

Family Home Sweet Home

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The Collins English Dictionary defines *house* as *dwelling*, which is a mere structure of a building. A *home* on the other hand is defined as *the place where one lives*. Home is the castle to some men and hopefully a haven of safety and love to all family members. Some brave parents, like Sue and Hank, have turned their dining room into a play space for their two young children. Of course, one day they may choose to turn it back into an eating space, or a reading space or whatever serves their household.

Houses can easily become child friendly homes. Growing families need organized storage and sensible but comfortable furnishings. There are three important questions parents can ask:

1. What appropriate activities may children do in this room? Young children especially need to explore space and all that is in it.
2. Have we provided appropriate activities so that all family members can function in this room?
3. What could we add or eliminate from this room to make it "livable" for children?

Here are some considerations:

Children's Bedrooms

Be cautious about juvenile wallpaper children will developmentally outgrow before you have the energy to remove and redo. One month the Little Mermaid is all the rage and the next it is Fantasia or Peter Pan. Choose durability and colour rather than theme defined wallpaper. Create themes with accessories like posters, books, toys and pillowcases. Older children will want to participate in the decorating of their room and legitimately deserve the opportunity to make their mark in their space.

Make sure you purchase a quality mattress. For young children hang a mirror and pictures lower so they can enjoy the view. Low closet rods and hooks allow young children to better care for their clothes. Provide open shelving for toys that invite quiet activity. Avoid toy chests as they are impossible to organize. Other ideas include dressers with coded drawers, a bedside table with a manageable light and alarm clock. A bulletin board is appreciated by any age. Some disciplined school age children will want a desk in their room for doing homework. Many other children need a defined time and place near caregivers to complete their school assignments.

Activity Place

Young children's activities are given a sense of importance if they are accepted within the home's hub of action--near the kitchen, dining room or family room. Many homes have toys strewn about because young children naturally want to be near the attention and sight of their parents. "Look what I just made, Dad!" If you can find space in that central area for a small table and chairs with shelving for games, paper, crayons and bins of toys you'll have a warm hum in the middle of your home.

For school-age children often the dining room table becomes the centre for homework and projects. Wood tables that can be refinished one day alleviate adult anxiety.

Give special consideration to where the computer centre is located. Some families are fortunate enough to have computers hooked up in each child's bedroom. The down side of this arrangement is that internet requires monitoring.

Living room

Oftentimes the living room is not utilized for any child-centred activities. However reading, listening to music, viewing the family photo album, playing a musical instrument, or cuddling a pet could easily occur in this living space—especially if there is a bookcase with some children's books, a musical instrument or two and a sound system available. Consider a collection of kaleidoscopes.

Dining room

The formal dining room may be space wasted for all members of the family. Suggested activities include family meetings, board games, family meals, at least weekly. The people you love the most deserve to have meals in the dining room. Turn the TV off, use the fine china and share a conversation about the worst, best and funniest things that happened today.

Kitchen

Introduce children to the world of food, nutrition and cooking. Provide a simple cookbook when they can read. At an early age establish a "snack drawer" that is low and accessible so that children can slap together their own peanut butter sandwich, grab a bag of raisins or sneak a fruit strip.

Bathroom

Be sure your children can see into a mirror and reach taps, towels, toothbrushes and toothpaste. Perhaps a footstool is required. Label towel racks with children's names, fun picture or a photo. Don't forget water play toys. Some 10-year-olds continue to enjoy them. Some days so does Grandma.

Basement Playroom or "Wrecked" Room

These rooms are great when playmates are visiting or for some especially noisy activities; but generally pre-school and early elementary school age children prefer to play near their care-givers. Observe where children are most comfortable playing and arrange for storage there, and you will have fewer toys kicking around. Conversely, the basement is the perfect place for teens and their friends. They want space from adults. Go figure? Your house will be a popular hangout if you provide broken-down but comfy furniture, techno stuff and a TV "down there."

Homes exist to serve family lifestyles. As parents of very young children we can take a look at our home from their perspective. We can get on our hands and knees and crawl around noticing the view. Test the ease of living at that level. Analyze your children's needs and make some adjustments. Notice the habits of older children and ask their advice. Don't forget yourself. If they fit the budget and you desire them, arrange a spot for a Trish Romance print, a lazy boy, a steam shower or a hot tub. "Home Sweet Home!"

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