



# Productive Housing: Achieving a Balance Between Work and Care Duties

**A conceptual framework on the connections between productive housing, caregivers, and childhood.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

A productive home is one in which the family, in addition to living there, carries out economic activities. This conceptual framework analyzes the relationship between work conducted within the home and the well-being of children and adolescents. The analysis identifies mechanisms through which the productive use of the home can influence child well-being, linked to the reorganization of caregiving, time use, household economic stability, the autonomy of caregivers, and everyday family dynamics.

**Keywords:** productive housing, home-based work, childhood, adolescence, women, gender, Latin America and the Caribbean, literature review, health, education.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The understanding of housing in Latin America and the Caribbean has changed considerably in recent decades. The concept of home has shifted from merely a living space to a multifaceted ecosystem in which domestic life, caregiving, and income-generating activities converge (Montes Ruiz, Arias Laurino, & Barriendos, 2026; Habitat for Humanity, 2025). This idea, called productive housing, involves using all or part of a living space for economic activities. It functions as a practical and resilient approach to addressing the exclusion of many individuals from formal jobs and the prevalence of urban informality (Tipple, 2005; Chen & Sinha, 2016). Having both productive and reproductive roles within the same household is not neutral; it generates structural tensions that affect household members in different ways, significantly impacting children, adolescents, and the long-term well-being of women caregivers (Tipple, 2005; Montes Ruiz et al., 2026).

**Productive housing: A household where families live and carry out economic activities.**

Organizations engaged in habitat development need to adopt a highly technical approach to productive housing programs, going beyond merely providing physical infrastructure. Balancing revenue needs with children's right to a safe, healthy environment is essential to prevent unintentional harm (UNICEF, 2025). Simultaneously, these programs should include a gender perspective that questions the feminization of responsibility and prevents placing an undue burden on women by integrating household tasks (Montes Ruiz et al., 2026).

**It is crucial to adopt a perspective that balances revenue needs with the rights of children and adolescents, while also incorporating a gender perspective that challenges the feminization of responsibility. This approach ensures that household work does not lead to excessive overload and multidimensional strain on women.**

Productive housing is a notable phenomenon, with approximately 16.6 million people in the region adapting their homes to manage care responsibilities while engaging in diverse economic activities, such as retail trade and artisanal manufacturing (Habitat for Humanity, 2025). This approach has emerged as a vital strategy for strengthening the economic resilience of households in vulnerable environments (Bonnet et al., 2021). The technical literature indicates that this practice offers both benefits and potential risks. The next chapters will explore both aspects.

## 2. PRODUCTIVE HOUSING AND ITS IMPACTS ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Evidence shows that household income significantly influences child development, with higher income associated with improved neonatal health and cognitive outcomes, especially in low-income families (Cooper and Stewart, 2021). In this context, productive housing acts as a resource booster that can enhance human capital. However, when housing insecurity is severe, the primary negative effects are on physical health and educational development (Sacone da Silva Ferreira et al., 2019). This situation encourages housing organizations to rethink architectural designs and support programs with a focus on rights.

### 2.1 Main benefits for children and women caregivers

Although income generation is a key way in which productive housing impacts children's and adolescents' well-being, it doesn't fully capture the complexity of its effects. Beyond its economic aspect, the productive use of housing units alters the organization of time, the use of domestic space, and family relationships. These changes can have indirect effects that impact child well-being through channels outside household income.

#### 2.1.1 More supervision at home

Research on family systems and parental absence shows that the lack of a daily caregiver correlates with reduced socio-emotional and educational well-being among children and adolescents. This link is influenced by family system instability, less supervision, and weaker attachment bonds.

These effects result in heightened psychological stress, anxiety, and depression, along with difficulties in emotional regulation and forming stable emotional bonds. They also lead to lower academic achievement, a greater risk of falling behind in school, and challenges in continuing education. Conversely, greater involvement and presence of the adult caregiver in daily household responsibilities can mitigate these negative outcomes by improving supervision, offering emotional support, and better managing children's schedules (Langlais, Chacón, & Brazer, 2024; Albanese, Russo, & Geller, 2019).

