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'...nice to get some alone time'

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'... nice to get some alone time': children's spatial negotiation of alone time needs in the family home

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ABSTRACT

This article exposes the spatial dimensions that children seek to support their alone time needs in the family home, based on empirical data from the *At Home with Children* research project. Domestic ideals problematise child alone time at home as a threat to family togetherness. In turn, housing foregrounds this idea through the move towards open-plan living and overcrowding policy's indifference to children's 'alone space' needs. This article offers new thinking by exploring the perspectives of children and teenagers on the everyday spatial negotiation of their alone time needs while at home with family during COVID-19 lockdown. Findings from semi-structured interviews with 45 families living across England and Scotland, UK, reveal that both children and teenagers seek spaces for alone time to enable four core experiences: *privacy*, *agency*, *ownership*, and *restoration*. Here, associated dimensions of space are identified by children and teenagers, contributing new understandings to children's domestic geographies and showing the relevance of space for alone time, to children's well-being, fundamentally challenging adult-centred constructions of family togetherness. The article's focus on the voiced needs of children sets a new agenda for the housing standards, with major policy implications for measures of occupation density, which can enable children's well-being.

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Child alone time; family togetherness; domestic space; child well-being

Family togetherness and children's mental well-being: lessons from lockdown

This article explores the spatial dimensions that children and teenagers seek to support their alone time needs in the family home. This exploration is supported by empirical data from the *At Home with Children* project, which sought lessons from the lockdown experiences of families with children in England and Scotland, UK. During the COVID-19 lockdown, most families were together at home for most of the time. With the slower pace of life and fears about the effects of the pandemic, lockdown has been framed as a period through which parents' dedication to children increased and family bonds grew deeper (Gray 2020). A view commonly reported in the media and likewise reflected in research was that increased family togetherness was enjoyed by both children and parents (Gummer 2020; McQuillan 2021), and in particular by those parents of teenagers (Freeman et al. 2022). Researchers also specifically highlighted the unreserved importance of family togetherness for children's well-being during lockdown (Bessell 2022). A rise in anxiety and depression among children was attributed to school shut downs, lack of social interaction and excessive

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media exposure (Panchal et al. 2023). Yet paradoxically, a number of studies indicate that the mental well-being of children increased during the first months of the pandemic (Gray 2020; Larsen, Hella, and Holt 2022; Twenge et al. 2020). Researchers hypothesise that, alongside several lockdown-related lifestyle changes (e.g. more sleep, less school-related stress), an increase in family togetherness may have temporarily resulted in increased children's mental well-being. Nonetheless, the benefits of increased family togetherness were not felt by all. Those families living in overcrowded housing, for example, were disproportionately affected by domestic conflict (Holt and Murray 2022). These findings resonate with previous studies highlighting the negative mental well-being impacts of a lack of personal space and overcrowding in the home (Firdaus 2018; Guite, Clark, and Ackrill 2006; Pengelly, Rogers, and Evans 2009; Ruiz-Tagle and Urria 2022). Experiences of togetherness were therefore influenced by long-standing housing problems which were worsened by the lockdown (Acevedo-Rincón and Flórez Pabón 2022; Carmona et al. 2020; Parnell et al. 2022).

The home is primarily conceived as an adult geography (Luzia 2011): a space where adults construct togetherness for children (Daly 2001), whilst children's own understandings of togetherness have gone unnoticed (Christensen 2002). During the twentieth century, the ideal of togetherness materialised in housing through the provision of activity-specific spaces, usually involving a living-dining room, a working kitchen, and independent bedrooms for adults and children, with boys and girls segregated in different rooms. The reintegration of children within the shared living spaces was a key feature of the modern house which supports togetherness (Stevenson and Prout 2013) and continues to dominate in contemporary housing design. However, this construction of togetherness reserves the need for personal space for adults (Dowling and Power 2012), and, as a result, housing space standards continue to overlook children's alone time needs (Housing Act 1985 2005). The pandemic showed that most family homes were not prepared for the simultaneous arrival of schooling and home-working, or the increase in children's indoor play brought by lockdown restrictions (Acevedo-Rincón and Flórez Pabón 2022; Freeman et al. 2022; Million 2022). Accordingly, families tried to adapt their homes in order to minimise spatial blurring between conflicting activities, as well as to minimise potential conflict between adults and children arising from a lack of personal space (Million 2022; Parnell et al. 2022). The lockdown, therefore, was a reminder that family relations are 'produced, communicated and undermined' through the materiality of the home (Dowling 2008; Walker 2022, 212). But also, the space of the home was shown to be an actor in these relations, rather than a stage where adult-child relations were played out (Dowling and Power 2012; Malatesta et al. 2023).

The post-pandemic family home witnesses reworked home-life patterns and adult-child relations, echoing adjustments made during lockdown (BBC News 2022; Hobbs and Bernard 2021; ONS 2022). Drawing from children's perspectives on their lockdown domestic experiences, this article asks: why do children seek time and space alone in the family home? What are the spatial dimensions that children seek to support their alone time needs in the family home? And what is children's role in creating family togetherness? In doing so, the article endorses the position that domestic experiences are an assemblage of home and house (Stevenson and Prout 2013), and offers findings with spatial implications for housing design and policy as well as contributing to understanding of children's geographies of home. The voices of children presented here offer insights into the positive motivations behind their everyday spatial negotiation of voluntary alone time, as well as the associated spatial dimensions that they value.

