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Housing Pathways, Parenting, and Early Childhood Development in Low-Income Families: A Qualitative Study of Mothers' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Many low-income families with young children encounter substantial housing challenges, which may critically affect early childhood development due to the significant amount of time children spend at home. Despite this, there is limited understanding of how these families perceive and experience their housing circumstances and address environmental risks impacting their children's well-being. This study draws on semistructured interviews with 19 low-income mothers of preschool children in Hong Kong to examine parental perceptions of housing and neighborhood conditions and their implications for children's health and development amid poverty. The findings indicate that parenting young children further intensifies families' housing concerns, with crowded living spaces and poor housing quality perceived as major threats to child development. Such adversity exacerbates maternal stress associated with financial constraints and caregiving responsibilities, undermining effective parenting practices. Public rental housing does not necessarily enhance parenting environments meaningfully, and mothers commonly express limited optimism about improvements to their housing situations. This paper advances the literature by elucidating the dynamic interplay between housing trajectories and early childhood parenting among low-income families.

1 | Introduction

Housing and neighborhood environments are foundational to children's physical, cognitive, and psychological development [1]. Many scholars have identified both risk and promotive factors for child well-being in residential environments, often with a focus on economically disadvantaged families with young children in deprived neighborhoods (e.g., [2–5]). Research has demonstrated that many low-income families with children experience housing hardships, such as poor indoor housing quality, overcrowding, tenure insecurity, and unaffordable housing costs, which have a detrimental impact on the growth and development of their children [1, 6–8].

These studies have made a significant contribution to problematizing the scale and extent of low-income families' housing challenges through a quantitative lens and have informed supply-driven policy interventions [9]. However, there is a lack of knowledge of how low-income households with young children perceive and experience their housing circumstances in relation to their children's well-being and how they navigate ways to address environmental challenges that may be harmful to their children and families. Maginn et al. [9] emphasized the importance of understanding "the contextual and cultural underpinnings of the housing problem" (p. 9) when housing issues among the underprivileged groups are investigated. Given that individuals' housing experience is highly subjective and

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contextual, the meaning of housing as an environmental risk to or facilitator of child development can be best understood through a qualitative approach, exploring the processes by which families with young children interact with their housing conditions within the local housing system and market [10].

This paper examines how low-income parents perceive and experience their residential environments in relation to their children's health and development in a context of poverty. It focuses on parents of preschool children, as both caregivers and children of this age spend a longer time at home in the first few years and are thus exposed more substantially to their immediate environmental context. The paper addresses the following research questions using data drawn from in-depth interviews with 19 low-income mothers in Hong Kong:

1. How are low-income families' housing challenges associated with raising a young child?
2. Which elements of residential environments do low-income mothers perceive as critical to their children's development?
3. How do low-income mothers respond to and cope with such housing-related challenges?

Hong Kong is one of the world's most unaffordable housing markets, where many low-income families struggle to secure adequate and affordable housing. Although public rental housing accommodates one-third of the city's population, the waiting time for allocation is long—about 6 years on average [11]. Approximately 220,000 people in Hong Kong reside in substandard housing units, locally known as subdivided units, and about 50,000 children live in cramped, substandard accommodation, including subdivided units, bed spaces, and cubicles [12]. Congested and poorly ventilated living spaces in subdivided units often compromise essential caregiving routines by undermining sleep quality, household hygiene, and access to quiet study space [13]. Chan's [14] valuable qualitative study also revealed the unhealthy housing experiences of occupants of subdivided units in Hong Kong, suggesting that housing cost, quality, and stability may be mechanisms through which subdivided units influence residents' health. However, parents' perceptions of, and interactions with, unfavorable housing circumstances regarding their young children have not been sufficiently explored. Our findings shed light on low-income families' housing experiences by offering a parent-centered interpretation of the ecological impact of housing on early childhood development in a densely populated and unaffordable city.

2 | The Intersection Between Housing and Parenting

A conceptual framework to understand the housing experiences of low-income families with young children can be constructed based on theoretical models that articulate the relationship between housing, parenting, and child development. We focus on the concept of housing pathways and the ecology of parenting and child development.

2.1 | Housing Pathways and Parenting Pathways

The housing experiences of families with young children are often analyzed using a framework that utilizes the concept of housing pathways. Housing pathways are defined as "patterns of interaction (practices) concerning house and home, over time and space" [10, p. 63], and they comprise housing choice, consumption, and experience at different stages or times of life. The concept of housing pathways links the social meanings of housing to housing practices and interactions with changing housing consumption [10]. This concept began to be expanded in the late 1990s, when socioeconomic changes disrupted the social lives of many vulnerable groups.

Within this framework, a household's specific housing consumption practices are seen as its choices within "the context of structural constraints in the system" [15, p. 488] and how they interact with the household's life events [16, 17]. As residential mobility and housing consumption are not conceived of as linear processes (e.g., from tenants to homeowners), housing pathways highlight the importance of individual households' distinctive experiences while also reflecting the interaction between housing practices and the structural context. This perspective has contributed to a proliferation of research investigating the lived housing experiences of various social groups (e.g., youths, older adults, and those living without permanent housing) [15, 18, 19, 20].