Other studies show that children and adolescents are more prone to risk behaviors – like skipping school, using substances, and delinquency – when they lack adult supervision at home, regardless of family income. In this setting, daily adult presence serves as a protective factor across all income levels by reducing risk-taking and promoting more stable developmental pathways (Aizer, 2002).

**In this sense, productive housing could act as a strategy to increase adult presence (especially mothers) in the home, which might indirectly enhance daily supervision and child support in highly vulnerable situations. This approach differs from other types of employment that require the primary caregiver to be away for extended periods.**

### 2.1.2 Economic stability

Evidence shows that the level and stability of income during childhood influence children's long-term development. Specifically, greater household income instability during childhood is associated with poorer educational outcomes in adulthood, particularly a higher risk of dropping out of school, a pattern primarily observed among children from lower-income backgrounds.

Although the estimated magnitudes are moderate and smaller than those of permanent income effects, the findings indicate that early economic instability can impact key aspects of human capital development. This suggests that households with a greater capacity to withstand economic shocks offer more stable conditions for child development (Hardy, 2014). Similarly, economic instability at home can affect a child's well-being by disrupting family routines, increasing parental stress, and creating more chaotic home environments. These factors disrupt supervision, consistent caregiving, and children's self-regulation, especially in low-income households (Hill et al., 2013).

From this perspective, productive housing is seen as a way to boost household economic resilience by supporting the maintenance or diversification of income sources during shocks. This helps lessen children's and adolescents' exposure to environments impacted by ongoing economic instability.

### 2.1.3 Enhancing the psychological well-being and self-efficacy of mothers and caregivers

Research in psychology and child development indicates that a mother's or caregiver's well-being and perceived parenting competence greatly influence the development of children and adolescents. A review of existing studies shows that greater parental self-efficacy is associated with reduced stress and depression among mothers and caregivers, as well as more responsive and consistent parenting (Albanese, Russo, & Geller, 2019).

Moreover, greater maternal self-efficacy is associated with less reliance on coercive or ineffective discipline methods and encourages warmer, more organized interactions with children. Conversely, lower self-efficacy correlates with increased parental stress and a higher likelihood of problematic parenting behaviors (Sanders and Woolley, 2005). These mechanisms connect caregivers' psychological well-being and self-efficacy to better socioemotional and behavioral outcomes in children, such as improved emotion regulation and reduced behavioral problems.

In this sense, productive housing can indirectly influence a child's well-being by changing the everyday conditions

where mothers and caregivers both work and care for children. Reducing commuting times and offering more flexibility in daily schedules can enhance parents' sense of control over their time and routines. This, in turn, boosts parental self-efficacy and alleviates stress related to balancing work and family responsibilities (López Estrada, 2002; Wagemann, Maynard & Simons, 2024; Doering & Liu, 2019). However, this relationship is not automatic: in situations of housing precariousness, the overlap of productive, domestic, and caregiving activities can heighten women's workload, limit rest, and elevate physical and emotional stress, thereby diminishing these positive effects (Verrest & Post, 2007; Floro & Pichetpongsa, 2010; Wagemann et al., 2024).

Productive housing can act as a practical alternative to work flexibility, enabling mothers to adjust their work and caregiving schedules from home.

“The biggest change for me is that now I am happy at work.”



Participant in Habitat for Humanity Paraguay's Productive Housing Project, 2021.

### 2.1.4. Autonomy, decision-making authority, and reduced intra-family violence

Women's increased economic independence and decision-making ability are linked to lower exposure to domestic violence. This happens due to greater bargaining power within the household and less financial reliance on their partner (Lemaitre et al., 2014). Similarly, domestic violence directly affects the well-being of children and adolescents, resulting in higher levels of chronic stress, mental health problems, social-emotional difficulties, and poorer educational outcomes (Corral-Verdugo et al., 2010; Corral-Verdugo et al., 2011).

Productive housing can indirectly improve the well-being of children and adolescents by empowering women caregivers with greater economic independence and decision-making power, enabling them to earn income from home and reducing reliance on external structures. This greater autonomy can enhance bargaining power within the household and reduce exposure to intrafamily violence, promoting safer and more stable environments for children's development (Doering & Liu, 2019; Wagemann, Maynard & Simons, 2024).

