

# Best Towns FOR Families



**IN OUR YEARLY  
ROUNDUP OF  
PERFECT PLACES  
TO CALL HOME,  
WE GIVE HIGH  
MARKS TO THESE  
COMMUNITIES FOR  
THEIR AFFORDABLE  
HOUSING, GOOD  
NEIGHBORS, GREEN  
SPACE AND A-PLUS  
SCHOOLS.**

**BY SEEMA NAYYAR**

# Best Towns FOR Families



Bass fishing on Thurmond Lake in Evans.

## ROCKWALL TEXAS

Terry Crabtree, a 50-year-old part-time nurse, has attended every single football game and marching competition since her son, Zach, 17, a sports nut and trombone player, started at Rockwall-Heath High School. Her husband, J.C., 57, who owns a carpet cleaning business, coached Zach's soccer and softball teams at the Y, and Terry has even filled in for the staff nurses at all the schools Zach and his sister, Jessica, 19, have attended. The

Crabtrees aren't unusual but the norm. "There are so many moms and dads stepping up, you practically have to get on a waiting list," says J.C. "We all want to show that we care about what our kids do." This lakeside Dallas suburb is one of the fastest-growing communities in Texas but still possesses the qualities the Crabtrees value most. Area schools rank among the top in the state on standardized test scores. And close ties are formed in the classroom. Jessica's third grade teacher still sends her a birthday card every year, while Zach's middle school music instructor invites him to his jazz-band gigs around town. "The educators are not only top notch," says Terry, "they're terrific human beings as well."

**GOLD STAR** Rockwall was the first school district in the nation to adopt Rachel's Challenge, a K-12 education program encouraging kids to perform random acts of kindness, named after Rachel Scott, the first student killed at Columbine High.

**POPULATION**  
27,040

**MEDIAN INCOME**  
\$86,499

**MEDIAN HOME PRICE**  
\$153,334

**HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN** 49.8%

**STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO** 16:1

**GREAT SCHOOLS RATING** 9

## EVANS GEORGIA

Robert and Sandra Gibbs are often reminded that they did the right thing leaving New York City 14 years ago to raise their children in this sunny, serene Augusta suburb. A couple of those moments came last spring, when their 18-year-old son, Raymond, was admitted to the U.S. Naval Academy, and their daughter, Regina, 17, announced she wanted

**POPULATION**  
22,187

**MEDIAN INCOME**  
\$71,760

**MEDIAN HOME PRICE**  
\$136,500

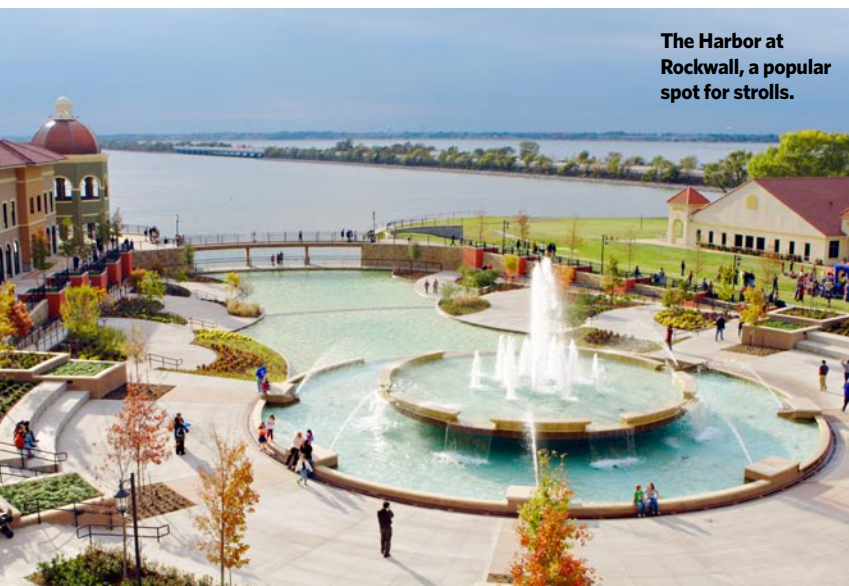
**HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN** 37%

**STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO** 16:1

**GREAT SCHOOLS RATING** 9

to study pre-med and become an oncologist. Sandra, 46, a special education instructor, and Robert, 53, a trucking contractor, are grateful for the grade-A opportunities the local schools have provided. "Since kindergarten they've never wanted to miss a day because there were so many activities they were crazy about," says Sandra. "Plus, their teachers made them—and all the other students—feel they had an important role in the classroom." The Gibbses love everything about Evans—the small-town warmth, low crime rate, community churches and state-of-the-art gyms with kickboxing, gymnastics and dance classes. "Living here makes it easy to instill family values and a sense of responsibility, and my kids are more well-rounded because of it," says Robert, who does admit to one regret: "I only wish we'd moved here earlier—you can never get too much of a good thing."

**GOLD STAR** High schools offer hands-on accreditation programs that give students a leg up on future careers. Regina enrolled in a course that includes taking mammograms and blood pressure readings at hospitals, and she has already become a certified nursing assistant.



The Harbor at Rockwall, a popular spot for strolls.

# Best Towns FOR Families



A festive crowd at the July 4th parade in Indian Trail.

## INDIAN TRAIL NORTH CAROLINA

When Peggy and Mitchell Covington moved here from New Jersey, they wanted “a healthy balance between work, play and family—and we found it,” says Mitchell, 45. They bought a spacious four bedroom—and cut their property taxes in half. Driving to his job as a bank recruiter in Charlotte takes Mitchell only 30 minutes, while Peggy, 45, works in town as a secretary. And their kids are thriving. Kelsey, 16, models part-time; 13-year-old Taylor is a cheerleader; Hannah, 12, plays flute in the middle-school band; and Zachary, 10, is on the baseball, basketball and football teams. Equally important, the Covingtons have a diverse circle of friends. “As an interracial couple, we were concerned we’d run into prejudice, but it’s been the opposite,” says Peggy. Nearly half of Indian Trail residents have moved here in the last five years. “Our neighborhood is a mix of Chinese, South Asian, Korean and Brazilian families,” says Peggy. “We’ve got tolerance and old-fashioned southern hospitality—a win-win situation.”

**GOLD STAR** After-school classes include sign language, gardening and a *Twilight* books fan club. Taylor, who belongs to Beta Club, a group of honors students who perform community service, started a family tradition last Christmas by rallying siblings and friends to stuff stockings for needy kids.

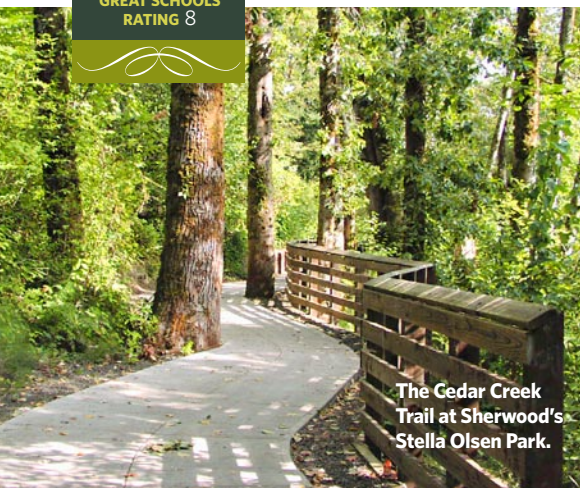
<b>POPULATION</b>	24,956
<b>MEDIAN INCOME</b>	\$67,169
<b>MEDIAN HOME PRICE</b>	\$175,500
<b>HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN</b>	46%
<b>STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO</b>	18:1
<b>GREAT SCHOOLS RATING</b>	8