The concept of housing pathways, therefore, seems a relevant lens through which to examine the housing experiences of low-income families raising young children. Families' housing choices and relocations are shaped by many factors related to their children. In addition, housing demands and consumption arising from children's education or childcare needs may be continually negotiated within families' resources and the local housing system. The concerns, meanings, and experiences related to housing among parents with young children may also differ from those among senior-only households or single-person households. For example, Feldman and Shwartz-Ziv [20] found that tenants' bargaining ability with landlords is inherently weak when they have young children, and that poor parents essentially negotiate parenting in the midst of poverty and housing insecurity. When low-income groups have limited choices in housing consumption, their interactions with and responses to a given housing circumstance can be characterized in the context of material and social deprivation.

Drawing on Giddens [22], Power [21] categorized low-income people's interactions with and responses to housing hardships into emotion-focused strategies and action-focused strategies. Emotion-focused strategies include residents' feelings of "pragmatic acceptance, cynical pessimism and sustained optimism" [21, p. 178], and action-focused strategies include residents' active work to address their housing problems in daily life (e.g., tenancy practice, home organizing). While some of these practices occur in combination, parenting young children is likely to raise additional life concerns related to housing, such as protecting children from environmental risks, securing tenancy, and tackling children's physical, social, and cognitive development [23]. Yet, how housing pathways intersect with parenting pathways is largely understudied.

2.2 | Ecological Perspective on Child Development and Parenting

The ecological model of human development suggests that child development is a transactional process in which the child

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interacts with multilayered ecological systems and contexts [24]. Although housing is not explicitly included as a core component, the model provides a fundamental framework for understanding how the physical, environmental, and economic attributes of housing affect child development. Evans and Cohen [25] argued that suboptimal housing functions directly as an environmental stressor that negatively affects human psychological and physiological functioning. Chronic exposure to adverse physical conditions—such as noise, crowding, and poor-quality housing—strains human adaptive capacities, producing psychological, physiological, and behavioral responses that can spill over into other life domains and impair well-being. A large body of literature has documented the direct and indirect effects of overcrowding, environmental hazards (e.g., lead, hygiene), housing unaffordability, tenancy insecurity, poor neighborhood quality (e.g., poverty, crime), and homelessness on children's health and cognitive and behavioral functioning [1, 6].

Studies have suggested that environmental stress also has a negative impact on child development through parental attributes [26]. The cumulative fatigue from housing-related stressors leaves parents emotionally and physically exhausted, reducing the quality of parent–child interactions [25]. Coley et al. [27] demonstrated that in low-income families, poor housing quality and instability are linked to child behavioral outcomes through parental psychological distress, even after accounting for income differences. Warren and Font [28] showed that housing affordability and instability are significantly associated with maternal stress, which mediates the relationship between housing problems and maltreatment risk. Marçal [29] provided similar evidence that housing insecurity is indirectly associated with adverse parenting through parenting stress. Jocson and McLoyd [30] empirically showed that neighborhood and housing disorder increase parental psychological distress, leading to harsher, less warm parenting, which further predicts higher youth internalizing and externalizing behaviors. They also found that housing disorder is strongly linked to parental distress, whereas neighborhood disorder is closely tied to youth externalizing behaviors.

In low-income families, mothers appear to be most significantly exposed to the adverse effects of housing on mental health and parenting, presumably because they spend more time at home doing housework than other family members do [31]. Researchers have found that housing problems contribute to family instability, which undermines maternal mental and emotional well-being [28, 32]. Housing affordability challenges and housing instability are also significantly associated with elevated maternal stress [28, 33]. Overcrowding exacerbates maternal stress by straining social relationships through a lack of private space, overstimulation, and environmental chaos [34]. Residential noise also increases maternal stress levels [35]. Moreover, unsafe and poor housing conditions and insufficient public spaces in the neighborhood have consistently been associated with mothers' higher stress levels [36, 37]. The unpredictability of housing insecurity places additional strain on mothers, who must navigate tight housing markets with limited resources while striving to maintain an adequate parenting environment [38]. Housing problems also influence social relationships, not only within a family but also with landlords or neighbors [20].

In summary, housing directly and indirectly influences a wide range of domains of young children's and parents' (especially mothers') well-being. However, low-income groups may not be fully aware of the environmental stressors associated with housing that have been identified in empirical quantitative studies. At the same time, some housing factors that are perceived as environmental stressors by low-income families may not be captured in research that uses (quasi)experimental or standardized methods. Understanding low-income families' interpretations of how the residential environment affects child development and family well-being would contribute to the development of more culturally sensitive housing policies and interventions [39].

3 | The Present Study

This paper explores low-income mothers' perceptions and experiences of their residential environments as an environmental platform for parenting their preschool children in Hong Kong.

3.1 | Context

Despite Hong Kong's sustained economic prosperity, poverty has persisted and income inequality has widened. According to a recent report [40], about 20% of the city's population lives in poverty (i.e., with household incomes below 50% of the city's median household income), and the income of the poorest decile is one-ninetieth of that of the richest decile. Although recurrent cash transfers have been provided to the unemployed, working poor, and older adults to reduce the poverty rate, many low-income families continue to face substantial income deprivation and material hardships [40]. Specifically, children in deprived households face a persistent risk of poverty, with approximately one in five children under 18 living below the poverty line [41]. However, given the rapidly rising elderly poverty rate in the city, low-income families with young children have received relatively little attention in the social policy arena.

In Hong Kong, there are generally four types of housing available to low-income families. Public rental housing is arguably the type of housing most preferred by low-income groups, given its affordability and secure tenancy. Subsidized ownership housing is another option for low- and lower-middle-income households, but its allocation is highly competitive and costly, particularly for those in the lowest income strata. While waiting for public rental housing, many low-income families are channeled into cramped, unhygienic subdivided units. The housing hardships of low-income households living in substandard, subdivided units in Hong Kong have been well documented (e.g., [14, 42]). Although some of them live in privately rented housing of better quality, housing affordability is still often compromised, even with the government's cash transfers.

