

Interiors

+ Add to myFT

## Turbocharged playrooms for the ‘smartphone-free childhood’ crew

Old-school games and play areas — where nothing glows, pings or scrolls — are being amped up in luxe family-friendly residences



The playroom at 96+ Broadway, New York © Kate Glucksberg

[Tara Loader Wilkinson](#)

Published 10 hours ago

It was the jungle gym at 96+Broadway, on New York’s Upper West Side, with its three foam pits and monkey bars, that turned the head of New York-based investment fund portfolio manager Lingbin Cai. He and his wife had decided to move from their Queens apartment, and were looking for a building with amenities that included those for his children, who are five and two. “It was rare to find this in a luxury condo,” says Cai. He bought a three-bedroom apartment in the building last May. “I’m passionate about keeping my boys off screens as long as I can,” he says. “I want my children to use their brains, be creative and do more physical activity.”

Cai and his wife's commitment to a "smartphone-free childhood" is part of a vocal movement of parents limiting and delaying screen use for children and teenagers. And developers are sensing an opportunity.

Several are prioritising family-friendly amenities and retro-style games rooms — not just in holiday resorts, but in urban residential buildings. Beth McGroarty, research director at Global Wellness Institute, believes 2025 has been a turning point. "We started 'analogging on' as never before: hungry for retro, pre-digital tech, hobbies and experiences."



At One Manhattan Square on New York's Lower East Side, developer Extell has added a bowling alley, full-court basketball and billiards, while at its Downtown Brooklyn property Brooklyn Point, residents have use of a 35-foot rock-climbing wall with double-height windows looking out over the city.

JVP Development and Gamma Real Estate's Sutton Tower in Midtown-East has a tricked-out games room with vintage arcade and classic table games, while across Central Park, two new residential buildings are elevating old-school gaming on the Upper West Side. These include a spacious lounge at 720 West End Avenue, with a pool table and golf simulator, and a games room at The Henry, geared — in part — for teenagers, who can gather for a game of pool. There's also a bowling alley, basketball, pickleball and bocce courts, as well as a cinema.



“

**It's about reviving the sort of adventurous, analogue childhood parents remember for their children**

**Buying agent Harry Gladwin**

In the UK, Venetia Rudebeck, co-founder of London-based Studio Vero, has had requests for indoor climbing frames, chalkboard drawing walls and pool tables. “Almost every brief we get these days is to dedicate a room to analogue play,” echoes Ed O'Donnell, co-founder and creative director of Angel O'Donnell, based in London. Angel O'Donnell was commissioned to create a “kidult space” in Newfoundland, a residential skyscraper in Canary Wharf; they included custom-made slides and tunnels, rocket-shaped activity walls and whimsical pieces such as the Magis Puppy.

“In cities where square footage is at a premium, it feels at once lavish and freeing to craft a space solely for screenless downtime,” says O'Donnell. “When screens are involved, they're large and positioned in front of a sociable sofa that encourages group gameplay. But more often, we're seeing requests for climbing walls, vintage arcade games and beautiful chess sets.”



A playroom by London-based Studio Vero © Simon Brown

He adds that too much screen time is a big concern among his clients. “Soft play and ingenious downtime hang-outs are design trends born out of a genuine desire to enhance family life. This transition stems from parents’ growing awareness of how digital immersion can lead to social withdrawal.”

Louisa Brodie, head of private clients at Banda Property, in London, says that “parents want their children to experience more of what their own childhoods offered; curiosity, conversation and unstructured time”. The Chelsea Barracks development in Belgravia, for example, has a playroom, tennis courts and homework rooms. These rooms can be built around books, crafts tables, table tennis or board games like Scrabble or Pictionary.





Angel O'Donnell's 'kidult space' in Newfoundland, a residential skyscraper in Canary Wharf © Taran Wilkhu



A reading nook and play area for children designed by Banda © Banda/Ben Anders

“Screen-free rooms are fast becoming the new drawing room,” says Brodie. “In a world saturated by information, a room where nothing glows, pings or scrolls is becoming one of the most meaningful design choices a family can make.”

“The consistent theme is that kids drift back to screens, so parents are prioritising spaces that keep them active offline,” says buying agent Harry Gladwin of The Buying Solution. “It’s about reviving the sort of adventurous, analogue childhood they remember for their own children.” He emphasises that it is outdoors as well as inside pursuits that parents are seeking: he has seen an increase in parents looking for homes with outdoor play areas, or space to build them — from quad-bike tracks weaving through paddocks to rope-swings over streams and cricket nets with bowling machines.



Chelsea Barracks in Belgravia, London, has a playground, tennis courts and homework rooms to encourage digital disconnectedness © Kensington Leverne

It is never too late to change habits, believes 39-year-old New York-based tax analyst Emma Sun. She and her software engineer husband were living in a high-rise in Chicago with five-year-old Maxwell, at their wits' end. Maxwell learnt the passcode to his mother's phone and would sneak away with it to play on the apps. "It's so hard to keep him from devices when they are already using iPads at kindergarten for maths," says Sun.

When a job change brought them to New York, they set out to find a building set up for children's activities. They settled on The Harper on the Upper East Side, which has a soft play area and a music room as well as a pool table and another with arcade machines such as Ms Pac-Man and Donkey Kong. They bought a two-bedroom condo in the summer. "Maxwell is happier, has more energy, is more active. He is learning violin in the music room. The price here was higher than other buildings without the amenities, but it is worth it."