



10 BEST TOWNS FOR FAMILIES

WE SET OUT TO FIND COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY THAT COMBINE BIG-CITY OPPORTUNITIES WITH SUBURBAN CHARM, LOCATIONS THAT OFFER AN IDEAL BLEND OF AFFORDABLE HOUSES, GOOD JOBS, TOP-RATED SCHOOLS, WIDE-OPEN SPACES AND A LOT LESS STRESS. HERE ARE THE RESULTS OF *FAMILY CIRCLE'S* EXTENSIVE RESEARCH: PERFECT PLACES TO CALL HOME. **BY MICHAEL J. WEISS**

When Americans choose an area to live in, most of us yearn for the same things: fewer crowds; less concrete and hassles; more serenity, nature and neighbors we can count on. That's why *Family Circle* singled out these small cities, where living costs, commute times and crime rates are low, and the educational and cultural scenes are way above average. In all of them, moms and dads are stepping up to help their children thrive; they volunteer in schools, coach sports teams and keep bike trails clean. As the people in these top towns will tell you, life is good. And if your community isn't among the winners, read on to learn ways you can make it warmer and friendlier.

CASTLE ROCK, COLORADO

POPULATION **31,219**

MEDIAN INCOME **\$78,403**

MEDIAN HOME VALUE **\$267,500**

HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN **48%**

STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO **21:1**

Kristal Dulleck, 39, and her husband, Mitch, 40, a telecommunications analyst, left San Francisco seven years ago, looking for a rustic place to raise their kids. They found it in this Rocky Mountain town, which combines a booming economy, frontier-era events like rodeos, and true neighborly spirit. When a blizzard dumped 3 feet of snow last winter, a dozen of the Dullecks' neighbors banded together to dig out driveways. "It turned into a big party," says Kristal. "People around here take care of one another." The Dullecks can often be found hiking, picnicking or cheering from the sidelines at 11-year-old daughter Mackenzie's swim meets or 15-year-old son Tyler's lacrosse games. The kids like the peaceful, easy feeling that comes with the low crime rate. **"We can leave our bikes out at night and no one will take them,"** says Kenzie. **"Cool."**



FAMILY-FRIENDLY PERK: The town spent \$2 million this year to buy land with a 6,785-foot butte; the reward for making the 20-minute hike is an awesome view.

DIAMOND BAR, CALIFORNIA

POPULATION **59,735**
 MEDIAN INCOME **\$78,972**
 MEDIAN HOME VALUE **\$552,000**
 HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN **45%**
 STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO **23:1**

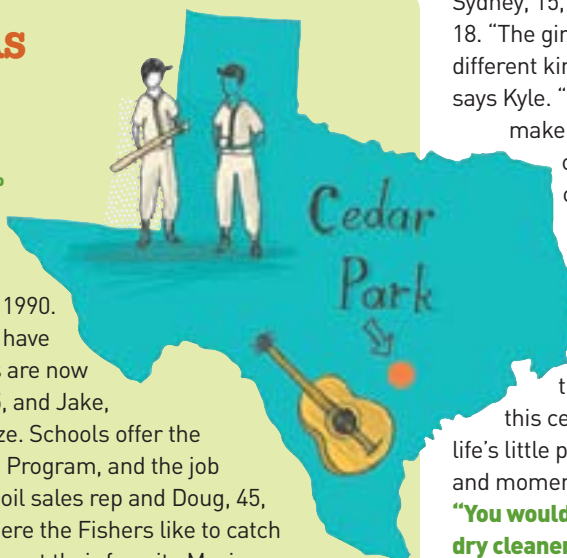


Every day Tania Peterson walks 3 miles through the streets of this sun-drenched southern California town, watching joggers and cyclists graciously give the right-of-way to kids roller-skating and playing stickball. The hike is a daily reminder of what the 43-year-old mom loves most about this rugged valley, just a half-hour commute from Los Angeles. “Like everyone else, we live outdoors,” says Tania, whose husband, Todd, 49, an electrical engineer, and son, Tim, 14, are into soccer and sailing. “It’s so healthy.” Lorbeer Middle School, where Tim plays baritone sax in the jazz band, has been designated a Blue Ribbon School of Excellence by the Department of Education, and nearby Diamond Bar High has one of the nation’s top calculus programs. The town, proud of its diverse population—49% Asian and 14% Hispanic—holds an annual festival with exotic fare from India and Korea. The laid-back lifestyle extends even to church, where shorts and sandals are welcome. **“No one has to wear their Sunday best,”** says Tania. **“That means everyone—especially the kids—feels relaxed.”**

FAMILY-FRIENDLY PERK: Disneyland and Knott’s Berry Farm, as well as the surf at Newport Beach and the ski slopes of Mt. Baldy, are all within 25-miles.