To improve the living conditions of subdivided unit residents, the Hong Kong government has subsidized nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to supply and operate interim housing units, named "transitional housing," in the last few years. The tenancy term is usually short, only 2–5 years, with the assumption that tenants can move to public rental housing within 6 years. As transitional housing is delivered through the renovation of underutilized buildings or the on-site installation of modular units, its objective physical quality is more favorable than that of

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subdivided units but falls short of that of permanent subsidized housing. However, there is limited knowledge of how these varied residential environments in Hong Kong are perceived by low-income parents as the environmental context for parenting their young children.

3.2 | Methods

The first author's research team conducted a mixed-methods research project examining the association between housing conditions and early childhood development among low-income families in Hong Kong in 2023 and 2024. The quantitative component of the project was a questionnaire survey, followed by semistructured in-depth interviews as the qualitative component. This paper draws on the interview data collected during the qualitative part of the study[1]. We first developed an interview guide containing key questions, prompts, and probing questions to facilitate the interviews. The key questions centered on various issues, including the mothers' views of their housing and neighborhood environments, past housing trajectories, future housing plans, housing-induced difficulties, daily routines, parenting stress, child development, and coping strategies.

The eligibility criteria for the research project included mothers with a household income of HKD30,000 or below (approximately the income threshold for a four-person family to apply for public rental housing) and at least one preschool child. Mothers who had lived in their current accommodation for less than 6 months were excluded from the study. Eligible participants were recruited for the initial survey by two NGOs serving low-income children and a local social research survey agency. We recruited survey participants who expressed willingness to participate in subsequent in-depth interviews and purposively selected interviewees to ensure that diverse housing types were represented (i.e., maximum variation sampling).

An information sheet detailing how the participants would be involved in the study, how their data would be maintained (e.g., confidentiality, data storage period), and their right to withdraw from the study at any time and access their personal data, following guidelines from the first author's university, was provided to all of the participants before the interviews, after which they gave their written consent. Each interview lasted for approximately 30–40 min and was audio-recorded with the interviewee's consent. If the mothers were unable to attend the interviews in person, we conducted the interviews online via video calls and recorded the entire conversations, including their provision of verbal consent at the beginning of each interview. After the interviews, the participants each received a HK$150 supermarket coupon as compensation, with an appreciation message. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the first author's university (HSEARS20220707005).

The interviews were not conducted directly by the authors, who had expertise in housing policy and child development, to ensure that they did not influence the conversations with the mothers, given their established views on low-income families in Hong Kong. Instead, the interviews were conducted by three research assistants who were trained by the authors over two training sessions, during which the interview questions, protocols, and potential challenges were reviewed and the consistency of the interview formats and questions across the three researchers was discussed. From approximately the 15th interviewee, we noticed a high degree of data saturation, and we therefore discontinued recruitment after the 20th interview. Because one of the interviewees was found to be ineligible when her household income increased following the survey, our data analysis was based on the remaining 19 interviews.

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the interviewees. The interviewees were mostly in their 30s. Five of them were raising more than one child within the age range of interest (0–6 years). The majority of the mothers were unemployed, and they took full responsibility for housework and childcare. Seven of the mothers lived in public rental housing, the city's most prevalent low-income housing type, and had larger families (four to six persons) than the mothers living in the other housing types (mostly two to four persons). Three of the participants lived in transitional housing, and another three lived in subsidized ownership housing.

The recorded interviews were all transcribed verbatim into Cantonese, Hong Kong's local language, by research assistants and translated into English for analysis. The translated transcripts were reviewed by the research assistants to ensure the appropriateness of the translation and to avoid significant loss or skewing of the original meanings. Next, the authors subjected the transcripts to thematic analysis, a qualitative data analysis method designed to develop and interpret patterns embedded in a dataset [43]. In thematic analysis, patterns of shared meaning with conceptual coherence are understood as themes, which are identified through the researcher's active engagement in interpreting the patterns. To address the research questions in a focused way, we adopted a deductive approach, in which data analysis is driven by a pre-existing theory or framework, to search for specific findings [44, 45], namely, housing pathways and the ecology of parenting and human development. We followed the six phases of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke [43]: becoming familiar with the data, coding, generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes, refining, defining and naming themes, and writing up. Two researchers worked independently to code the dataset manually, produce the initial themes, and review the suggested themes (collaborative coding) to enhance the interpretation and reflexivity. We used NVivo 12.0 software for the coding.

4 | Findings

In line with the research questions, our analysis was structured into the following subsections. First, it delineated the housing and parenting hardships experienced by low-income mothers, highlighting the intersection between housing pathways and parenting pathways in the context of poverty. Second, from the perspective of the ecology of child development and parenting, we explored mothers' perceptions of environmental risks to child development and family lives, which are an important source of their parenting and housing hardships. Finally, we outlined their coping strategies to reduce environmental hardships and promote healthy child development and family well-being.

4.1 | Mothers' Struggles With Poverty, Housing Hardships, and Parenting

4.1.1 | Financial Challenges and Lack of Childcare Support

Our analysis revealed that the participants were experiencing multifaceted housing hardships. Housing cost was a constant

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TABLE 1 | Characteristics of the interviewees ($N = 19$).