### 2.1.5. Enhanced autonomy and more informed reproductive choices.

Research indicates that greater labor autonomy influences women's reproductive choices, such as when they start having children and the probability of having multiple children.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper examines potential negative impacts of productive housing, mainly in informal environments, where housing is precarious or lacks support or necessary adaptations. This distinction is consistently preserved throughout the analysis, covering both the physical and socioemotional health and well-being dimension and the education and skills development dimension

Specifically, managing working hours and conditions influences reproductive continuity—either delaying or accelerating it—by alleviating tensions between work and caregiving, depending on the life-cycle stage (Osiewalska and Matysiak, 2025).

Evidence indicates that work environments that promote work-family balance, especially through flexible work arrangements, are associated with higher intentions to have children, particularly a second child. Conversely, benefits that provide only care services do not significantly affect these intentions (Juni and Vitali, 2025). Because the timing of pregnancy and the stability of maternal employment influence the environment where children are born and grow, these findings imply a substantial indirect link between working conditions and child well-being.

This suggests an indirect route by which activities associated with housing units could affect reproductive decisions and the early developmental conditions of children.

## 2.2 Potential risks associated with productive housing units that are in unsafe conditions and unaccompanied individuals<sup>1</sup>

### 2.2.1 Health and well-being, encompassing both physical and social-emotional aspects

Evidence indicates that productive housing can negatively affect the health of children and adolescents through direct and indirect pathways.





Indirect impacts include childcare stress from overlapping work and domestic duties, which results in a decrease in the quality of care (Mehrotra and Biggeri, 2007). Moreover, turning the home into a workshop raises environmental and safety issues by reducing living space and handling toxic or hazardous materials (Mehrotra and Biggeri, 2007). In Pakistan, nearly all children in these environments were reported to suffer from production-related illnesses (Mehrotra and Biggeri, 2010). In contrast, in Brazil, exposure to contamination was observed even without the child's direct involvement (Sacone da Silva Ferreira et al., 2019). Furthermore, dividing adult care increases awareness of household accidents, such as falls and burns (WIEGO, 2016). Additionally, working from home directly impacts adolescents' socioemotional well-being by significantly decreasing their sleep and leisure time (Pereira et al., 2020).

#### 2.1.4 Education and skills development

Productive work within the housing unit generally harms educational paths (Mehrotra and Biggeri, 2007; 2010; Doane, 2007). One direct consequence is an increased risk of child labor, facilitated by the immediate access to and the flexible nature of household chores (Mehrotra and Biggeri 2010). ILO estimates suggest that when adults are employed in the housing unit, the probability increases in low- and middle-income countries (ILO, 2021). However, qualitative research shows that this relationship is not guaranteed and varies with context; in some cases, participation can be sporadic and informal, such as in retail trade (Tipple, 2005).

The increased workload indirectly heightens the risk of poor performance or dropping out of school (Mehrotra and Biggeri 2010). These effects reveal significant gender disparities, primarily affecting older girls who assume sibling-care duties to enable their mothers to work full-time (Mehrotra and Biggeri, 2007). This reallocation limits their chances for skill development and exacerbates intergenerational poverty (Mehrotra and Biggeri, 2007; 2010; Doane, 2007). Finally, the literature distinguishes between less intense and more risky forms of participation; while higher income can encourage schooling, increasing productivity without adequate safeguards could lead to a higher demand for child and adolescent labor (Dammert et al., 2018).

Summary of the main benefits and potential adverse effects of productive housing for women and children, according to key dimensions