Children's alone time and family togetherness

Children's need for alone time within the family home has been largely overlooked by researchers, with a few exceptions looking at the decrease of time that adolescents spend with family through the lens of transitional disengagement (Ashbourne and Daly 2012; Larson et al. 1996) or young adults' sensory withdrawal from conflict (Wilson, Houmøller, and Bernays 2012). This lack of attention to children's alone time reflects first, the wider lack of children's voices and perspectives in research

(Christensen 2002; Daly 2001; Michelan and Correia 2014) and second, the dominance of togetherness ideologies which put the emphasis on parents spending time with children (Dowling and Power 2012; Guthier, Smeeding, and Furstengerg 2004), in order to create family time as 'a harmonious experience of togetherness' (Christensen 2002, 79). Nevertheless, togetherness ideologies dictate that the desire for separateness – and the capacity to secure it – is reserved for adults, although arguably gendered (Dowling and Power 2012).

Studies exploring alone time in the family home commonly represent adult perspectives, often theorising alone time through the study of practices geared towards the containment or exclusion of children in relation to adult time or space (Dowling and Power 2012; Stevenson and Prout 2013). Here, containment and exclusion of children are not framed as eschewing togetherness, but as a mechanism to resolve tensions between family togetherness and adult's need for separateness. Alternatively, adults use 'safe places' in the home to allow child play with a degree of freedom near adult supervision (Hancock and Gillen 2007, 348). This article aims instead to offer children's perspectives, building on the notion that 'family time for children is constituted both as time that they spend together with their family but also as time they are able to spend on their own' (Christensen 2002, 85). In other words, whilst 'parents readily define 'togetherness' in and through time' spent with children (Christensen, James, and Jenks 2000, 145), children see *alone time* and *time with family* as inextricable components of togetherness. Clarifying our theoretical perspective is paramount because other theorisations of children's and teenagers' need for separateness, when explored through an adult's lens on family togetherness, are understood as 'alone-together' time (Mullan and Chatzitheochari 2019, 798) or 'ambiguous togetherness' (Ashbourne and Daly 2012, 316), often referring to children's or teenagers' psychological distance or absence when being at home with their family. These theorisations overlook the fact that children value voluntary alone time when they know someone is there for them (Christensen 2002). Alone time is therefore understood here as self-exclusion from the social space of the family (Christensen, James, and Jenks 2000). This understanding acknowledges the idea that, for children, voluntary alone time creates a 'growing sense of personal independence from the family' and offers a way to 'express and cope with bad moods or emotional tensions' (Christensen, James, and Jenks 2000, 149).

Whilst a focus on the child's perspective innately acknowledges children's agency, a note of caution recognises that their autonomy in the home is mediated by adults (Michelan and Correia 2014) and often subject to home rules and adult supervision (Stevenson and Prout 2013). Children's agency is therefore a 'relational dynamic' (Spyrou, Rosen, and Cook 2018, 6) which makes them interdependent with their context, and, in particular, with family relations in the home. Restrictions over children's use of domestic space have been shown to be geared towards avoiding conflict resulting from tensions between togetherness and the desire for (adult) privacy (Dowling and Power 2012; Sibley and Lowe 1992; Wilson, Houmøller, and Bernays 2012). Ultimately, parents' rules about the use of time and space by children reflect everyday efforts to match ideological expectations of *good parent* and *good child* (Livingstone 2007). These efforts are reflected in spatial negotiation of together and alone space (Christensen 2002), often resulting in processes of accommodation (Dowling 2008) which shape the space and materiality of the home in different ways (Blunt and Dowling 2006). Nevertheless, modern ideals of the 'competent child' allow children to express agency and negotiate family relations to some extent (Bjerke 2011, 96), thus becoming social actors within family practices (Stevenson and Prout 2013). Children not only play a role in defining, negotiating and maintaining family togetherness (Daly 2001; Larson et al. 1996; Livingstone 2007; Sibley and Lowe 1992) but, as Christensen (2002) reveals, they also perceive themselves as actors in the creation of alone time within the social space of the family. Still, children's role in producing togetherness has received little attention in the field of children's geographies (Christensen, James, and Jenks 2000; Wilson, Houmøller, and Bernays 2012).

Although children's symbolic place within the family home is gaining significance (Buckingham 2000), this change materialises as an increase in the time that parents dedicate to being with children (Guthier, Smeeding, and Furstengerg 2004). Expectations of parental time allocation are

fuelled by narratives of ‘positive engagement and child-centeredness’ originating from Western ideologies of family togetherness (Daly 2001, 293) and supported by the benefits of open-plan housing design for parental sense of control and multitasking (Dowling and Power 2012). These narratives construct children’s autonomy within frames set by parents and problematise unsupervised presence of children in the home (Wilson, Houmøller, and Bernays 2012).