Pseudonym	Age	Employment status	Child's age	Housing type	Household size
Connie	33	Unemployed	6 years	Transitional housing	3
Crystal	37	Unemployed	2 years; 9 years	Transitional housing	4
Kelly	Unknown	Unemployed	2 years; 5 years	Transitional housing	4
Alice	39	Part-time	5 years	Public rental housing	4
May	32	Unemployed	9 months; 3 years	Public rental housing	4
Joyce	29	Unemployed	4 months	Public rental housing	5
Ivy	Unknown	Unemployed	6 years; 10 years	Public rental housing	4
Winnie	52	Unemployed	6 years; 10 years; 15 years	Public rental housing	5
Angela	32	Unemployed	4 months; 4 years	Public rental housing	4
Fiona	36	Unemployed	4 years; 9 years	Public rental housing	5
Michelle	33	Full-time	4 years	Private rental housing	2
Mandy	34	Unemployed	3 years	Private rental housing	5
Maggie	39	Unemployed	3 years; 6 years	Private rental housing	4
Emily	30s	Full-time	2 years	Private rental housing	3
Karen	39	Full-time	1 year	Private rental housing	3
Rebecca	39	Part-time	2 years; 9 years	Private rental housing	4
Vivian	38	Full-time	1 year: 6 years	Subsidized ownership housing	4
Carmen	34	Full-time	1 year	Subsidized ownership housing	3
Janet	32	Full-time	3 years	Subsidized ownership housing	4

concern for the mothers we interviewed, and housing expenses were found to be one of the primary sources of economic pressure for their families. While the participants in public rental housing, who usually paid much less than private tenants, still suffered from financial constraints, those living in private housing felt extremely stressed by the high market rents, which typically exceeded 40% of their monthly household income. However, they felt frustrated that despite such unaffordable rents, their housing quality was notably inadequate. The high market rents shrank their families' nonhousing expenses, such as food consumption, medical treatment, and leisure activities.

> *"Sometimes, for certain expenses—like taking our child out to play or buying non-essential items—we have to be more careful. If something is cheaper, we might buy a bit more of it. But for things that aren't necessities, we have to think twice about whether or not we really need them. [...] We have to count every dollar carefully—whether the purchase will be useful, or whether it will eventually be clutter and a waste of money."* (Michelle)

> *"I won't buy expensive ingredients because our money is limited. Some expenses are fixed, like rent—you can't skip that—so I see where I can save, usually on food."* (Joyce)

> *"It's like not seeing a doctor and just buying medicine; it's still an expense in terms of self-care."* (Ivy)

One participant's family resided in a village far from the district center because the rent there was lower, which slightly increased the costs of daily necessities (e.g., food, medicine) due to the limited number of stores nearby. Some of the mothers had a strong desire to work even part-time to relieve their household financial burdens, but they could not find anyone or any services to care for their children. The absence or lack of childcare in their social and institutional networks deterred the low-income mothers from participating in economic activities that might have reduced their housing cost burden. While hiring a foreign domestic helper to take care of young children is a common practice in Hong Kong, this was not a practical option for the participants because it is costly and would have required them to share their cramped home spaces with the helper.

> *"If I hired a foreign domestic worker, I'd need to provide a place for her to stay, but our home isn't that spacious, so I might not be able to give her a bed."* (Kelly)

> *"Well, if I worked full-time, it would be a problem because my parents don't know how to help with my child's homework. Also, they don't understand Cantonese very well, so if the teacher gave instructions in Cantonese, my child would not be able to do homework properly... Because I've been taking care of my child by myself since they were little, sometimes they don't listen to their grandparents."* (Mandy)

> *"If the community could help with looking after children, stay-at-home wives like me could work a bit and help with our family's finances. If there were someone to look after the children, then women could go out to work."* (Connie)

4.1.2 | Cramped Spaces, Overcrowding, and Family Relationships

Increased family size since a child's birth affected the way the mothers shared their dwelling spaces and exacerbated overcrowding. As most of the participants only had one or two bedrooms in their homes, it was not uncommon for the mother to

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sleep in one room with all of their children and the father or eldest sons to sleep in the living room to enhance everyone's sleep quality. Squeezing children into one bedroom at night was often reported by mothers who lived with one or two extended family members, such as parents-in-law or a brother-in-law, who usually occupied one whole room in the house.

> *"My youngest daughter was just born, and now with four people, it's a bit cramped. Before, when there were only three of us, it was still okay. Now, we only have one room, and all four of us are living in the same room."* (May)

> *"After our second child was born, we had to put a lot more effort into childproofing, so he wouldn't injure himself. Of course, with two kids, you have more toys, more clothes. I keep trying to carve out storage space. A corner that might have been a play area is now being used for storage. We store loads of diapers there."* (Vivian)

> *"We only have one bedroom. We don't have enough sleeping space. All of us end up sleeping in that one room, in one bed, so if one child moves around, it affects everyone else. Basically, no one can get proper rest. Now we've ended up having some of us sleep in the living room. That way, everyone can rest a bit better."* (Angela)

While living in a small house is the norm in Hong Kong, raising a young child seems to exacerbate the negative effects of crowdedness. A lack of space for storing toys and books or for a desk at which their child could study was a particular environmental stressor for the interviewed mothers. The interviews also showed that cramped, cluttered living spaces caused significant stress for the mothers, who were responsible for the household chores. The mothers generally described their feelings at home negatively, using words such as "uncomfortable," "stressful," and "unhappy."

