If you could experience the city from 95cm – the height of a healthy 3-year-old – what would you change?

Building empathy for babies, toddlers and caregivers

Kneel down somewhere outside, for a 95cm-tall view of the world.

Try breathing at four times your usual rate. This is the speed babies breathe. You’ll take in four times as much air and all its pollution per gram of body weight.

Try carrying a 10-kilogram bag of rice, or pushing it in a buggy, to give you a sense of how hard journeys can be for a caregiver with a baby.

Have you ever imagined how young children and their caregivers experience the city? Try the following:
Urban95: Creating healthy, safe and vibrant cities where babies, toddlers and their families thrive
We are driven by a simple question: If you could experience the city from 95cm – the height of a healthy 3-year-old – what would you change?

Cities can be wonderful places to grow up, but they can also pose serious challenges for the health and wellbeing of babies, toddlers and the people who care for them – from a lack of nature and safe spaces to play, to air pollution and traffic congestion, to social isolation.

Urban95 is a global initiative created by the Bernard van Leer Foundation that works with leaders, planners, designers, advocates and communities to support the healthy development of young children and the wellbeing of caregivers in cities.

Our goal is to encourage cities to create spaces where children can grow, learn, create, imagine and play across all neighbourhoods, reaching as many families as possible. Because a city that works for babies, toddlers and their caregivers is a city that works for everyone.
Babies, toddlers and the people who care for them experience the city differently

Babies, toddlers and caregivers experience the city in unique ways, which can impact their development and have lifelong effects.

Babies absorb 2-3 x more air pollution. Exposure starts during pregnancy.

Toddlers need double the amount of time to cross streets compared to able-bodied adults.

Young children experience reduced stress and better physical and mental development when they have regular access to nature.
The early years of life – from before birth to five years old – is a window of opportunity to improve lives. Babies’ and toddlers’ brains develop rapidly, and relatively small changes at this young age can have lifelong effects.

Brain building: One million synapses are created in a baby’s brain every second.

The scale of the problem: 250 million children under 5 – across almost every country in the world – do not receive the care they need to reach their full potential.

The potential: US$6.40–17.60: estimated return for every USD 1 spent on high-quality early years programmes.

More than a billion children live in cities, and rapid urbanisation means that number is growing.

Safe, healthy environments, where crucial services are easily accessible, are essential for giving all children a good start in life. Cities can encourage and support frequent, warm, responsive caregiver interactions and provide stimulating spaces to play and explore. Such foundations are essential for babies’ and toddlers’ brain building. Investing in these environments and behaviours enables cities to realise a healthy, peaceful and creative society where young children and their families can thrive.
Children and their caregivers are more likely to thrive in cities when they have access to:

- **Clean air**
  The effects of poor air quality are felt disproportionately by the youngest, and especially those in low-income areas.

- **Nature**
  Exposure to nature for play, exercise and rest is beneficial for mental and physical health at all ages.

- **Proximity to services and healthy spaces**
  Ensuring that key early years services and spaces are easily accessible provides support to caregivers and the children they care for.

Urban95 focuses on diverse aspects of city design and urban life to improve health and wellbeing of babies, toddlers and caregivers such as:

- **Public space**
  Places such as streets, parks, sidewalks, plazas and playgrounds which are safe, accessible, comfortable and stimulating for babies, toddlers and their caregivers.

- **Mobility**
  Safe, convenient, affordable and sustainable ways for caregivers with young children to reach their destinations including walking, cycling, public or informal transit or other modes.

- **Neighbourhood planning:**
  Neighbourhoods that provide easy access to key services within a short, affordable journey, a vibrant, supportive community, and a comfortable environment.
At the heart of Urban95 are dynamic and committed cross-sectoral partnerships with pioneering cities around the world.
In our partner cities we work to build local coalitions, uncover priorities, and test and scale cost-effective solutions. We aim to grow Urban95 partnerships to at least 63 cities around the world by 2023.

Beyond this, we support global and local stakeholders that are willing to adapt and scale-up Urban95 approaches in new locations, spreading good practice worldwide.

We bring young children and caregivers into the global conversation about the future of cities through:

Global Partnerships with universities and other institutions that train urban planners, designers and managers

Convenings that bring together experts in urban issues and in early childhood development to share the most promising ideas

Advocacy to make the case for cities that meet the needs of young children and their families.

We apply the following approaches across our work:

**Data-driven decision-making:** We believe in making decisions backed up by data rather than relying on intuition or observation alone.

**Behavioural science:** We encourage caregivers to adopt and maintain positive behaviours and make good use of childfriendly infrastructure and services.

**Workforce development:** Capacity building and wellbeing support for professional stakeholders at project frontlines can improve outcomes and anchor positive change over the long-term.
Five lessons for toddler-friendly cities

From over five decades of working with partners in cities we’ve learned five valuable lessons about planning and designing cities with babies in mind.
1 Design for wellbeing: Cities should be healthy and safe for young children and caregivers – starting with clean air, removing dangers and designing out stressful elements.

2 Design for equity: Closing gaps means improving quality of life in the poorest areas with strategic support for the most vulnerable groups to access to services and opportunities.

3 Design for caregiving: The people looking after babies and toddlers decide where they will go and how long they will stay. Caregivers need to feel safe and comfortable, and environments should encourage positive behaviours and interactions.

4 Proximity matters: It is important that people can walk, cycle or take affordable transport safely, comfortably and quickly to where they need to go. The concept of the “15-minute neighbourhood” is a good place to start.

5 “Think babies” as an inclusive design principle: Babies, toddlers and their caregivers’ vulnerability, dependency and strong drive to explore and play mean that if a space is healthy, safe, clean and interesting for them, it will work for everyone.
Start implementing Urban95 in your city. Go to brainbuilding.org for the Early Years Starter Kit.

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Urban95 milestones

2016
Urban95 is launched to explore the impact of the physical environment on early childhood development.

2017
The Urban95 challenge selected 26 innovative projects from 151 ideas from 41 countries. The first Urban95 study tour is held.

2018
The first Urban95 Starter Kit was created for implementing child and caregiver-friendly urban initiatives.

2019
The Urban95 Festival gathered 86 stakeholders in Rotterdam.

2020
Urban95 scales with new cities joining the network. The first global online Convening is held.

2022
The first Urban95 Executive Education Course is held with the London School of Economics.

2023
Urban95 aims to have 63 cities in the global network.

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