The City of Vancouver has already introduced its family-friendly housing program in the 90s. Vancouver planning guidelines require that the apartments to be built be spacious, have natural light, and be located on the lower floors, thus meeting the needs of families. An essential aspect of the design is that the residences must be located within half a mile of schools, child care centres and grocery stores, and can be accessible by safe pedestrian routes. It is also important that playgrounds and parks provide relaxation for families living nearby. And last but not least, access to apartments is provided for families at a favorable price (Laker, 2018).

The City of North Vancouver has a specific strategy for making the city family-friendly: the document was adopted in 2015 under the title „Child, Youth and Family Friendly Strategy”. The strategy focuses on five key themes: community engagement, community spaces, housing, programming and services, and community partnerships. Each theme has action items needed to be (Table 3).

TABLE 3 – KEY THEMES AND FOCUS AREAS OF CHILD, YOUTH AND FAMILY FRIENDLY STRATEGY OF NORTH VANCOUVER

Child, Youth and Family Friendly Strategy of North Vancouver	
Key themes	Focus areas
Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Supporting the development of engaged citizens ▪ Consultation ▪ Engagement through giving back
Community Spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Public gathering spaces ▪ Private gathering spaces ▪ Playgrounds ▪ Walkable and accessible neighbourhoods
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Affordable housing for families and older youth/emerging adults
Program Design and Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recreation and culture programs ▪ Employment skills ▪ Inclusion and access ▪ Advocacy ▪ Marketing and communication
Community Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Supporting Collaboration

Source: The author's own compilation based on City of North Vancouver (2015)

The main goals of the City of North Vancouver are to provide suitable housing options, child care and other services, cultural and recreational opportunities for families with children. The strategy emphasizes the need for the increase of opportunities for families to be involved in shaping their city, and for the creation of a collaborative environment in which all actors of urban development work together to create a family-friendly city. In North Vancouver, families can get involved in the city's planning and development process in several ways, for example, they can participate in public meetings and advisory committees,

or simply share their thoughts and feedback through social media channels, online surveys and apps. (City of North Vancouver, 2015). The strength of the strategy is that it considers the needs of both parents and children, and even differentiates between developments intended for children, youths and emerging adults.

2.3. European Network of Family-Friendly Municipalities

The European Network of Family-Friendly Municipalities is an initiative of the European Large Families Confederation (ELFAC). The network was established in 2018 to create a family-friendly culture throughout Europe. According to ELFAC (2019) „a family-friendly municipality is an inclusive community that prioritizes its most vulnerable components, children, disabled, elderly, persons in vulnerable situations.”

The main objectives of the network include supporting families (especially large families), and creating an attractive social, economic and cultural environment for them. Table 4 contains the requirements for joining the European Network of Family-Friendly Municipalities. The municipalities have to give evidence of fulfilment of at least five of the 10 requirements in order to join the network.

TABLE 4 – REQUIREMENTS TO JOIN THE EUROPEAN NETWORK OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY MUNICIPALITIES

Requirements to join the European Network of Family-Friendly Municipalities	
Mandatory	Global minimum family criteria
Commitment of the Mayor and the Municipal Council to apply for the Certificate of Family-friendly Municipality within two years.	1. Engagement of family associations 2. Services for families 3. Family benefits 4. Specific body for families in the municipal council 5. Plan or strategy for families and youth policies 6. Info point for families 7. Family-friendly policies for municipal employees 8. Housing policies for families 9. Family-friendly environment 10. Family events

Source: The author’s own compilation based on Familycities.eu (2022)

According to Familycities.eu, today, there are eighty family-friendly municipalities in eight European countries (Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Portugal and Spain) with many good practices. Family-friendly municipalities pay a lot of attention to investing in families, by providing family benefits (e. g. housing program, allowances, tax benefits, free tickets). For example, in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, several types of family benefits are available, such as family package assistance for single-parent and large families living in poor financial conditions, allowances for stay-at-home parents, new-born essentials allowance, scholarships, free public transportation and free textbooks for students. In Szolnok, Hungary, financial support of first flat purchase is provided for generations under forty, and free public transport for families with small children.

Among the good practices of family-friendly municipalities, we can find a wide range of services for families, from childcare services to parental education and family support including the elderly. In Zagreb, there is a family planning advisory center for young citizens. In Perugia, Italy, parents are assisted by family mediators and psychologists in solving problems affecting family life. Family-friendly policies that facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life are also given great emphasis. For example, flexible working hours, part-time employment, and telecommuting can promote work-family balance for employees. In Perugia, the „Family Help” program has been created to address the conflict between work and family, and to promote labor market participation of women, reducing gender inequality. The program provides economic support to families for the payment of family cooperators who help with school tasks, domestic activities and daily needs.