> *"It's very messy, very messy. When I come home, I feel really annoyed, very worried."* (Kelly)

> *"How does crowding affect my mental and physical health? It's quite obvious and significant, it is about 80% of the problem. Crowding really causes lots of conflicts in my home, for sure."* (Winnie)

> *"Even if it's a little less convenient, I would probably consider moving because living in such a small space is really hard. It's frustrating to see things so cluttered."* (Fiona)

Insufficient housing space also had a negative impact on family relationships. In many cases, all of the children had to share the same space to do their homework and to sleep; as a result, disputes and conflicts often arose between siblings. Crowdedness seemed to make even a short conversation a noise nuisance to other family members and significantly invaded everyone's privacy. The participants who lived with parents-in-law were stressed by their mother-in-law's conflicting parenting style, and the lack of privacy in the cramped unit did not give the mothers proper space and time to relieve their stress.

> *"The rent isn't too much of a pressure, but the main stress comes from the cramped space. Because there isn't enough room, there's more friction between us, and we end up arguing more."* (May)

> *"Living together with an older parent and a child is really hard for me. My mother-in-law always says, 'At this age, she* [my daughter] *still can't talk and only eats a few things; she won't eat anything else.' She* [my mother-in-law] *always says that my daughter cries loudly when sleeping, screams, and disturbs them."* (Mandy)

4.1.3 | Precarious Housing Status, Lack of Neighborliness, and Inconvenient Mobility

As public housing tenants benefit from stable tenancy and affordable rent, most of the participants living in private rental housing had applied for public rental housing if their households were eligible, and they had been waiting for between 2 and 6 years to be allocated a place. The unaffordable housing prices in Hong Kong seem to have trapped many of the participants' households in the subsidized housing sector, and they were unable to move up the housing ladder toward homeownership. However, due to the long waiting time and uncertainty of public housing allocation, the participants who had applied for public housing were also unable to set a clear plan for their future housing pathway.

> *"We applied* [for public rental housing] *in 2021, but we still have to wait for permanent residency status, which will take another 4 to 5 years. The contract in our current home allows us to stay for 2 years, but when I think about it, I feel a bit of pressure. I don't know if we can continue living here when the lease expires. I want to stay here until we move to public housing."* (Karen)

> *"I can stay in my house for 2 more years. I've already been on the waiting list* [for public housing] *for nearly 6 years. The landlord told me that we can renew* [our contract] *after 2 years, but I'm not sure if we will. I'm not very clear about it. Our current home will be demolished in 4 or 5 years."* (Crystal)

Mothers with active boys of preschool age were particularly anxious about the noise their children made at home (e.g., shouting, running, fighting), which they worried would annoy their neighbors. This concern seemed to bother the mothers most when they did not have close relationships with their neighbors, as they believed that neighbors who knew their families' situations well would be more patient with their children's annoying behaviors. The mothers living in public housing appeared more concerned about the noise their children made because their relationships with their neighbors were weaker than those in other types of housing.

> *"I'm worried that my children's rowdiness may disturb the neighbors sometimes. They shout a lot, they're loud, they play with remote-control cars. I'm afraid it will bother others."* (Maggie)

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"Actually, we're sometimes really worried about making noise and disturbing the neighbors, because the kids do shout and scream sometimes. We don't really have much interaction with the neighbors, because everyone keeps their doors closed now, and it's rare for us to chat with them, although we do say hello when we see them." (May)

For the participants who lived in remote areas, it was not easy to go grocery shopping or pick up their older children from school, as they often lived far from the neighborhood centers, subway stations, or bus stops. Inconvenient public transportation was apparently the result of a trade-off in their housing choice—choosing lower rents at the expense of convenience. The fact that some of the mothers had to take their babies and toddlers along with them all the time made their daily mobility even more challenging. This finding indicates that convenient public transportation and neighborhood amenities may have a profound meaning for low-income mothers with young children.

"My younger son is 2 years old and doesn't like to sit in a stroller. He prefers to walk on his own and tends to run around. When I go grocery shopping, even if I don't buy anything, it takes me an hour to walk there and back. As the grocery shopping takes two to three hours, he can't handle it and starts running around on his own. I feel exhausted." (Crystal)

"We have to walk for 15 minutes to reach the minibus stop. If you walk slowly with a child, it takes even longer. I estimate it takes 20 to 30 minutes to reach the bus stop. If I'm alone, I can get there in 10 minutes; it's much faster. But with a child, you can't walk fast; you ask them to walk fast, but they don't. So we end up walking for a long time." (Kelly)

4.2 | Mothers' Perceptions of Environmental Risks to Children at Home

4.2.1 | Overcrowding and Inadequate Housing Quality

Our analysis demonstrated that residential overcrowding was the most prevalent environmental concern deemed by the participants to affect their children's development. Due to an insufficient number of bedrooms, the participants' young children spent most of the day in the living room. The mothers identified the lack of space for their children to move around or study quietly as a daunting environmental stressor at home. Clutter, accompanied by congested living spaces, appeared to severely affect the mothers' mental state, which in turn influenced their parenting behaviors.