## SHERWOOD OREGON

Ask Raina Volkmer to show you her favorite dessert spot in Sherwood, and she’ll lead you to the wooded trails behind her house. “I was bike riding one day with my family when we came across these beautiful-smelling apple trees,” says Raina, 38, a supervisor at Portland State University. “Now we just walk out here after dinner and pick some fresh fruit—it sure beats cookies.” Like many Sherwood residents, Raina and husband James, 39, a manager at Nike with an easy commute to nearby Beaverton, can’t get enough of the outdoors. Sherwood has miles of paths that wind from downtown to the Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge. The Volkmers, with kids Abigail, 8, Joseph, 5, and 3-year-old Evan in a kiddie trailer, like to pedal over to Truck Park, a sandlot piled high with toys. Schools have consistently received “Strong” or “Exceptional” ratings from the state, and the district has a \$7 million “rainy day” fund to make up for any education spending cuts. “Before moving here we spent a lot of time online researching the schools,” says James. “There was a great deal of activity on the Sherwood page. You could tell people were passionate about education but also about real quality of life.”

**GOLD STAR** Sherwood has partnered with a private medical group to treat students who don’t have health insurance and is now working to provide dental coverage as well.

<b>POPULATION</b>	16,183
<b>MEDIAN INCOME</b>	\$77,775
<b>MEDIAN HOME PRICE</b>	\$289,400
<b>HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN</b>	43.1%
<b>STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO</b>	25:1
<b>GREAT SCHOOLS RATING</b>	8



The Cedar Creek Trail at Sherwood’s Stella Olsen Park.

**MAKING THE CUT** With the help of Onboard Informatics, an NYC research firm that provides real estate, demographic and other data, *Family Circle* assembled a list of 1,700 cities and towns with populations between 15,000 and 150,000. From that group, nearly 800 localities with a high concentration of households with an average income of about \$75,000 were selected. We then assessed which places best met our family-friendly criteria—including affordable homes, quality schools, access to health care, green space, low crime rate and financial stability—and ranked them. *Family Circle* then selected the 10 winners from among the highest-rated towns.



Photo (top): Dan Schallenkamp.

## PERRYSBURG OHIO

This Toledo suburb gives new meaning to neighbor helping neighbor. When Jamil Jemaa, 47, lost his job at a glass factory after it relocated abroad, his wife, Sonia, 36, found a \$100 gift card in their mailbox from a secret Samaritan. Days later, a co-worker pulled into their driveway with bags of groceries and snacks for their four tweens and teens—Nasser, Nasreen, Sreen and Nadeen. “It still makes me tear up when I think of how people reached out to help us,” says Sonia, a preschool teacher. The family moved here 12 years ago, attracted, in part, by the town’s tolerance and diversity—the local mosque is the third largest in the country—as well as an abundance of recreational facilities for kids. And the schools are superb: The state education department awarded Perrysburg an “Excellent with Distinction” rating, its highest accolade. But what Sonia and Jamil, who now works for an auto parts supplier, appreciate even more is the extra attention instructors give students and parents alike. “The teachers make sure the kids get the best possible education,” says Jamil.

“They also make a point of telling us how special our children are, even when they’re not getting As.”

**GOLD STAR** Lessons in compassion start early. Elementary school kids do service projects, like making meals for the elderly, every year. In 2008 first-through fifth-graders at one school raised \$13,500 for the American Heart Association.



The annual kids' "Fishing Rodeo" at Old Hickory Lake.