CEDAR PARK, TEXAS

POPULATION **36,029**
 MEDIAN INCOME **\$76,266**
 MEDIAN HOME VALUE **\$206,914**
 HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN **49%**
 STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO **15:1**



Marilyn and Doug Fisher were still newlyweds when they moved here in 1990. Since then both they and Cedar Park have seen a population boom. The Fishers are now a party of five—with Erin, 8, Grant, 15, and Jake, 17—while the town has doubled in size. Schools offer the rigorous International Baccalaureate Program, and the job market is teeming [Marilyn, 43, is an oil sales rep and Doug, 45, is a financial analyst]. And Austin, where the Fishers like to catch college games and scarf down burritos at their favorite Mexican eatery, is only 17 miles away. **“We’ve got everything we need here,”** says Marilyn. **“Cedar Park is a haven for families.”**

FAMILY-FRIENDLY PERK: To raise funds for the anticrime group National Night Out, residents last year held 41 block parties, Texas BBQ included.

MORTON GROVE, ILLINOIS

POPULATION **21,691**
 MEDIAN INCOME **\$72,331**
 MEDIAN HOME VALUE **\$376,000**
 HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN **30%**
 STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO **15:1**



On the tree-lined street where she lives, Kyle Olund, 48, a market-research-firm manager, counts families from five countries. That’s typical in this cosmopolitan Chicago suburb, where one-third of residents are foreign-born. Although Kyle and her husband, Mike, 49, who works at a pharmaceutical company, moved here in 1994 for the schools and affordable homes, they consider diversity an added dividend for daughters Sydney, 15, and Darce, 18. “The girls appreciate different kinds of people,” says Kyle. “I think that will make them more

compassionate—and more capable—when they go out into the world.”

The Olunds often hit Chicago’s theaters and museums when they get a craving for culture. But they prefer the quiet life in this century-old village, where life’s little pleasures are appreciated and moments are meant to be savored. **“You wouldn’t think of going to the dry cleaner without stopping and chatting a while,”** says Mike. **“People here have time for one another.”**

FAMILY-FRIENDLY PERK: About 20% of the town’s land is set aside as a forest preserve for running, walking, cycling and picnics.

DERBY, KANSAS

POPULATION 18,928
 MEDIAN INCOME \$67,668
 MEDIAN HOME VALUE \$146,807
 HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN 43%
 STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO 16:1

Since moving to this suburb 10 miles south of Wichita, Jim Urso, 45, a director of facilities at Boeing, has been offered better-paying jobs in other cities several times. He always said no. "I can be home for lunch in 10 minutes and get back early enough to hang out with my kids after school," says Jim, dad to Alexandra, 12, Stefanie, 15,



Danielle, 17, and Kristin, 23. His wife, Tamie, 48, agreed with his decision to stay every time. She couldn't bear to give up the sweet, slow weekends spent sitting in lawn chairs and sipping iced tea with friends, fellow moms and neighbors. "There's absolutely no rat race around here," she says.

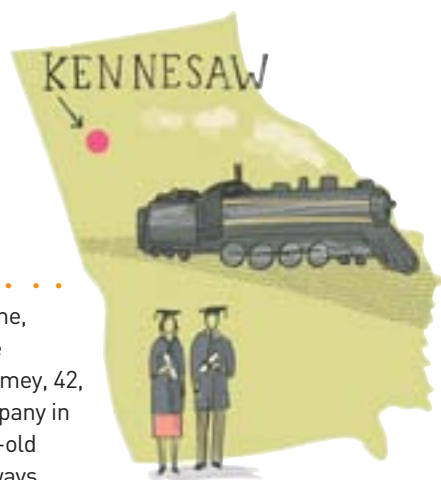
No housing bubble, either. Derby is still highly affordable, with spacious three-bedroom ranch homes selling for as little as \$150,000. And the brightest lights in this small town are the old-fashioned Friday Night kind—those at the playing field during varsity football games. **"There's only one high school, so everyone rallies around the students,"** says Tamie. **"Rooting for our kids brings the whole community together."**

FAMILY-FRIENDLY PERK: At Rock River Rapids water park, 2,000 kids a day get their kicks with state-of-the-art water slides, a 600-foot "lazy river" and a 50-meter lap pool.

