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Crowded house: the cosier, the rosier

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Uncrowded house? Cosier is rosier for kids

Many parents dream of raising their family in a roomy suburban house, but new research has found it is isolating for children to grow up in homes that are too empty. “They have separate bedrooms and living spaces when they would benefit from more interaction with siblings and adults,” said Professor Michael Dockery. **NEWS PAGE 6**

EXCLUSIVE

Andrew Taylor

Large suburban houses and McMansions may be harmful to children’s health, according to new research that found kids are growing up in homes that are too empty.

The study by Michael Dockery, a research fellow at BankWest Curtin Economics Centre, also suggested sharing bedrooms and living spaces could have a positive impact on children’s physical health and measures of social and emotional development.

“My working hypothesis is that children now grow up too isolated within their own homes,” he said. “Too often, they have separate bedrooms and living spaces when they would instead benefit from more interaction with other siblings and adults.”

Professor Dockery’s research, based on longitudinal studies of children and the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey, found scant evidence to support the assumption that crowded homes negatively affect a child’s health and development.

There was, however, a link between higher household density and poorer results on standardised maths and reading tests for Indigenous children.

Professor Dockery’s working paper *Could the real empty-nesters please grow up: Household crowding and children’s wellbeing in Australia* found isolation or a lack of interaction at home had the greatest impact on children aged between five and nine.

Australians build the second biggest houses in the world after the US, says a report by CommSec and the Australian Bureau of Statistics, which also found

the average floor size of an Australian home (houses and apartments) was 189 square metres in 2018-19.

Canberra had the country’s biggest homes, with an average floor area of 251 square metres, ahead of Victoria (246 square metres) and NSW (221.8 square metres).

About 4 per cent of Australian households are considered overcrowded, or require additional bedrooms for the number of occupants, Professor Dockery said. “The vast majority of children simply do not grow up in homes that are crowded,” he said. “It appears they grow up in homes that are too empty.”

Emily Smith shares her five-bedroom home on Sydney’s lower north shore with her husband, Trent, their two children, Annabel and Ella, as well as her brother- and sister-in-law, their nine-month-old baby and an au pair.

Ms Smith’s children share a bedroom and bathroom, which she said kept them “very close” and focused on sharing. “We deliberately haven’t created a separate kids’ area as we enjoy having the kids integrated into the conversations and playing around us,” she said.

Ms Smith said her home would feel “quite empty” if there were not as many people in the household.

“I think the noise, chaos and

laughter fills the space with a warmth and energy that is good for the kids’ mental and physical health,” she said. “We’ve found their independence is accelerated and that having a few different perspectives in the home is

good for their personal growth.”

Paul Burton, director of the Cities Research Institute at Griffith University, said overcrowding was a problem when it was a product of economic necessity rather than a choice. “If I genuinely prefer to live with a lot of other people in a small house, then it might not be a problem for us, even if our neighbours think differently,” he said.

Professor Burton also said the design of homes was more important than their size. “It is certainly true that providing separate rooms for every member of the household can encourage us to lead very isolated lives, albeit under the same roof,” he said.

University of Adelaide professor of housing research Emma Baker said overcrowded housing can make inhabitants, particularly children, more vulnerable to catching communicable diseases. She said housing problems rarely occur in isolation. “So the small number of Australians living in overcrowded housing probably already face the effects of living in cold and poorly maintained housing,” Professor Baker said.

Professor Dockery said there may be benefits to larger families that outweigh space constraints, although it was not the government’s role to tell people whether or not they should live in a McMansion.

“The important implication is for families to ensure children have plenty of interaction and opportunity for play in their home during the developmental stages – maybe trade-off extra bedrooms for more backyard and shared living spaces,” he said.



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Trent and Emily Smith with children Ella, 3, Annabel, 6, and au pair Charli Slarks. Photo: Dominic Lorrimer



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Trent and Emily Smith at home in Greenwich with their children, Ella (front) and Annabel, au pair Charli Slarks, and their dog Sundae.
Photo: Dominic Lorrimer