## HENDERSONVILLE TENNESSEE

With Nashville just 18 miles away, Hendersonville is home to several country music legends, including the Oak Ridge Boys and T.G. Sheppard. But here it's the kids who can't step out without being noticed. Just ask Wade Evans. When the 19-year-old college sophomore had a few too many friends packed into his car, his mom, Debbi, got phone calls from concerned neighbors. “There’s a kind of unspoken agreement among parents to look out for each other’s children,” she says. “It’s not like anyone’s telling on them, just keeping them safe.” And the kids are all right with the grown-up grapevine. “Everyone knows everyone else here, and sometimes the attention can be a little annoying,” says daughter Mackenzie, 17. “But it keeps you grounded and humble knowing you can’t get away with anything” Debbi, 49, a first grade teacher, and husband Mark, 49, who co-owns a triathlon supply store, also take pride in their hometown schools, where student achievement routinely surpasses state and national averages. The Evanses like to spend summer afternoons at Old Hickory Lake, exploring its secluded coves on Jet Skis or just relaxing on inner tubes. “There are so many healthy activities for kids,” says Debbi. “On any given evening you head over to the park or ball field and it’s full of families, practicing, playing, enjoying each other’s company. We love being a part of that.”

**GOLD STAR** At Hendersonville High, the 315 seniors logged a total of 20,000 hours at retirement homes, food banks and literacy centers with the Leadership Summer project.

POPULATION	46,969
MEDIAN INCOME	\$62,127
MEDIAN HOME PRICE	\$215,312
HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN	31%
STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO	16:1
GREAT SCHOOLS RATING	9

POPULATION	17,899
MEDIAN INCOME	\$75,981
MEDIAN HOME PRICE	\$165,000
HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN	30.9%
STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO	16:1
GREAT SCHOOLS RATING	9

Perrysburg's historic homes date back to the 1800s.



# Best Towns FOR Families



Ice skating on Centennial Lakes in downtown Edina.

## EDINA MINNESOTA

Peter Anderson loved growing up in this Minneapolis suburb so much, he couldn't wait

to come back after finishing college in Wisconsin. "Nobody wants to leave this place," he says. "A lot of families here go back generations, so there's a real sense of continuity." Now Peter, 46, an accountant, his wife Heather and their three teens sip malts at the same shop his mom used to go to and swim at the pool where he did cannonballs as a kid. Edina is renowned for its schools, which have received an excellence award from the U.S. Department of Education. Students can take a traditional curriculum, work with the same teacher for several years or enroll in dual-language classes. Daughter Kate, 17, is fluent in French; 16-year-old Molly is learning Mandarin; and Tom, 14, speaks French. Edina also has nearly 40 parks, including Edinborough, the Midwest's largest indoor playground.

"There's standing room only at varsity games and music concerts. We go boating and skating on the lake," says Heather, 43, director of a children's enrichment program. "Edina is a magical place for families."

**GOLD STAR** By signing up for a one- or two-year term on the local planning committees, high schoolers can cast votes (they're tallied with those of real members) and get a shot at helping run City Hall.

## AHEAD OF THE CURVE

The Great Schools rating listed for each town is determined by the standardized test scores of local elementary, middle and high schools relative to other schools in the state, based on a scale of 1 to 10. A rating of "10" means that overall test scores are as good as, or better than, 90% of scores elsewhere. The ratings are provided by GreatSchools.net,

a nonprofit website with a mission to improve education by inspiring parents to get involved. It profiles more than 90,000 public elementary, middle and high schools in all 50 states. Go to the site and enter your school's name and state to see test results according to grade, stats on student/teacher ratios and diversity, and parent reviews.

## NOBLESVILLE INDIANA

There are good eats at the summer street fair on Courthouse Square.