"My son is very active and moves around a lot. If we had a bigger house, I would have bought a slide . . . something that would help him to burn off his energy. But our house is small. It's hard to keep many toys in it. We have to go to the park to have him run and burn off energy." (Carmen)

"It's difficult [for my children] *to do homework at home. All three kids sit here doing their homework, and they disturb each other. They don't have a designated table or space for doing homework, so it's not ideal."* (Winnie)

"We have a lot of stuff at home. Both my husband and I feel that this [clutter] *worsens our temper. I am not so patient with the kids. It's a really simple thing, like my son throwing a tantrum or not eating much. Maybe because of the cramped space, we take our negative emotions out on him."* (Carmen)

Noise was another significant source of environmental concern, adversely affecting children's sleep quality and emotional stability. In particular, mothers with babies were frustrated by noise from the neighborhood (e.g., motorbikes, construction noise), which often interrupted their children's nap time. Noise also functioned as a negative stimulus for children's problematic behaviors. For instance, Mandy's daughter had been diagnosed with autism and developmental delay, and Mandy needed more space at home to stimulate her daughter's growth and development. However, she was frustrated that her house did not have enough space to accommodate her daughter's behavior.

"In our previous home, the noise affected her, and when there was arguing, she would start screaming, crying, and biting her father when he tried to hold her. After we moved here, her sleep quality worsened. When she woke up the next day, she would say, 'Mami sorry, daddy sorry, grandma sorry.' She thinks that she caused the arguing . . . So, she doesn't feel a sense of security." (Mandy)

"Well, it's mainly because our place is small. Sometimes, we don't finish all of the housework and other tasks until late, and my daughter ends up staying up with us. We can't turn off the lights early to let her sleep because of the limited space. It's quite challenging. If the place were bigger and she had her own room, at least she could go to bed earlier than she does now. Whatever housework we needed to do wouldn't affect her sleep that much." (Carmen)

"My partitioned house is very noisy all the time. It's not that they [the neighbors] *shout at us, but they always scold their kids, and we can hear it from inside our house. Sometimes my son hears it and he gets scared."* (Michelle)

The participants also reported high indoor humidity, a lack of natural light and ventilation, and infestations of rats and cockroaches as environmental concerns; however, they considered these problems less critical than cramped conditions and noise. Interestingly, the physical quality of transitional housing, the latest type of subsidized rental housing in the city, was criticized by the participants with young children due to the relatively small unit size and the odor generated by the materials used for finishing the interior (e.g., paint, glue, plastic panels), which they considered harmful to their children's health.

4.2.2 | Nurturing Neighborhood Environments

Outdoor public spaces or playgrounds in which children could run around, along with affordable extracurricular activities through which children could learn new things, were considered

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essential criteria in evaluating the adequacy of their neighborhood for child-rearing. A few of the mothers felt that proximity to playgrounds, parks, and green spaces compensated, to some extent, for their cramped indoor spaces and limited learning opportunities. However, poor-quality equipment in playgrounds, poorly behaved peers, and mentally unstable neighbors sometimes induced feelings of unsafety and deterred some of the mothers from taking their children outside to spend time outside the home.

> *"The environment near my house is not suitable for raising children. The children outside are very poorly behaved, very bad. If there's a slide, they don't wait and take turns to go down it. They're bossy and won't let others have a turn. We usually don't let my child play outside unless we accompany her."* (Emily)

Although the participants recognized the potential impacts of their living environment on their children's well-being, they did not specifically identify the adverse outcomes that had resulted from these environmental stressors. Some of them expressed concerns about their children's developmental and health issues, such as delayed language skills, being picky about food, or having a neurodevelopmental disorder. However, they were unable to draw clear connections between these symptoms and their living environment. While the participants were generally satisfied with their children's development status, two mothers expressed concerns about their children's attention deficit problems. They perceived their small living space to be a factor that amplified the maternal stress they experienced due to their children's problematic behaviors, rather than a factor aggravating these behaviors.

4.3 | Coping Practices

4.3.1 | Emotion-Focused Strategies

Our analysis revealed that while the mothers faced various housing hardships related to parenting and child development, their coping practices typically involved a combination of pragmatic acceptance and cynical pessimism. As moving to a bigger house was unlikely to be a feasible option for them, the participants, regardless of their housing type, showed a tendency to accept their current housing situation and endure the associated environmental problems, while remaining largely pessimistic about their housing prospects. Some of the mothers recalled the poorer conditions in their previous homes and tried to reassure themselves that their present housing quality was better than before, which may have slightly reduced their psychological distress.

> *"Living here is much better than before. The environment in the subdivided housing we used to live in was very poor. It was extremely hot in summer, and there were many rats. We didn't have good ventilation, because the housing was located in an alleyway. The air quality was very poor, and the toilet and kitchen didn't have windows. The children weren't happy there and often fell ill. Here, we have more open space outside. After the children finish their homework, they can go out and play for a while. I asked my older son if he's happy living here, and he said it's the happiest place he's lived in Hong Kong, considering all the subdivided housing we've been in."* (Crystal)

> *"I feel quite cramped at home, but there's nothing I can do about it. It causes a lot of stress and unhappiness, but I try not to let myself feel unhappy. I try to think about something that can make me feel better."* (Connie)

> *"Well, it's okay. Considering it's in Hong Kong, it isn't too bad. We used to live in a smaller unit, but now we live in a unit for five to six people. Sometimes my grandfather comes back* [to stay with us]*, and then it feels crowded. Other aspects, like convenience, are fine."* (Fiona)

4.3.2 | Action-Focused Strategies: To Move or Not to Move

Among the interviewed mothers, only a few were able to move to new homes after their children were born. Several mothers with newborn babies and those who worked and thus needed childcare support had moved closer to their parents' or parents-in-law's houses. However, the move did not necessarily guarantee optimal housing conditions for raising a young child, given the limited housing choices and financial constraints.