Framed within ‘the “benign” approach’ taken by literature on home (Brickell 2012, 225), time spent together as a family is generally seen to support a sense of ‘we-ness’ (Larson and Richards 1994, 217) and believed to benefit both adults and children. However, this assumption reflects a one-way adult construction (Crouter et al. 2004; Daly 2001), mirrored by an increasing attention to the way children spend their time (Crouter et al. 2004). As a result, children’s use of technology and portable devices is seen as detrimental to family interaction and normative expectations of childhood (Facer and Furlong 2001; Livingstone 2007; Mullan and Chatzitheochari 2019), and even the privacy afforded by the space of a child’s bedroom is rendered problematic for all but sleeping (Larson et al. 1996; Livingstone 2007; Michelan and Correia 2014).

Anxieties related to children’s alone time and space in the home are framed as fears about the transformation of the family into a group of individuals living together separately (Livingstone 2007). This is reflected in an emphasis within family studies on the threat that alone time presents to family time (Ashbourne and Daly 2012), with less attention dedicated to children’s need for alone space within the home. Spatial aspects of conflicting constructions of togetherness are rarely incorporated into childhood and family studies (Christensen, James, and Jenks 2000; Sibley and Lowe 1992; Wilson, Houmøller, and Bernays 2012), despite evidence that being able to have their own space at home is relevant to children’s well-being (Harden et al. 2013). A lack of critical examination of children’s construction of family togetherness as an experience inclusive of alone time (Christensen 2002; Christensen, James, and Jenks 2000) has important ramifications for housing studies and the design of the everyday domestic spaces which children inhabit. By asking how children construct togetherness through the spatial negotiation of alone time, this article aims to enable children’s perspectives to challenge adult-centred notions of togetherness.

Methods and participants

This article draws upon the *At Home with Children* research project, which sought lessons from the lockdown experiences of families with children¹ in England and Scotland, and explored how these lessons could inform the design, refurbishment, re-imagining, and use of family homes to accommodate changing needs. The project had three phases of data collection,² starting with a large-scale, quantitative survey, and ending with a smaller-scale sample of households in design-based focus groups. As phase two involved semi-structured interviews with families, this phase permitted direct participation by children to share their lockdown experiences. Therefore, the findings in this article relate to the interview phase of the project, in which online semi-structured interviews were carried out with 45 different families (representing 85 adults and 73 children) living across England and Scotland (see Table 1). Children’s ages in the families represented ranged from 2 to 17 years, with an average age of 7.5 years. Eight families were single-adult households, thirty-five families included two adults, one included three adults and one included four adults. Twenty-three families had one child, sixteen had two children, and six had three children (see Tables 2–4). For the purposes of this discussion, children in a broader sense are categorised as children (up to 12 years old), and teenagers (13–17 years old).

The interviews were conducted between September and December 2021, by which time, three national lockdowns had been enforced by the UK government.³ Each participant family represented a single household who had spent at least one lockdown period together in their home. Interviews were conducted with each individual household and centred on family members’ reflections on their lockdown experiences of their home. Each interview lasted up to one hour, with the final 15 min made available for discussion with children to allow them further space and time to express

Table 1. Number of families interviewed by region.

Geographical region (as defined by the ONS 2020)	Frequency of families interviewed	Percentage of families interviewed (%)	Percentage of total number of families with children in England and Scotland, based on ONS 2020 (%)
North East (England)	12	26.7	4.3
North West (England)	1	2.2	12
Yorkshire and The Humber	2	4.4	8.9
East Midlands (England)	0	0	7.8
West Midlands (England)	2	4.4	9.5
East of England	4	8.9	10.3
London	8	17.8	16.3
South East (England)	6	13.3	14.8
South West (England)	6	13.3	8.4
Scotland	4	8.9	7.8
Total	45	100	100

ONS = Office for National Statistics.

themselves.⁴ Children who chose to participate in the interviews were aged three to fourteen years old. The data discussed in this paper is textual, generated via the interview 'talk'. However, to prompt discussion, family members were invited to share photographs of spaces in their home that were important, difficult, or changed during lockdown.⁵ Booklets with simple prompts for drawing or writing were also offered as an optional activity to engage younger children during the family interview, enabling them to subsequently talk about what they had drawn or written. A semi-structured interview guide encouraged all household members to share experiences, whether or not photos or drawings had been provided.

Following interview transcription, content and qualitative thematic analysis were conducted drawing on a flexible coding approach (Deterding and Waters 2021), using N-Vivo software. In what follows, codes have been used to identify the interviewer (I), and whether the participant is adult (A) or child (C), followed by their age (in years) and gender (M = male, F = female, NB = non-binary).