**POPULATION**  
41,199

**MEDIAN INCOME**  
\$79,024

**MEDIAN HOME PRICE**  
\$148,437

**HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN** 42.6%

**STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO** 20:1

**GREAT SCHOOLS RATING** 9

What Rob and Cindy Green love most about Noblesville is the way teachers go the extra mile for their students. Their 8-year-old, Kati, gets extra TLC in class whenever Rob, a 44-year-old computer consultant, travels abroad. Daughter Ally, 11, was delighted to see her fourth grade instructor—along with her husband and kids—show up for her baptism last year. "I told her she didn't have to come, but she said she wouldn't dream of missing Ally's special day," says Cindy, 39, a part-time bookkeeper. The time son C.J., 13, was hospitalized with pneumonia, the principal phoned to ask Cindy whether there was anything they needed. "We hear from the schools all the time, and it's not just because people are worried about missing homework," she says. "They're passionate about our kids' well-being." This Indianapolis suburb has many charms, from affordable housing to its historic downtown district. Families canoe along the White River, catch Shakespeare in the park and chow down at varsity game tailgating parties, where they're likely to bump into a teacher or two. "We feel blessed to live in such a close-knit community," says Cindy. "Everyone here feels connected."

**GOLD STAR** Summer camp is free for elementary school students, who can enroll in swimming, basketball, football or volleyball classes taught by high school coaches and players.

# Best Towns FOR Families

## KENMORE WASHINGTON

Back in 2003, Larry and Kristi Pyne were on the fence about moving to Kenmore from nearby Seattle—until a visit to an elementary school sealed the deal. “The principal gave us a tour, then spent 30 minutes discussing the curriculum and how to make the transition easier for our children,” says Kristi, 47, a math tutor. The day the family settled into their four-bedroom house, one mom dropped by with a phone list of everyone on the block, including names of all the kids and their pets. “To say this place has a welcoming way about it would be an understatement,” says Larry, 50, an office manager. The Pynes, with kids Katie, 16, and Kenny, 14, like to take in summer concerts at St. Edward State Park and hike along the Burke-Gilman Trail. “You look out through the trees and catch glimpses of Lake Washington and Mount Rainier,” says Kristi. “In fact, there are gorgeous views everywhere.”

**GOLD STAR** An orchestra class for fourth-through sixth-graders is so popular that one out of five students participate, while 42% of juniors and seniors at Inglemoor High are enrolled in the rigorous International Baccalaureate program.

POPULATION	20,868
MEDIAN INCOME	\$77,569
MEDIAN HOME PRICE	\$380,000
HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN	33%
STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO	20:1
GREAT SCHOOLS RATING	9



Getting a toehold at a block party in Sun Prairie.

## SUN PRAIRIE WISCONSIN

When Melissa and Stephen Havens decided to take their tweens and teens on a camping vacation, they didn’t realize it would coincide with Cornfest, a four-day extravaganza with games, rides, parades and all-you-can-eat, butter-dripping kernels on the cob. “The kids were really disappointed, and we never heard the end of it,” says Melissa, 45, a research data specialist. “Now, we make sure we’re always around.” To outsiders, this Madison suburb is best known as the birthplace of artist Georgia O’Keeffe. To locals, it’s the simple pleasures that matter most—strolling through the farmers’ market, dirt-car racing at Angell Park Speedway, a family visit to the Aquatic Center. The Havenses, along with kids Sarah, 18, Zachary, 16, and Caleb, 14, no longer drive to Madison for dinner but instead head downtown to Cannery Grill or one of the new ethnic restaurants. With voters recently passing referendums appropriating \$100 million for a new high school with a performing arts center and an eight-lane pool, Sun Prairie is growing fast. “But it hasn’t lost its cozy, small-town character,” says Stephen, 48, an engineering consultant.

POPULATION	24,951
MEDIAN INCOME	\$65,518
MEDIAN HOME PRICE	\$191,900
HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN	39.1%
STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO	15:1
GREAT SCHOOLS RATING	8

“It’s comforting to know our kids can still go anywhere by themselves, and we know they’re safe. We’re getting bigger—and better.”

**GOLD STAR** Members of the New Scholar Society, a group of black honors students, serve as mentors to other African-Americans to improve performance and encourage them to enroll in AP classes. And senior citizens who volunteer to teach reading and math in Sun Prairie’s elementary, middle and high schools receive an annual stipend of up to \$430, which they can use to reduce their property tax bills. ●



A misty view of Lake Washington from Kenmore’s Log Boom Park.

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