> *"When my younger son was born 2 years ago, we felt the need to find a new place because it was difficult to move around with a baby stroller and carry groceries at the same time. So we moved to a unit with an elevator, but it was a platform conversion on the ground floor."* (Crystal)

> *"When my child was born, my parents-in-law couldn't help take care of him. My husband and I both had to go to work, and my mother was willing to help take care of my child. That's why we moved to our current home. We specifically chose this location because it's near my mother, who can help when my child starts primary school or kindergarten in this area . . . But my home is still very small, and we don't have the money to move to a larger place. There's financial pressure, plus the usual pressures of life."* (Vivian)

Although the mothers recognized the need to relocate for their children's sake, some intentionally chose not to move because they felt that it would be too difficult to do so with young children and all their belongings, and/or they did not want their children to have to change schools or kindergartens. Several mothers had decided to delay moving until their children started primary school or they had saved more money. These mothers expressed their willingness to tolerate their existing housing hardship. For example, Mandy's family, who lived in a tenement building and spent almost half of their household income on monthly rent, was offered a transitional housing unit that supposedly had better hygiene and lower rent. However, she refused to move because the new unit would still be too small for her newborn baby to learn to walk, and her current location had more kindergarten choices.

> *"Having two children makes it* [moving] *a hassle. We have to pack everything to move. Out of all our moves* [in the past]*, we only hired movers once; we handled the rest all by ourselves. It's very tiring. We've moved four times in the past few years. It's*

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scary . . . We have so many things for the children, so it's exhausting. We're just waiting for public housing." (Maggie)

"We probably will [move in the future]*, because I want my children to have more space and want to give them their own rooms. Luckily, I have two daughters, so they can share a room. If I had had a son, the situation would have been harder." (May)*

While the participants were aware that it would be difficult to significantly improve their housing conditions, some made an effort to alleviate their housing-induced, parenting-related stress through social interaction with close neighbors or friends. Some mothers in private housing or transitional housing appreciated the frequent interactions with their neighbors, particularly their older neighbors, who could watch their children play in the outdoor spaces while the mothers cooked dinner.

"They even gave me some bread today. They often give me things like that. The neighbors are very nice. You won't find people elsewhere who would share food with you or watch your children. My friend said that if we moved to public housing, we wouldn't have this kind of neighborly relationship anymore. We often let the kids play outside in the evening, and after we finish dinner and cleaning, we chat with the neighbors. We often make plans to do things together . . . So the neighborly relationship here is really like the one back in my hometown, where neighbors are like family" (Crystal)

Most of the participants who lived in private housing had applied for public rental housing if their households were eligible. Sometimes, they had sought help with the application procedure from social workers whom they had met through NGOs. However, the participants seemed to be generally pessimistic about the effectiveness of such institutional assistance, as they knew that there was nothing that could be changed immediately. Cynical pessimism was commonly associated with giving up the active search for a better housing solution.

"I sought help from social workers at C organization [a local NGO]*. They talked with me and suggested some activities, but they couldn't help me with other things. I have been waiting for a long time to see a public psychiatrist. I asked the social worker if there's any way to see the doctor earlier, but they only offered activities for me to participate in . . . I don't seek help from social workers anymore because they can't really help with these matters."* (Connie)

"When I feel really stressed because of my living conditions or lose my temper, I go out for a walk and try not to spend much time at home . . . I asked social workers [for help]*, but they said there's no way, I just have to wait. They said everyone in Hong Kong is in the same* [housing] *situation, there's nothing special, so there's no solution."* (Fiona)

"What can I do? I don't have money. I only endure. I can't even afford to buy a mop. You see how small this home is. There's no point in talking about it. People can't help you. Can someone just give you a home to live in? That's not possible. Complaining about it only makes things harder for yourself, so why complain?" (Kelly)

5 | Discussion and Conclusion

The low-income mothers interviewed in this study experienced immense challenges stemming from a combination of housing problems, poverty, and parenting hardships. We found that when their first child was born, the participants encountered a new facet of housing problems and endeavored to navigate a housing pathway within Hong Kong's housing system (research question 1). Indeed, our analysis demonstrates that raising a young child added concerns to the participants' daily hardships, as the inadequate housing conditions they had previously managed to tolerate with their spouses seemed to become environmental stressors once they had children. The small dwelling spaces easily became cluttered with children's items, and a lack of neighborhood amenities posed a significant problem due to the limited mobility of mothers with babies and toddlers. Moreover, their already constrained household income had to be reallocated between rent, expenses for children, and other basic family needs. A few of the participants had moved to another house after having a child, and some planned to move in the near future to secure a better educational environment. This finding underscores the temporal nature of a household's housing pathway [10, 16], in that a family's housing experiences and the meaning that housing holds for them can change over time, particularly after the birth and growth of their children.

Researchers have argued that families expecting to have a child are more likely to move to better quality housing or try to obtain homeownership [46, 47]. However, this claim does not seem to hold for low-income families in the unaffordable housing market that characterizes Hong Kong society. The participants in our interviews had very limited housing choices and were generally unable to secure an optimal housing solution before their children's birth. This mismatch between the timing of household events (i.e., a child's birth) and housing events (i.e., moving to a better house or becoming an owner), in Feijten and Mulder's terms [47], appeared to be associated with low-income mothers' negative feelings about and perceptions of their homes.