Findings

Children's spatial negotiation of alone time needs in the family home

Our findings reveal how during lockdown, children carved out space for alone time to engage in study, play and leisure activities or just to be, rather than to do. This discussion reflects emergent themes, prioritising interview extracts which include children's voices,⁶ to build understanding of the experiences that they sought through spending time alone. Four experiences emerge: first, privacy, interpreted as not being observed or disturbed by others; second, agency, understood as spatial control and choice; third, ownership, here interpreted as a sense of ownership of space; and fourth restoration, understood in terms of bringing one back to a sense of well-being. Christensen et al. point out that 'the spatial dimensions of the home provide a key site' for the everyday negotiation of time to be alone (Christensen, James, and Jenks 2000, 149). Each sub-theme in the following discussion therefore represents what was previously a tacit spatial dimension, valued by children as enabling the alone time experiences that they seek when at home together with family.

Table 2. Family composition: Number of adults.

Number of adults in the family	Number of families
One adult	8
Two adults	35
Three adults	1
Four adults	1
Total families	45

Table 3. Family composition: Number of children.

Number of children in the family	Number of families
One child	23
Two children	16
Three children	6
Total families	45

Table 4. Age of children in families interviewed.

Age bracket	Number of children
0–4 years	20
5–12 years	41
13–17 years	12
Total children	73

Privacy

Contained space (contained worlds)

During lockdown, many children, not only teenagers, mentioned preferring to do their ‘home-schooling’ in a contained space, such as their bedroom, rather than in the common areas of the home, because they sought privacy. The idea that parents might observe or even participate in the school space – now digitally present within the physical space of the home – was an uncomfortable idea for many children:

I: So, you like to have some privacy?

C10F: Yeah [...] the times when I was like I’m doing schoolwork and stuff, it’s kind of like weird to like be with your parents when you’re in school.

I: So, you like to do your things alone?

C10F: Yeah, schoolwork.

Similarly, now forced to keep in touch with friends remotely, children (as young as nine) used their bedroom to accommodate online conversations and play with friends. Thus, children used their bedrooms as a portal to access their social worlds, creating communication zones outside the boundaries of the room (Sian Lincoln 2016), free from observation or participation by other family members:

C10F: Well ... I played like ... I face timed and played with my friends on it as well, like on my computer, and I was sitting there [in the bedroom] but lots of the time I was on my bed and things like that.

I: Why did you like to see your friends in your room? Why didn’t you do [it], I don’t know, in the living room or somewhere else?

C9F: I like being alone and just talk to my friends.

I: Some privacy. You want the privacy?

C9F: [nods positively]

Young children often discussed how not seeing friends during lockdown affected their well-being:

C9F: Yeah yeah, and it wasn’t really fun in the lockdown that much because I couldn’t go to school, and I missed my friends a lot.

I: What was the main challenge that you faced during the lockdown?

C6F: Think not seeing my friend.

By providing an unobserved, contained physical space in which to continue friendships online, the bedroom therefore supported the privacy necessary for children's well-being:

I: [...] may I ask [C9F], what was your favourite space during lockdown? Favourite space or room ... you know, it can be an area of the room or whole room.

C9F: My bedroom.

I: Why was it your bedroom?

C9F: ...

A72M: Because you were going online with your friends, wasn't it? Yeah, they were going online and playing games and ...

Undisturbed space

Another dimension of the bedroom space valued by children, was a lack of disturbance, enabling focus for schoolwork. This resonates with evidence that many children see homework or study as alone time, for which they value peace and quiet (Christensen 2002). Children of both primary and secondary school age primarily used the designated desk within their bedroom for studying alone, or, as this girl revealed, they aspired to this scenario as an alternative to working in common areas:

I: And for you, what was the most challenging thing in the home? A place that you felt [was] really difficult, and you felt like you wanted to change?

C9F: Living room. I couldn't do my learning.

I: And what could have made it better?

C9F: [...] I could do my learning in my own room. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, have a little desk. Not papers and pencils. Computer.

Although a separate bedroom allowed children to concentrate better, individual bedrooms did not always include a designated space tailored to study needs:

C10F: Well, I used to work in the living room in the old house [...] because there wasn't a cable like anywhere else [...]. But really, I couldn't like work in the living room because C5F was distracting me. So, at any opportunity possible I would always charge up my laptop in the morning and then go into my [...] room. [...] But whereas with the new house I can just go into my bedroom without having to come out to charge my laptop up again and so I think that's made like an impact on my schoolwork because I'm not getting distracted by C5F all the time. So, and I'm doing better on my schoolwork as well because [before] I couldn't focus.

When the child's bedroom did not afford enough peace and quiet for alone study, they would seek alternative spaces in the home:

C10F: It felt like a better place ... downstairs instead of my desk upstairs because I had [C13F] going on in her call [...]. So, I couldn't really hear what they were saying [...] and then [C6] was playing with dollies in her room. So yeah ...

I: Was it good working there or did you not like doing your schoolwork there?

C10F: I prefer doing [it] in the front room.

I: Yeah? Why? Why do you like it in the front room better?

C10F: It's a lot quieter and there is more space, I guess.

I: OK and, why did you choose this space [the living room] for your work and your home schooling?

C10F: Peaceful ...

In addition to the living room, the kitchen and in one case, the conservatory, were noted as common areas frequently appropriated for schoolwork, even if the latter was dependent on the season and weather conditions:

C11F: Yes, when it was winter, when it got a bit too cold in the conservatory, we couldn't go out in there because it was dripping wet half the time. Yeah, no when it is raining ... we couldn't go out there, so we mainly used the [kitchen] island.

