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## Community. Connection. Cohousing...

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Today fewer and fewer people really know their neighbors, sprawling suburbs are doing serious damage to the planet, and families are desperate to find more time together.

### Enter: The Cohousing Solution.

Do you ever long for simpler days, a slower pace and the feeling of community that seemed to grow easily once upon a time in small towns and tight-knit neighborhoods? Life has become so fast-paced and disconnected that we often don't even realize what we're missing. But some people have found enough time to reflect and envision what they want for their families. It's called "cohousing." And no, it's not a commune or some weird cultish thing. It is actually refreshingly peaceful and "normal." The cohousing idea originated in Denmark, and has been promoted in the U.S. by architects Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett. There are now hundreds of cohousing communities worldwide, with urban as well as rural sites. There are a couple in Davis, one in Sacramento and new ones forming in Tahoe, Orangevale and Grass Valley.

I recently toured Nevada City Cohousing and discovered a sensible, progressive alternative to your typical suburban sprawl. Like all cohousing communities, it is an intentionally planned neighborhood. It combines private homes with shared facilities. Nestled in the hills within walking distance of downtown Nevada City, the neighborhood's houses are grouped together along flower-lined pathways. Parking is organized on the outside edges of the property, away from living spaces and children's play spaces, and little red wagons are available to bring groceries—and small children—to your home. There is a large open space where children are free to build forts or play hide and seek while adults walk the trails and enjoy the serenity of the woods. The common house sits next to the swimming pool and hot

tub, just a stone's throw from the community garden. Inside the common house is a beautiful, gourmet kitchen where optional shared meals are prepared several nights a week; parties, game nights, craft projects and after-school homework also have a place here. There is a play room for preschool-age children, guest bedrooms for visitors, a music room and laundry facilities. And it wasn't hard to guess that one brightly painted room filled with posters and an array of mismatched couches was, indeed, the teen room! Individual homes, while a bit smaller than some of our sprawling suburban abodes, are spacious, carefully planned and beautifully built with hardwood floors, skylights and front porches.

### Real Community

The community includes single adults, families with everything from newborns to teenagers, retired couples and seniors. Communities usually include 20-40 homes. (Nevada City Cohousing has 34 homes.) Families don't just watch out for each other here; they truly participate in each other's lives. If you want to take an extended vacation, there is someone right there to feed your cat, water your plants or get your mail. One resident, at a glowing 80 years of age, is a retired school teacher who delights in reading to the children. They, in turn, brought her soup when she was recently ill. You might wonder if there is a lack of privacy in all of this, but residents have found a simple solution that everyone honors. A small round circle hangs on everyone's door, one side has a brightly colored sunshine on it, signifying "visitors welcome." The other side has a moon and stars; when this side is hanging, it means that family is having quiet, family time and is not prepared for visitors.

Dyann Castro-Wehr, who graciously showed us around her community, has lived here for two years and can't imagine returning to her old way of life. Her children always have someone to play with, and she loves the convenience and cost savings of shared meals. These meals are offered several evenings per week, and families can choose how often they want to participate. Each family is required to prepare the meal once every six weeks; this includes planning, shopping and cooking. Families sign up ahead of time, so you know how many you are cooking for. Some nights the meal is served at 6:00 p.m. (perfect timing for families with young children); other nights, dinner's served closer to 7:00 p.m., so adults commuting from work have a chance to participate.

### The Green Life

Another benefit of the co-housing community is that residents are able to take advantage of more environmentally conscious ways of living. Because homes are all built at the same time and residents agree on materials to be purchased, eco-friendly building materials that might be too expensive for one family to purchase on its own become affordable when bought in bulk for the whole community. Many people who choose co-housing have the desire to minimize their impact on the environment and find this an affordable, pleasant way to do so. The Nevada City Cohousing community is solar powered; residents share resources (instead of everyone having a lawn mower, they only need 1 or 2), and parents can easily carpool to school or soccer practice.

With this intentional attempt to create community, community management needs naturally arise. Decisions are made by consensus, and everyone shares in the work of maintaining the common spaces. This innovative solution to today's environmental and social challenges creates a multi-generational, child-friendly and sustainable neighborhood. If this concept intrigues you, find out more at [www.cohousing.org](http://www.cohousing.org). This website has a wealth of information. It's also worth checking out [www.cohousingpartners.com](http://www.cohousingpartners.com).

The six defining characteristics of cohousing:

1. Participatory process. Future residents participate in the design of the community so that it meets their needs.
2. Neighborhood design. The physical layout and orientation of the buildings encourage a sense of community.
3. Common facilities. Common facilities are designed for daily use, are an integral part of the community, and are always supplemental to the private residences.
4. Resident management. Residents manage their own cohousing communities and also perform much of the work required to maintain the property. They participate in the preparation of common meals, and meet regularly to solve problems and develop policies for the community.
5. Non-hierarchical structure and decision-making. Leadership roles naturally exist in cohousing communities; however, no one person (or persons) has authority over others. Each person takes on one or more roles consistent with his or her skills, abilities or interests. Most cohousing groups make all of their decisions by consensus.
6. No shared community economy. The community is not a source of income for its members and finances are not pooled.