KENNESAW, GEORGIA

POPULATION 24,404
 MEDIAN INCOME \$70,065
 MEDIAN HOME VALUE \$166,000
 HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN 45%
 STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO 16:1

From her family's quaint 1903 Victorian home, Melissa Hulseley, 39, walks the 2 miles to the employment agency she owns. Husband Jamey, 42, can drive to his job at the local electric company in 10 minutes flat. As for their kids—6-month-old Adeline, Jack, 7, and Alison, 9—"there's always something within easy reach, like sports leagues, outdoor concerts, movie nights and hayrides," Melissa says. "You don't have to make a big production of packing up the car to go everywhere."



Ordinances in this Civil War-era town require the use of 19th-century brick architecture, including lampposts and benches. Civic pride, superb schools and a half-dozen universities in nearby Atlanta are a big draw—the population has tripled since 1980. But Kennesaw hasn't outgrown its sense of community. The Cobb Chamber of Commerce pays for SAT prep courses for hundreds of high school juniors. **"Kids have the best chance of getting into the college they want,"** says Melissa. **"How many places can you say that about?"**

FAMILY-FRIENDLY PERK: Kids and grown-ups can brush up on their history watching combat reenactments at Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park.

COOPER CITY, FLORIDA

POPULATION 29,677
 MEDIAN INCOME \$85,402
 MEDIAN HOME VALUE \$375,000
 HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN 52%
 STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO 21:1



Lori Green, 43, gave up a nursing job last year to spend more time with kids Jeremy, 15, and Heather, 17—but she never slowed down. She became a parent liaison at her local high school and joined an advisory council, providing input on curriculum. Lori's one of many moms who have helped area schools earn the state's highest rating. "We take volunteering seriously," she says. That includes husband Mitch, 49, a lawyer who coaches baseball for one of the town's many sports leagues, which boast 6,000 youngsters. Team spirit has made Cooper City so desirable that homes are often sold by word of mouth. **"Most towns have to beg for volunteers,"** he says. **"We've got a surplus of helping hands."**

FAMILY-FRIENDLY PERK: Green and proud of it, Cooper City helps folks who've lost trees to storms or hurricanes by replacing them for free.

MADISON, MISSISSIPPI

POPULATION 16,930

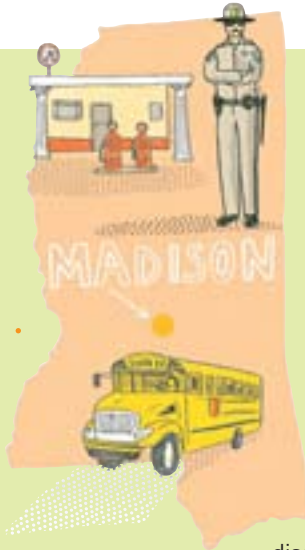
MEDIAN INCOME \$83,477

MEDIAN HOME VALUE \$242,760

HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN 47%

STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO 19:1

When teachers at Madison Avenue Lower Elementary School wanted more arts programs last year, they went straight to the school's parents for help. Janie Jarvis, 45, a stay-at-home mom to Amelia, 8, and Audrey, 11, corralled volunteers to write a grant proposal to the state. The result: \$15,000 for a new instructor, boxes of paints and pastels, and lessons on the masters, including Vincent van Gogh. And Janie couldn't have been prouder when Amelia painted a Monet-style landscape that ended up on display in the school library. "The kids use their imaginations and get creative every day and everywhere," she says. "Now they see rabbits



and elephants in the clouds and rainbows on the sides of buildings!"

Parents aren't the only ones stepping up. At the city's sole high school 70% of seniors serve as mentors for elementary school children struggling with learning and family issues. A few years back high school students spearheaded a drive that convinced the city's businesses to operate smoke free. And everyone pitches in to preserve the tranquil atmosphere in this old southern belle of a town. When Janie's husband, Mike, 46, who works in construction, recently built two cell phone towers, he disguised one as a pine tree and concealed the other inside a church steeple. **"Sure, they cost more,"** he says, **"but they're beautiful to look at, which is what Madison is all about."**

FAMILY-FRIENDLY PERK: When families go away on vacation, a local police officer checks their homes daily while making his rounds.