However, the background noise produced by kitchen appliances was often highlighted as a challenge to studying; again, emphasising the importance of quiet for alone time study from the perspective of children:

I: So, why was the kitchen important to you?

C11M: Just because it was a space where no one else really went in because ... unless they were making a cup of tea, which is extremely loud, it was usually quite easy to work here except the whole room shakes when the washing machine is going.

C11F: [During online learning] whenever I unmuted, you could just hear the washing machine running behind me, which makes everything shake.

Whether animate or inanimate, sources of noise were prominent in children's accounts of disturbance. Children therefore valued peaceful spaces, free of sources of distraction and disturbance, enabling concentration for study.

Agency

Controlled space

Both children and teenagers sought spaces for alone time that they could control for a variety of purposes, enabling a sense of agency. A six-year-old girl discussed how control over her own bedroom allowed her to restrict her 'destructive' younger brother's access so she could enjoy alone time for play. Defending alone time for study proved much more problematic among those sharing a bedroom, some of whom expressed their desire to control how space was occupied by whom:

C13F: I would have made dad have his own office, and [C6F] have her own space, in her own room that she always stays in ...

The desire to control space for alone time also emerged in relation to shared areas, even if that was not always possible:

I: How did you feel about your little space there in the living room?

C13F: It was really nice until somebody wanted to come and watch TV, or someone was on break, and they just needed to sit down.

Often, it was revealed through adult accounts that a child's lack of control over alone space for study was driven by the adult's desire to check on the child:

A41M: It also worked quite nicely because the dining room is in the middle of one door to the living room, of the other door is the kitchen. So, we were sort of between.

C11M: So, did you want to keep watching me that much?

A41M: Yeah, we did.

Adult limitation of children's agency did not tend to emerge in children's own accounts, but became particularly apparent through dialogue exploring the use of common areas for studying:

I: Yes, so then why did you need to go to move from your bedroom to the kitchen?

C12F: Doing it for the whole day and I think that we have like all our sort of sheets printed out. We had all the pens down here. We just had sort of like more things out there that we needed.

A41F: [...] you really needed that control 'cause I needed to see that you were doing it. Yeah, I really want to make sure she was doing it 'cause otherwise she's upstairs. Well, you have to know.

As well as being driven by the desire to make sure that tasks were done, adult restrictions over the child's use of alone spaces were fuelled by fears over internet safety. As parents are often responsible for balancing the benefits of online learning against internet risks (Willett 2017), the child's bedroom becomes the space where parental anxieties about internet threats are played out (Facer and Furlong 2001), and control of internet access in the child's bedroom is exercised according to normative expectations of good parenting (Livingstone 2007). Often, for children, agency to use their bedroom for alone time was restricted by parents in relation to the use of internet devices:

A44F: But you weren't working there because you were absolutely not allowed to have ... The rule is no internet and devices in bedrooms.

I: And why do you choose watching in the kitchen?

C10F: 'cause it's an easier place to sit.

A44F: We discourage [C10F] from bringing her tablet to her room. Uh-huh we prefer she's with us when she's watching things.

Having a degree of control over space and its use in the family home matters to children's family relations and constructions of togetherness, because it has been shown to help them feel 'at home' (Wilson, Houmøller, and Bernays 2012). Here, the findings show how children and teenagers valued space they could *control* in the creation of their alone time because it allowed them to set boundaries and exclude other family members. Nevertheless, children's agency over alone space often conflicted with parental anxieties over internet safety.

Space to shape, space to choose

Building makeshift dens was common practice for alone play and leisure, either within common areas or in children's bedrooms, allowing children and teenagers to choose the size, shape and quality of the space created:

C13F: Oh yeah [...] I can like put up cushions and things and make a little den there [in my room], because there is a charger there and the bookshelf and stuff like that.

C10F: Yeah. Yeah, that's my ultimate favourite [making dens].

I: Where was the best; tell me about the best you've made.

C10F: Well. I used to make them with the chairs with like a blanket when I had my single bed. I had like these drawers and stuff, and I made a massive den, and I slept in it.

I: That's interesting, how do you do that [make your den]?

CF10: Well, I had a blanket. Yeah. The edge of the bed. From the top.

Outbuildings were also discussed by children as places they could shape to their own needs:

C10F: Yeah. And so, the smaller shed was sort of my play shared storage sort of shed and it was a lot tidier than ... so you could sit in it then. So, I did spend a bit of time in there ...

Dowling and Power's study of the negotiation of togetherness in the family home highlights the opportunities for separateness that large houses present 'through the provision of excessive space' (2012, 616), such as multiple living spaces. A twelve-year-old girl with two younger siblings reflected on the choice of spaces available to her, including her own bedroom:

C12F: I think it depends what type of homework I have. Like when I sort of have like my computer work, I probably come down and do it more like in the kitchen. [...] But when I sort of had like writing down homework, I'd do it in my room.

