

Dothan Eagle

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Jay Hare / jhare@dothaneeagle.com
Gage Cowart, 14, jumps a ramp on his skateboard at his home in Dothan late Tuesday afternoon.

Dothan on list of top towns for raising kids

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Jo Ellen Nelson thinks about her three children and agrees with the data.

"I feel children do have a good quality of life here," Nelson said. "The values of this community are strong. You see caring and a spirit of serving in this community. Dothan is different. It is a close-knit community."

Dothan was one of three cities in Alabama named to the Best Places to Raise Your Kids list compiled by *BusinessWeek* magazine in conjunction with OnBoard Informatics, a provider of real estate analysis.

The three most important criteria used to judge the communities were affordability, school performance, and safety. Other factors considered were cost of living, job growth, racial diversity, air quality, and amenities like parks and museums.

All cities had to have at least 50,000 residents and a median family income of \$40,000 to \$100,000.

Huntsville, with a population of 163,000 and a median family income of \$60,000, was ranked the best in the state. Dothan and Hoover were runners-up.

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Dothan attorney Chris Maddox was raised in Dothan, a place he returned to after college and where he and his wife want to raise their children. Maddox, who also serves on the Dothan City School Board, said families do have a good quality of life in Dothan.

"I am not surprised in any way that Dothan made this list," he said. "I think we have an excellent school system here, although I would like to see it funded a little better. I think our recreational facilities are unbelievably fantastic and as good as any I have ever seen. People who live here like to live here. We have lots of community pride."

Maddox has three elementary school-age daughters. He and his wife, Angie, are expecting a fourth child in April.

One thing parents value for their children is opportunity. Nelson's oldest daughter, Sara Ellen, is involved in club and high school soccer and her younger daughter, Virginia, is a cheerleader.

"There are opportunities here, and not just in athletics," Nelson said. "We have very good dance studios, theater groups that both my girls participated in, and other types of activities they could do. Sara chose athlet-

ics, and I would have to say our city is second to none in recreational facilities."

Nelson used to live in Atlanta and knew that was not a place she wanted to raise kids, even though the suburb of Marietta made the list.

While locals may think they spend a lot of time stuck on the Circle, drive

time to-and-from work does not compare to big cities.

"In Atlanta, we spent so much time on the road going back and forth to work, there was not quality time to spend," Nelson said.

"This community nurtures you through church and recreation and family and schools. It nurtures the whole family."

Best Places to Raise Your Kids

The best cities in the South to raise kids, according to *BusinessWeek* magazine in conjunction with OnBoard Informatics, include:

- Alabama: Huntsville, Hoover, Dothan
- Georgia: Warner Robins, Athens, Marietta
- Florida: Fort Lauderdale, Sunrise, Ocala
- Mississippi: Biloxi, Gulfport, Jackson
- Tennessee: Murfreesboro, Clarksville, Franklin
- Louisiana: Bossier City, Lafayette, Monroe
- Arkansas: Springdale, Conway, Fayetteville