FRANKLIN, MASSACHUSETTS

POPULATION **29,642**
MEDIAN INCOME **\$81,065**
MEDIAN HOME VALUE **\$355,000**
HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN **48%**
STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO **14:1**



When Benjamin Franklin learned that colonial settlers named this town after him in 1778, he sent 116 of his own books to become the core of the community library—the first such public collection in the nation. “History is instilled in our kids,” says Kathy Sirignano, 45, a stay-at-home mom to Jillian, 9, Kyle, 16, and Michael, 18. “It gives them a real sense of belonging.” Not to mention pride. After Jillian and her classmates at Jefferson Elementary School performed a song last year to celebrate the 300th anniversary of Franklin’s birth, the third graders were tickled when local officials promptly proclaimed the tune the town’s official theme. Dad Andrew, 46, a real estate broker, raves about Franklin’s affordable houses (half the cost of those in suburbs closer to Boston and Providence, Rhode Island) and low property taxes. But what he and Kathy appreciate most are good neighbors all around. **“You can always count on them to take care of your kids if you have to work late or to help you out in an emergency,”** Kathy says. **“It’s that feeling of togetherness that makes living here special.”**

FAMILY-FRIENDLY PERK: Locals still gather on the 4-acre common for holidays like the Fourth of July, a six-day spectacular that includes nightly concerts, a carnival and an eye-popping parade with floats.

TURN YOUR TOWN AROUND

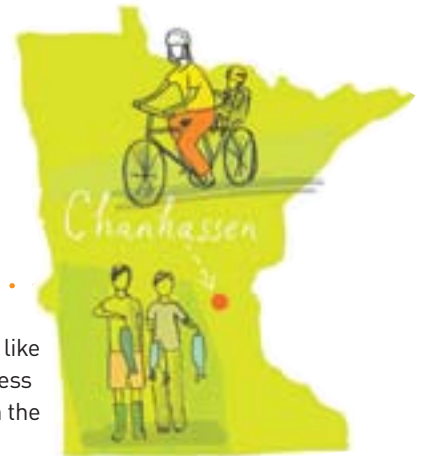
SURE, SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL. BUT EVEN IF YOU LIVE IN A METROPOLIS, THERE ARE STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO MAKE LIFE FEEL MORE LIKE THE GOOD OL’ DAYS.

- **CREATE A WALKABLE COMMUNITY.** Lobby officials to repair broken sidewalks, build public spaces for residents to gather and sit, and designate areas for people first, cars second. See walkable.org.
- **GO GREEN.** Urge local leaders to participate in Tree City USA (treecityusa.org), which plants and preserves greenery. Ask dry cleaners to replace perchloroethylene, an air and groundwater contaminant, with biodegradable detergent. Join the Cool Cities campaign (coolcities.us) and urge your mayor to pursue smart energy solutions.
- **BRING BACK SAFETY AFTER SUNSET.** Join National Night Out (nationalnightout.org) to heighten drug and crime awareness and clean up problem neighborhoods.

WANTED: PEOPLE WHO LOVE WHERE THEY LIVE. GO TO **FAMILYCIRCLE.COM/TOWNS** AND TELL US WHY WE SHOULD PACK UP AND MOVE TO YOUR PLACE. WE MIGHT FEATURE YOU AND YOUR KIDS IN OUR **MY HOMETOWN** COLUMN!

CHANHASSEN, MINNESOTA

POPULATION **25,133**
MEDIAN INCOME **\$98,296**
MEDIAN HOME VALUE **\$293,250**
HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN **50%**
STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO **16:1**



Some communities define themselves by their proximity to a big city. Here, residents like Brian Lundquist, 36, talk about their nearness to a lake. “We’re only a hundred yards from the water and a wetlands area,” says Brian, a manager for ConAgra who moved to Chanhassen from Toledo, Ohio, in 2000 with wife Kellie, 37, and children Lily, 8, and Jordan, 10. “We open a window and see a loon flying overhead.” An eco-haven situated 20 miles southwest of Minneapolis, the town has 12 lakes, 55 miles of walking trails and 27 parks (local regulations, in fact, require every home to be within a half-mile from one). Even the winters are family friendly: Kids participate in ice-fishing contests to catch the most crappies, then gather around a fire to toast s’mores. Given the modest nightlife—there’s only one movie theater—families entertain at home, inviting friends over to grill burgers and hot dogs in their backyard fire pit. **“The kids like to play tag or alphabet memory games,”** says Kellie, a part-time preschool teacher. **“They get so much more out of entertaining one another under the stars than vegging out in front of a TV or computer.”**

FAMILY-FRIENDLY PERK: The 950-seat Chanhassen Dinner Theatre serves up supper and Broadway musicals like *Grease* and *Les Misérables*. ●

HOW WE CHOSE With the help of On Board, a New York City research firm providing real estate and demographic data, *Family Circle* assembled a list of 1,850 places with populations between 15,000 and 150,000 and a high concentration of households with an average income of \$65,000. From that, 800 localities were selected based on our family-friendly criteria, including cost of living, jobs, schools, health care, air quality, green space and crime rate. We assessed which towns best met those standards and ranked them according to state. *Family Circle* selected the winners from the highest-rated towns in the top 10 states nationwide.