Having multiple *spaces to choose* from increased children's agency over their alone time. On the other hand, when choice was limited, children often *shaped spaces* by building makeshift dens to create a room-within-a-room.

Ownership

'My room'

A child's bedroom is often portrayed as the first home space that children claim as their own, allowing them to articulate their identities (Adcock 2015). Children and teenagers interviewed had expectations about claiming ownership of their own space within the home. This allowed them to feel safe and relaxed:

I: So, why is this room so important to you?

C14M: Well, because I can have all the space, I want ... like, if I don't have any mess to clean up.

I: How did you feel about it?

C14M: How I felt about the room?

I: Yes, how do you feel about the room like ... how do you feel when you are in your room?

C14M: I feel pretty, very happy in my room. [...] Yeah, I always relax in my room.

I: Where is your favourite place in your house?

C5F: My room

It was notable that ownership of the bedroom space for some children with special educational needs extended its importance beyond the most commonplace alone time activities, such as study, play and leisure, to also encompass everyday activities such as eating, thus making the child's bedroom territory their primary living space during lockdown. This resonates with the notion that children's bedrooms must be understood not just as deeply related to the other spaces in the home, but also to children's individual and familial circumstances (Lincoln 2014):

I: I mean, I can probably guess, but could you tell me your [seventeen-year-old] daughter's favourite place and how she used it?

A54F: Yeah, her bedroom itself. She used it for everything: for chatting to her boyfriend in [another place], for playing games on her phone or the iPad, for her home schoolwork when it was lockdown. Yeah, for everything – for eating, for sleeping.

Space for 'my stuff'

Children and teenagers use belongings to set boundaries and recognition within relations with other family members (Palludan and Winther 2017). Talking through the drawing and text she had prepared, a ten-year-old girl explained why her bedroom was her favourite place during lockdown: for her, a place of her own was a place for her 'stuff':

C10F: [...] I liked having all my stuff with me [...] And then there's a picture of me saying, 'This area is mine. Knock, knock'.

Belongings not only worked as territorial marks to claim ownership over a space, but they also made teenagers feel at ease in that space:

C13F: I mean I use my windowsill quite a lot because I used it to keep a bunch of little trinkets and like, shells and crystals and things I found ... rocks ... just lots of little things. I always like to look out of my window just ... Out there, to people watch.

Research indicates that children suffer the efforts required to negotiate alone time for study on a regular basis through tiresome strategies (Christensen 2002). In our findings, children complained about the busy to-and-fro of moving their belongings when their space for alone study was not their own:

I: If you had a magic wand and you could change anything in your house, what would you have changed?

C10F: My own sort of space. Having a designated office space, I could work in. So, I didn't have to store everything away from the desk.

I: Where would that be? Would that be a different room or a space in your bedroom?

C10F: It would be a different room preferably. So, I could sort of spread everything, all my books around me, instead of crammed into that little desk I had.

Both children's and teenagers' accounts therefore reflected both their practical and their psychological needs for ownership of alone space. While a space of one's own was identified by children as meeting their need for *more* space to store, arrange and easily access their 'stuff', they also created special places of their own for alone time through the positioning of their own valued items.

Restoration

Space to retreat

Children and teenagers sought the restorative effects of separation from others, particularly following the intensity and duration of sharing space during lockdown. An only child's bedroom often offered the desired *space to retreat*, affording the experience of restoration:

C12F: Favourite places, probably my room [...] 'cause it was like an alone place. 'Cause, I mean, nobody was up there, it was just like 'cause, I mean, we've been in the kitchen all day working there like our whole family. It was actually nice to get some alone time.

A mother described how important it was for her nine-year-old daughter to shut her bedroom door, away from her parents and five-year-old brother, and have time out from family interaction:

A41F: You have to speak up sweetheart, remember, OK? Yeah, they did play in there quite nicely and together quite a lot, but I think [to C9F] it was also quite important for you to be able to go in there and shut that door for a little while. Wasn't it?

'Shutting the door', and retreating from others, was more difficult for children sharing a bedroom with their sibling:

C11F: I did think ... because occasionally ... I mean, I have my privacy but then sometimes, like my [nine-year-old] sister would come in and ...

Even siblings who were very close, like this thirteen-year-old girl and her eleven-year-old brother, expressed the need for space to retreat during their day to restore their well-being:

I: OK, so were there any rooms or spaces that you found particularly challenging?

C13F: Our bedroom [...] We have bunk beds because we're living in my grandparents' house and then we also have really close proximity, so also stuck together.

A44F: Having spent all day together and then having to go to bed. Always the standard 'she poked me, 'he hit me', 'She stole my teddy bear' 'She's breathed heavily in my direction', 'my sock's gone' – it was definitely worse.

Even for young children, a space to retreat brought a freedom from worry about others, enabling carefree play, fun and creative activity:

C6F: what I would say about my bedroom is that I have loads of toys that I just play with and do my crafts. Yeah, there's a nice peaceful place. I didn't have anybody to worry about [...] I can just play my games and have fun.