Whereas numerous qualitative studies on low-income families' housing experiences have emphasized families' precarious housing status in the context of eviction, homelessness, and insecure tenancy (e.g., [18, 19, 48]), our study identifies that low-income families with young children in Hong Kong perceive the environmental quality of housing as posing the most daunting environmental risks to their child development (research question 2). Hong Kong's housing system partly explains this finding. In Hong Kong, public tenants can secure tenancy rights as long as they are eligible, and two- to 4-year tenancies for the residents of subdivided units are also legally protected. Thus, although unaffordable market rents may threaten poor households' stable residency, the interview participants seemed to have managed to navigate the housing market and to have chosen units that they could afford, albeit often at the expense of housing size or quality.

Given that a secure tenancy does not necessarily mean good housing quality, however, many households facing financial constraints suffer from residential crowding and noise, *regardless of* housing type. Hong Kong's housing is well known for its small unit size—approximately half the size of that in other major developed Asian cities [49]. The adverse effects of residential crowding and clutter on mental health identified in this study are

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consistent with other empirical evidence previously found in Hong Kong [50, 51]. However, our study further provides a nuanced understanding of this link in the context of parenting and child development by highlighting the significance of sufficient living space for preschool children to run around, read books, develop emotional stability, and enjoy high-quality sleep. Although the participants were not experiencing immediate housing insecurity problems, such as eviction or rent arrears, at the time of the interviews, the foreseeable negative impact of small living quarters on their growing children *in the future* was a major concern for the mothers, a finding that is rarely captured in quantitative studies that focus on past or current impacts.

Our analysis also revealed that the perceived environmental stressors affecting child well-being are not clearly detached from those affecting mothers' mental well-being; rather, they are mostly interconnected. The influence of an inadequate living environment on low-income mothers with young children seems more complex and multidimensional than the influence on children. Crowded living spaces and poor housing quality appeared to worsen the mothers' stress from financial and childcare burdens, and the inability to participate in economic activities due to the unavailability of childcare support left the mothers feeling disempowered to improve their housing circumstances. Moreover, as Feldman and Shwartz-Ziv [20] noted, housing problems seem to infiltrate the relationship not only between mothers and their children but also between mothers and co-residing family members. Distressed mothers tend to show negative parenting attitudes toward their preschool children, with whom the mothers spend most time, which implies that the housing environment may influence child outcomes through mothers' mental health and parenting. This is consistent with prior studies grounded in the ecological perspective on child development and parenting [27–30].

We also found that the strategies used by low-income mothers to cope with their housing problems alongside their parenting hardships are mixed (research question 3). Our participants' emotional strategies mainly manifested as pragmatic acceptance and cynical pessimism; sustained optimism was rare [21]. The participants' action-focused practices to change their housing situations tended to be marginal improvements: either moving or waiting passively for institutional assistance (e.g., public housing). Our interviews suggested that their emotional and action-focused coping strategies were highly correlated and sequential. The participants envisaged that they would have almost no chance of overcoming their current housing and financial challenges in the near future. Therefore, they tried to adapt to and tolerate their current circumstances while waiting for public rental housing, which they deemed the most affordable housing option for them.

Interestingly, while variation across housing types was not the intended focus of this paper, we found that low-income families' housing and parenting hardships were generally consistent regardless of housing type. Low-income mothers living in private housing generally wish to move to subsidized housing. However, subsidized housing does not necessarily provide an optimal housing environment for their young children, because overcrowding persists due to the small size of subsidized housing units—with crowding sometimes intensified by the addition of extended family members—and social capital often weakens after moving to public rental housing. Transitional housing was favorably assessed by our participants in terms of promoting social interaction with neighbors, owing to its relatively small development scale and the availability of outdoor public spaces on the housing sites. However, low-income mothers' most significant environmental concerns, i.e., overcrowding and noise, remained the same on the whole. This finding underscores the need to enhance the overall quality of subsidized housing, particularly regarding dwelling size.

This study extends the literature by illuminating the close interaction between housing pathways and the early childhood stage of the parenting pathway among low-income families within the structural context of Hong Kong, as well as revealing low-income mothers' perceptions of their housing circumstances from the ecological perspective on parenting and child development. However, the current study was limited by the conflation of babies, toddlers, and kindergarten children into a single analytic sample, the absence of meaningful comparisons across housing types and family attributes due to the limited number of interviewees, and the lack of evidence of the impacts of residential environments on child outcomes. Nevertheless, this paper demonstrates that low-income mothers' experiences of housing and material hardship substantially shape their perceptions of residential environments as desirable, or dismal, contexts for early childhood development. Therefore, it indicates the value of future research on the mediating effects of parenting on the association between housing and child outcomes, supporting Coley et al.'s [27] research in a non-Western context with a younger child cohort.

The paper also sheds light on future policy directions to help low-income households cope with housing and parenting hardships. Its findings highlight the need to recalibrate the government's housing subsidy interventions in line with family welfare policies. At the proximal level, supplying sufficient, affordable, and adequate housing would restore low-income families' optimism about pursuing housing pathways that align with the stages of their children's development. Prioritizing families with children (or newborn babies) in public rental housing allocation, a policy recently launched in Hong Kong, seems to be conducive in this regard. However, the meager improvement in environmental quality through subsidized housing programs may not suffice to promote healthy child development and increase the fertility rate, particularly among low-income groups. As nonhousing interventions, expanding childcare support for working mothers to increase their financial resources to move to a better house and offering education in decluttering and home organizing could also alleviate low-income parents' concerns about the adequacy of their housing environments for early child development.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Data Availability Statement

Data are available from the author(s) with the permission of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

Endnotes

[1]Refer to Seo et al. [52] for a fuller description of the larger research project on which this paper is based.

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