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Condo sites make a play for kid spaces: “They’re residents, too.”



A rendering of the children's playroom proposed for The Eglinton, set to debut in 2018.

by Suzanne Wintrob, Special to National Post

A few years ago, as a bachelor living in a downtown condominium building, Jared Menkes got a kick out of seeing the little baby next door crawling through the corridor. Given their small unit, the baby’s parents were overrun with toys and baby gear so they spilled into the hallway for extra play space. But the baby was so cute that Mr. Menkes and his neighbours were happy to put up with the squealing and they cheered as the little guy took his first steps.

Alas, it was those first steps that pushed the family over the edge and Mr. Menkes and his neighbours were sad to say goodbye.

“As he got older, the parents felt they had to move out because there was nowhere to take him to walk around or to throw his toys on the walls and floors,” he recalls.

Today Mr. Menkes is married and a father of twin five-month-old daughters and they’re all tucked in to a downtown condo. Though his children aren’t yet crawling, the 33-year-old can finally relate to his former neighbours’ frustration and wants to make things right. That’s why, as vice-president of high-rise residential for Menkes Developments, he’s excited about the company’s first children’s playroom that will give kids and their playdates free reign.

The colourful 500-square-foot space — planned with input from child development consultants and designed by Mike Niven — will feature climbers, bean bag chairs, low stools and tables plus ample space for circle time, storytelling, and arts and crafts. The playroom will debut at [The Eglinton](#), a 34-storey, 445-unit tower set to soar near Yonge and Eglinton in late 2018.

“In some of our buildings we started seeing kids’ groups taking over party rooms or yoga rooms and taking adult-designed space,” Mr. Menkes says. “So we said, ‘Let’s create a proper room that’s kid-friendly [so] people don’t feel weird booking [adult] space and having a kids’ singalong class or whatever it may be.’ They can book the kids’ room and do what they want.”

Condo living isn’t for everyone, especially for those thinking family. Sure, three-bedroom units exist yet they’re often not affordable for young parents trying to make ends meet. Fortunately, condo developers are starting to embrace family-friendly lifestyles by thinking outside the box. Amenities such as swimming pools, outdoor lounge areas and gyms are still de rigueur in most new projects but, given the price of houses and the growing number of families choosing condos, children are starting to take centre stage. It’s out with the empty theatre room and billiard room, it seems, and in with kid-focused playrooms and outdoor jungle gyms.

“The theatre room less and less makes sense because the TVs have caught up to the point where everyone would rather just watch something upstairs in the comfort of their own home,” says Hessam Ghadaki, spokesman for Times Group, which is

introducing its first children's playroom at its new 607-unit, three-building [River Park](#) project in Markham. "It's not the days when the large 60-inch TV is out of reach for everyone."

Most residents have already moved in to River Park's first 20-storey building but the 300-sq.-ft. playroom is still in the works. Much like The Eglinton, plans call for a colourful space with an indoor climber, toys, tables and chairs and even wi-fi for the adults. An outdoor playground is being considered and safety issues are being ironed out, too.

"Why make people have to drive to a playground or to a Chuck E. Cheese or to a friend's or relative's house with a large basement when you can provide this in the building?" Mr. Ghadaki asks. "It's just a logical flow. If there are children in the building then this belongs in the building. The children are also residents in the building so we should provide amenities for them, too."

So how about building larger, more affordable units to make parenting in a condo that much easier? Jim Ritchie, Tridel's senior vice-president, says his company has added significantly more two-bedroom suites to its new master-planned community in the Bloor and Islington neighbourhood than it would put in a downtown project in order to accommodate small families. [Islington Terrace](#) — a 45-storey, 422-unit building that's the first of three towers planned for the site — will include an indoor playroom plus an outdoor playground and splash pad.

Mr. Ritchie says the company will be incorporating more three-bedroom suites into the mix downtown and where it makes sense.

"I'm not sure we're seeing a really large new shift in terms of buyers looking to accommodate more children, but we certainly see more today than we saw 10 years ago," he says.

Mr. Menkes agrees. He feels the condo lifestyle has "really started to mature" in the past 10 years since Ontario enacted the Places to Grow Act calling for urban intensification. People want an urban lifestyle, he adds, and they shouldn't be turned away for the suburbs just because they've become parents.

“What we’re doing with condos is creating vertical urban communities,” he says. “Having a proper community is having spaces for everyone who lives in the building. ... The condo market is not monochromatic. It’s not totally comprised of singles and couples. It’s meant for everyone and we shouldn’t just be targeting certain groups. We should be targeting everyone that wants that urban lifestyle.”

That said, a children’s playroom may just be the answer to mom and dad’s prayers.

“When it comes to making condos workable for families, the party room, the pool room and the children’s play area gives you three indoor play spaces for ages two to six,” Mr. Ghadaki says. “Other areas can be used by kids, but the children’s play area is taking it to the next level.”