Although children tended to favour the retreat afforded by their own bedroom, the routine of lock-down would create feelings of boredom or monotony. In these cases, another aspect of children's restoration needs – i.e. tackling boredom – was met through the act of retreating to a new space. Children therefore sought retreat in unusual 'get away' places, such as the bathroom:

C12F: It's really weird. So, like I'd sit in there and I don't know, watch, or just go through social media 'cause you know ...

A41F: She uses the bathroom [to go through] social media.

C12F: It's just, it's just nice.

C7F: She puts the lid down and sits on the toilet.

C12F: That was it because, I don't know[...] it's like too cramped, but just sitting down. I don't know 'cause I think I got bored of my room ...

Whilst alone time is important for children to cope with the 'emotional tensions' of family life (Christensen, James, and Jenks 2000, 149), the findings show that both children and teenagers also value *space to retreat*: having the space as well as the time to move away from others emerges as an important part of children's alone time as a restorative process.

Sensory space

Our senses are not just a way to take in the materiality of the home, but a means to establish a sense of self within the family's social relations (Sou and Webber 2023). Finding a quiet, yet sensory, 'get away' space was also used by children and teenagers as a coping mechanism to deal with the lockdown's intensity of being together all the time:

C11F: In the old house, the best place for me ... we had this really old oak tree, at the back of the ... like in the drive and there ... barely anybody would go out into drive and it's quiet and above it actually you could hear blue tits and robins.

I: That's really nice.

C11F: It was really nice.

I: What did you do there? Why would you go to the tree?

C11F: Just sat there and I listened to birds because being inside with four people, it's a bit frustrating [...]

Being able to connect from the indoors to the surrounding environment through views often made windows and their nearby areas into special places for children. A ten-year-old girl with no siblings enjoyed spending quiet time by herself in the front room, where she could watch the outside:

I: And is it a good comfy room?

C10F: Yeah, and it's much bigger. There is not a noise. And I can see if there's anything going on outside.

The 'rhythmic affordances' of familiar sounds can shape 'where and when one feels at home' (Sou and Webber 2023, 951). This was commented upon in relation to window areas which were enjoyed for the experience of relaxing sounds, or even the warmth of the sunlight; another of the 'intangible materialities' of the home (Soaita and McKee 2021). The nooks created by dormer windows or window seats were particularly cherished:

C13F: It's just like a nice place to sit and look out. So now I will move my chair there and just sit and look out and think or read and ... I love sitting in my room when it's raining. It sounds amazing! Rain and like sound of candles is like my favourite sounds.

I: OK, did you use the window like this ... Did it have this importance for you before lockdown?

C13F: Yeah, it was just a nice place to go and look out. When it's like sunny and nice I can just look out, when it's night I can go look at the stars, when it's like dull and rainy I like looking at the clouds and all snow and the birds, something like that.

I: [...] you said you like to relax at the windowsill.

C10F: Yeah, so in the old house I didn't actually have the windows [like] now and I used to sit on my desk, but I have this window seat like, like, the window goes outwards and there's like a seat on it, and I like to sit there and doodle and like, doodle and stuff.

These findings resonate with previous work highlighting that children construct places in the home for themselves through both spatial and sensory experience (Wilson, Houmøller, and Bernays 2012). This has been conceptualised as the 'sensory home', encompassing both material and (temporary) sensory experiences (Pink 2003; Sou and Webber 2023). When children and teenagers sought alone time to experience *restoration*, they not only valued having a *space to retreat* but also valued the *sensory* dimension of such space.

Conclusion

By drawing on the perspectives of children and teenagers themselves, this study challenges the existing adult-centred understandings of alone time and togetherness in the family home. The family home is primarily conceived as an adult geography, where adults construct togetherness through time spent with children. Children, however, view togetherness as encompassing both time spent with family and time spent on their own, as they value the sense of independence and emotional relief afforded by voluntary alone time. Different understandings of togetherness underlie parental rules over the use of time and space by children, resulting in spatial negotiation of together and alone time. Nevertheless, children's agency over negotiation of alone time is interdependent with the space of the house and with the family relations within it, as the children's and teenagers' voices presented in this article have shown. In order to challenge current adult-centred understandings of alone time, this article asked three fundamental questions:

Why do children seek time and space alone in the family home? The findings have revealed a complex layering of experiences sought by both children and teenagers through alone time, each of which is negotiated spatially. It is, therefore, the combined time *and* space to be voluntarily alone that offer both children and teenagers four core experiences, here identified as *privacy*, *agency*, *ownership*, and *restoration*. These core experiences are key aspects of children's geographies of home that have received little attention.