In addition, family-friendly municipalities encourage families and young people to participate in the life of the municipality, for example forums can be created where families can express their opinions and ideas about the community, and also can be involved in the work of the municipal councils. Last but not least, it is very important to develop cooperation between national, regional and local governments, public and private companies and family associations in order to develop family-friendly communities. In Vecumnieki, Latvia, there is a project called “Residents create their own environment” which aims to involve citizens in order to improve the environment and quality of life, and to build cooperation between the local community, municipality and local companies. As part of the project, for example, sports fields, playgrounds and landscaped parks were created for children and families. Another good practice comes from the city of Grodzisk Mazowiecki in Poland where the municipality, in cooperation with the Association of Large Families and local companies, introduced the "Large Family Card" which provides families with discounts on cultural programs, sport activities, public transport, health services, language learning, etc.

3. SUMMARY OF THE KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY CITIES

As a summary of family-friendly initiatives and strategies, it can be stated that there is no unified scheme for developing family-friendly cities. Creating an environment that is attractive to families and supports childbearing is a very multifaceted task that affects countless areas and actors involved in urban development. The paper summarizes the key factors of family-friendly cities in Table 5.

According to the author of the study, one of the basic elements of family-friendly cities is an environment that perfectly meets the needs of families and children which requires urban rehabilitation and real estate development. This means that ideal, affordable housing options for families must be created, for example by modernizing the building stock in a family-friendly way or building new apartments. Furthermore, it is

also important to create and develop playgrounds, public parks, sports fields and other high-quality green spaces near the apartments. These green and open spaces provide opportunities for social interactions and play for families with children, contributing to children’s mental health (Wells & Evans, 2003).

TABLE 5 – KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY CITIES

Key Characteristics of Family-friendly Cities	
1. Family and child friendly environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ affordable housing for families ▪ availability green areas, playgrounds, public parks, etc. ▪ safe transportation ▪ safe and pollution-free environment
2. Family-friendly services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ high-quality, accessible educational, social and health services for families ▪ family benefits ▪ participate in sports, cultural and social events
3. Family-friendly workplaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ workplaces with family-friendly organizational culture ▪ (flexible forms of employment, parental leave, etc.)
4. Collaboration and involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ involving children and families in the planning and development process ▪ establishing cooperation between municipalities, companies and civil organizations

Source: The author’s own compilation 2022

On the other hand, family-friendly urban rehabilitation does not only include the development of apartments and green areas. Transportation must be made safe and ideal for families. For example, pedestrian and bicycle paths must be provided in cities, and traffic must be organized in such a way that busy roads avoid family-owned residential areas. This can help create a clean, pollution-free environment. However, safety is not only a key element of transport. Great emphasis must also be placed on crime prevention so that children can walk safely in the streets and in parks.

The author considers high-quality services and institutions accessible to all members of the families as the second building block of family-friendly cities. Creating cities suitable for families is not possible without improving living conditions and developing local society. On the one hand, adequate quality educational, social and health services must be provided for families near their homes. As an example, child care contributes to children’s development, and also promotes the participation of parents in the labor market and supports them in reconciling work and family life (Anderson & Dektar, 2011). That is why affordable, high quality child care services should be offered to all families. In addition to the development of basic services, it is also important to activate all family members, from children to the elderly, by organizing sports programs, cultural and social events for them.

The author of the study believes that the main characteristics of family-friendly cities also include family-friendly workplaces. Local companies must support employees, both women and men, in reconciling work and family life. Today, there are many good practices for creating family-friendly organizational culture

and encouraging women to return to the labor market (Pátkainé Bende, 2022). The most popular practices are flexible forms of employment, such as flexible working hours, part-time work, and telecommuting. However, organizations can also support their employees in many other ways, such as by providing childcare opportunities, organizing family programs or other benefits.

Last but not least, the author thinks that the key factor in family-friendly urban development is the cooperation between all actors involved in the development, starting from municipalities through actors of the public and private sectors to civil society. Municipalities have a significant role not only in defining the development concept or in coordinating the processes, but also in the involvement of families and civil organizations. For example, as many forums as possible should be provided for families where they can express their opinions and shape the process of urban development.

Of course, urban development that takes into account all the above-mentioned aspects can only be realized within the framework of an integrated urban development strategy. In order to create cities suitable for families, integrated actions requiring the joint work of a wide range of activities and specialist areas are necessary, which can only be realized in the long term.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study looked for the answer to what aspects make a city family-friendly, and what improvements would be necessary for cities in order to better meet the needs of families with children.

Based on some American and European family-friendly city initiatives and strategies, the study summarized the criteria that can make a city ideal for families. In the author's interpretation, creating family-friendly cities means building a sustainable community that integrates the environmental, social and economic needs of the families living there. This is therefore an extremely multifaceted task, as it includes, among others, the improvement of living conditions, the renovation of the residential environment and public areas in a family-friendly way, the making and expansion of services family-friendly, and the creation of an economic environment that supports families in balancing work and family life. All this can only be realized within the framework of a long-term strategic approach.

The development of cities suitable for families requires the coordinated efforts of actors from several fields. In addition to the activities of local governments and local companies, the author of the study draws attention to the role of local civil organizations and families whose involvement and active participation is essential in order to create a family-friendly urban milieu. As a future research direction, the author outlines the conduct of empirical research on the topic in order to reveal concrete experiences on the

design of family-friendly cities, good practices, and the possibilities of involving families and civil organizations.

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