



**Bloorview**  
KIDS REHAB

*From disability to possibility*



ONTARIO  
ASSOCIATION  
OF CHILDREN'S  
REHABILITATION  
SERVICES

# Accessible Housing: An issue of health

In Canada, there are approximately 4.4 million people with disabilities.<sup>1</sup> There are more than 20,000 low-income families caring for severely disabled children across Canada. One third of young children with disabilities are in families living below Statistics Canada's low-income cut-off.<sup>2</sup>

When you consider these numbers, and recognize that research shows that having a child with a disability is inextricably linked with family poverty, it is no surprise that families with children with disabilities are overrepresented in their need for affordable housing.

## Disability = fewer Housing Options

From a health care perspective, the lack of affordable housing that meets the needs of our families is particularly alarming. Research shows a clear link between appropriate and accessible housing and positive health and social outcomes. Good quality housing is essential for the healthy development of children because the home is the environment in which pre-adolescent children spend most of their time.<sup>3-6</sup> Canadian surveys suggest that 63 per cent of the homes of children with disabilities lack the necessary ramps, elevators, automatic doors and accessible doorways.<sup>7</sup>

Most children with disabilities live in smaller homes with fewer amenities and resources than other Canadians because their extraordinary care requirements restrict parental employment and increase expenditures.<sup>7,8</sup> Given the irrefutable links between appropriate housing and health and social outcomes, **the time for action is now.**

International research shows that people with disabilities have fewer housing options than the general public.<sup>9</sup> Like everyone else, this group deserves a range of options when it comes to their housing opportunities.

Housing challenges are multi-faceted for low-income families with children with disabilities. Three main categories exist:

1. Families in need of social housing
2. Families in private rentals
3. Families who own their own home, but need renovations to make it more accessible

The health and social outcomes for children with disabilities and their families are affected by the homes they live in.

*"There are so many added expenses to raising a child with a disability, it makes owning our own home almost impossible"*

— parent who has been waiting more than 10 years for social housing

## Appropriate Housing = positive health and social outcomes

Participation is defined as the nature and extent of involvement in life situations, which is critical to the quality of life for children with disabilities and their families. Low participation rates have been linked to inaccessible housing, public buildings, and parks and playgrounds.<sup>10-13</sup> Children living in lower-quality housing also have greater psychological distress, poorer school performance and fewer play opportunities.<sup>4,14</sup> Fewer opportunities for play and physical activities lead to high rates of obesity, cardiovascular and respiratory problems as well as decreased functional capacities.<sup>15-21</sup>

## Having appropriate housing is essential for:

- **Promoting independence for children with disabilities:** Having the appropriate equipment and enough space to be able to maneuver allows children to learn independence.
- **The health of the family:** Having a home that meets the needs of the family is crucial for the health of each family member, as noise and overcrowding negatively affect mental health.
- **A healthy family dynamic:** Having enough bedrooms to accommodate each family member's privacy needs is important to maintaining strong relationships, and appropriate development of all children, including the child with special needs.<sup>22-24</sup>
- **The safety of the parents and children:** Inaccessibility and not having access to appropriate equipment poses serious safety risks for both the parents and children.
- **Social Inclusion:** Giving children the opportunity to move around their homes and be included in family activities is beneficial for self-esteem and is essential for the healthy development of children.

*“Every time there’s a fire drill in our building I have to carry my child down several flights of stairs – it’s very dangerous, for my child and for myself.”*

– concerned parent

## Social housing needs for families with children with disabilities:

- Units with more and larger bedrooms – Wait lists for larger accessible units are far too long
- Accessible units – Many families are living in two-storey units with stairs and the bathroom is typically on the top level
- Larger/wider units - Washrooms, halls, bedrooms and doorways are too narrow and families face safety concerns due to lack of accessibility
- Quality homes in safe neighbourhoods - some children with disabilities may be more vulnerable to abuse due to an inability to defend themselves or communicate in a crisis
- Reasonable wait times – Some families are waiting 10 years and beyond for accessible affordable housing

## What can be done:

- Recognize families with children with disabilities as a unique and important group that requires special consideration.
- Consider families with children with disabilities a Special Priority Household Category in the Social Housing Reform Act for all Ontarians.
- Adopt a principle of accessibility for any renovations or new buildings which is in line with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act.
- Tax breaks should be provided for families needing to renovate their homes.
- Improve access to funding for renovations.

*“I wish I could help my mom out more and be more independent. There isn’t enough room in our apartment for me to maneuver my wheelchair and do things by myself”*

– 16 year old boy living in a single parent household



## About Bloorview:

Bloorview Kids Rehab (Bloorview) is Canada’s largest children’s rehabilitation hospital. Our vision is to create a world of possibility for kids with disability.

We pioneer treatments, technologies, therapies and real-world programs that give children with disabilities the tools to participate fully in life.

Bloorview serves about 7,000 children each year, with about 600 inpatient admissions and 52,000 outpatient visits. Bloorview is a world-class teaching hospital fully affiliated with the University of Toronto. We train future health-care specialists in the field of childhood disability. The Bloorview Research Institute is located onsite, allowing us to integrate cutting-edge research and teaching with frontline care to improve children’s quality of life.

## About OACRS:

OACRS, the Ontario Association of Children's Rehabilitation Services, is a non-profit, independent organization that represents 20 children's treatment centres across Ontario. Non-profit and community-based, children's treatment centres serve about 65,000 children and youth with disabilities, and their families.

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