What are the spatial dimensions that children value to support their alone time needs in the family home? First, the need for *privacy*, understood by the children and teenagers in this study in two distinct ways: as avoiding observation and also avoiding disturbance. Children seeking privacy valued *contained* space, which enabled a clear separation and containment of the different worlds in which they operated (home, school, friendship) by preventing other family member's observation and participation. Children also valued *undisturbed spaces* – quiet, peaceful spaces without noise and other activity where they could focus. Second, *agency*, as related to both control and choice over space. Adults' fears, anxieties and good parenting ideals were reflected in their strategies to limit children's free choice of space used for studying and for using internet. However, children and teenagers seeking agency valued alone time space which they could *control*, *shape*, and *choose*. Third, *space ownership*. Children and teenagers clearly valued a sense of having '*my room*' during alone time and they also valued having enough space within, for '*my stuff*'. Children's and teenagers' valued belongings were also used as territorial markers to create and to claim alone time space. Fourth, *restoration*, understood in terms of restoring a sense of well-being. Sometimes the simple act of removing oneself from others, having spent enough, or too much, time together, was the motivating factor for time spent alone: 'It was actually nice to get some alone time'. Spaces to *retreat* were therefore valued by children and teenagers simply for the absence of others, while

sensory space enhanced the restorative effects of alone space through the positive sensory experiences that they afforded. These experiences resonate with Christensen, James and Jenks' meaning of alone time for children – namely growing independence and managing emotions – illustrating how children seek to experience alone time spatially in the family home.

Finally, what is children's role in creating family togetherness? This study offers new knowledge about how both children and teenagers strive to carve 'alone time' out of 'family time' as an essential dimension of children's understanding of togetherness (Christensen 2002). The article contributes new understanding by exposing how the spatial dimensions of four core experiences (privacy, agency, ownership, and restoration) that children and teenagers seek through alone time in the family home allow them to build their place within the family and navigate its social relations.

Through discussion of children's and teenagers' own perspectives, this article offers new thinking about the positive motivations behind children's everyday spatial negotiation of voluntary alone time, as well as the associated spatial dimensions that children value. The findings suggest that adults' well-meaning spatial strategies for controlling children's alone time can potentially undermine children's capacity to negotiate space for their own well-being. Similarly, the findings suggest that the physical spaces of the 'house' as family home can either limit or afford possibilities for children and teenagers to find, appropriate, inhabit or create suitable alone time space.

The reliance on the bedroom as the child's primary alone space perhaps reflects the child's desire to create their own space within the home, but it also reflects a scarcity of provision of other suitable options in most family housing design. With an emphasis on open-plan living areas in contemporary family housing, there is a risk that the alone time needs of children – especially those who share bedrooms – are overlooked. This has well-being implications for children, as well as for adult family members, and will continue to hinder learning for those children without a suitable space to study (Yeeles et al. 2020). The UK's housing overcrowding standards also neglect the alone time needs of children. The 'room standard' defines a home as being overcrowded when two individuals above nine years of age of opposite sex (except partners) sleep in the same room 'available as sleeping accommodation'.⁷ Thus, the statutory standard expects any child under 10 years of age to share a room for sleeping, despite the potential for *some* children to experience negative well-being impacts. Furthermore, any person above nine years old and of the same sex as another, is expected to share a room for sleeping (Housing Act 1985 2005). Children and teenagers can therefore find themselves sharing a bedroom – either with each other or with an adult – for many years, in small, densely occupied homes without alternative alone time space in living areas. Although our findings showed that some children found places to be alone temporarily in living areas, outbuildings or within dens that they created themselves, such alternatives are not always available.

In sum, this research not only fundamentally challenges adult-centred constructions of family togetherness, but it also demonstrates how a focus on children's and teenager's perspectives can set a new agenda for housing policy and design, opening major new avenues for examining the suitability of contemporary family housing for children's and teenagers' well-being needs.

Notes

1. Where children were defined as being under 18 years old.
2. The study followed both Newcastle University's and Dundee University's ethics guidelines and received ethical approval from Newcastle University Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Panel [Ref: 9317/2020]. Information sheets and consent forms were provided via online communication. Participants 14+ years old were sent a digital information sheet and asked to complete a secure digital consent form. A tailored version of the information sheet was designed for children under 14 years old and adults were prompted to discuss its contents with their children before providing written consent for their child's participation. Children were then asked at the start and during the interviews for their verbal consent to take part, following the principle of ongoing consent. The interviews began with a further explanation of the project and a reiteration that all participants could withdraw from the interview at any time.
3. March to June 2020, November – December 2020 and January – March 2021. The UK government instructed citizens to stay within the limits of their home and garden, work from home if possible and avoid contact with

other households. Schools were closed to children, other than those of keyworkers, and teaching moved online. People were allowed to leave their home once per day for essential shopping or exercise.

4. The observation above regarding adult limitations on children's agency in the home extends to the child's interview space. Being online, in the home, in the presence of adults, the interview responses will have been affected by adult presence, potentially limiting the findings presented. The choice to include some parents' voices responds to a desire to acknowledge adults' limitations on children's agency. Booklets were rarely returned and are not drawn upon directly in this article, although one child refers to their drawing in one of the quoted interview extracts.
5. Photographs have not been included in the paper since they were not intended to provide data, only support the generation of rich verbal data. Photographs were optional – many families did not provide any.
6. These are drawn from either the family group context or the children's separate session at the end of the interview. Adult voices are therefore also included in the extracts where these were part of a shared response and/or dialogue with the child during the interview.
7. e.g. either bedroom or living room

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in data.ncl at 10.25405/data.ncl.20223534.

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