Dimension	Potential benefits of productive housing		Adverse effects of productive housing <i>If adequate support is not provided</i>	
	For women	For children and adolescents	For women	For children and adolescents
<b>Economic stability</b> 	<b>Minimized revenue fluctuations</b> Stress relief, increased job satisfaction, and greater community acknowledgment.	<b>Improved educational stability and nutrition</b> It boosts income, enhances educational stability, and promotes greater investment in health and nutrition (Cooper and Stewart, 2021).	<b>Informality</b> Dependence on unreliable local markets and lack of social protection (Tipple, 2005).	<b>Potential increase in child labor and school absences</b> An increased likelihood of working, whether or not it involves combining work and school, also reduces the quality of leisure time and sleep (Mehrotra Biggeri 2010).
<b>Time management</b> 	<b>Decreased commuting time</b> Flexibility in balancing work and caregiving boosts caregivers' self-efficacy.	<b>More supervision at home</b> Adult involvement serves as a protective factor by reducing risky behaviors and promoting more stable development through greater emotional support and better time management (Aizer, 2002).	<b>Overlap of working days</b> Combining housing and employment may lead to overlapping shifts and severe caregiver burnout, potentially worsening gender role disparities (Montes Ruiz et al. 2026).	<b>Decrease in rest</b> This type of work has detrimental effects on sleep and leisure time (Pereira et al., 2020).
<b>Spatial organization</b> 	<b>Improves service availability and supports a sustainable city</b> Enhancing land use in informal settlements through the expansion of neighborhood-scale services (Tipple, 2005)	<b>Improves service availability and supports a sustainable city</b> Enhancing land use in informal settlements through the expansion of neighborhood-scale services (Tipple, 2005)	<b>Possible functional overcrowding</b> Coexistence of hazardous materials and housing uses (Mehrotra and Biggeri, 2007)	<b>Risks related to contamination or accidents</b> More insecurity by reducing the space destined for domestic life and introducing inputs, chemicals, fumes, or other hazardous materials linked to productive activities (Mehrotra and Biggeri, 2007).
<b>Autonomy</b> 	<b>Less economic dependence</b> Generating own revenue and strengthening bargaining power (Doering and Liu, 2019).	<b>Gradual engagement</b> It helps the child develop practical knowledge of tools, languages, and professional expectations. (Universidad Pontificia del Perú, 2017.)	<b>Economic poverty</b> The feminization of poverty will continue unless care responsibilities are shared more equally (Montes Ruiz et al., 2026).	<b>Perceptions of gender roles</b> Children observe their parents working and, in doing so, not only learn technical skills but also absorb the "gender-related responsibilities" and insecurities associated with the labor market. (Beach y Mikats, 2026).

### 3. Strategic recommendations for housing organizations and institutions.

To execute effective child protection projects, a housing organization should adopt proactive risk management (Oxfam, 2023; UNICEF, 2026) and focus on recognizing and addressing structural inequalities, especially the “feminization of responsibility” (Montes Ruiz et al., 2026).

The following recommendations, categorized by area of action, can help achieve the potential benefits and mitigate the risks identified earlier.

#### 3.1 Architectural design and physical security considerations

**Visibility and passive supervision:** The design should enable observation of children from the work area without requiring them to enter the workshop (Montes Ruiz et al., 2026; Álvarez, 2023).

**Environmental risk mitigation:** It is mandatory to perform lead screening tests and ensure cross-ventilation systems in workshops to dissipate Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) (Sacone da Silva Ferreira et al., 2019).

**Electrical installations:** The workshop should include independent circuits and tamper-proof outlets placed out of children's reach (Minsalud, 2024; Drugs.com, 2024).

**Secure storage:** All projects must include fixed furniture for hazardous material storage, equipped with locking systems that are inaccessible to minors (Minsalud, 2024; CPSC, 2024).

#### 3.2 Institutional safeguarding and operational protocols

**Code of conduct:** All technical staff entering the housing unit must follow a code of conduct that bans unsupervised physical contact with minors (Oxfam, 2023; UNICEF, 2026).

**Protection clauses:** Financing agreements should contain commitment clauses to help prevent child labor (ILO, 2021; UNICEF & ILO, 2025).

**Image management:** Informed consent must be obtained before using photos, and images showing the child's housing location should be avoided (UNICEF, 2026).

#### 3.3 Suggestions to prevent overload and burnout

**Design of the "care-attentive housing unit":** Prioritize reducing spatial hierarchies and create open central kitchens to encourage social interaction during activities (Montes Ruiz et al., 2026; Valdivia, 2018).

**Promoting autonomy:** Placing shelves and sinks at accessible heights for children and adolescents enables them to perform basic tasks independently, reducing the need for constant maternal supervision (Álvarez, 2023; Montes Ruiz et al., 2026).

**Technologies that improve household efficiency:** Install efficient stoves or water-harvesting systems to decrease the need for manual hauling (Montes Ruiz et al., 2026).

**Encouraging shared responsibility:** Conditioning financial support on family members attending workshops about redistributing domestic work (Montes Ruiz et al., 2026).

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