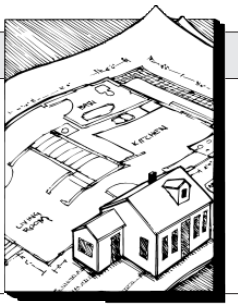


A House Fit for Kids

by Gordon Tully

Since the heyday of the "typical family" in the '50s and '60s, housing has followed our changing living patterns by focusing on other markets, especially singles and retired people. Even so, kids are here to stay, and there is still a big market for family housing.

With that in mind, I designed a case study house to include features that respond to the needs of kids and help smooth out conflicts between the generations.

Open Plans Lack Privacy

Open plans are a great help in preventing small houses from feeling claustrophobic, but they don't allow much acoustical privacy. Adding back some of the barrier walls and doors permits competing groups, like adults and teenagers, to use the house in different ways at the same time. It also allows the parent to cordon off various parts of the house from kids (or pets), and to control sound and privacy.

There are two main strategies for dividing a house to accommodate competing uses: Build special rooms for specific purposes, and split the house into two parts. I have used both strategies in this design, while trying to keep some of the openness of a modern plan.

Isolate Special Rooms

There are several special-purpose rooms in a typical house that can be acoustically isolated — notably bedrooms and bathrooms. Kids need a private room to be alone, listen to loud music, or read away from the TV. Even Frank Lloyd Wright, a great advocate of open plans, put doors on bedrooms in his designs.

One feature that should appeal to buyers with kids is sound-isolating construction in the bedrooms. Two techniques that help a lot are using 6-inch staggered-stud walls with acoustical batting in bedroom party walls, and hanging the ceiling below on resilient acoustical channels.

My design also assumes a playroom in the basement, useful for kids from age six or so. When the kids are gone, it can become storage or workspace, or an adult playroom (ping-pong, for example). For first-time buyers, the bedroom over the garage could start out as a playroom and be converted into a master bedroom suite later. Make sure the playroom is acoustically isolated — use resilient channels on the ceiling of a basement playroom.

Formal vs. Informal Spaces

The other strategy for dividing the house is to split the living spaces into two parts, allowing two family groups to use the house in competing ways at the same time.

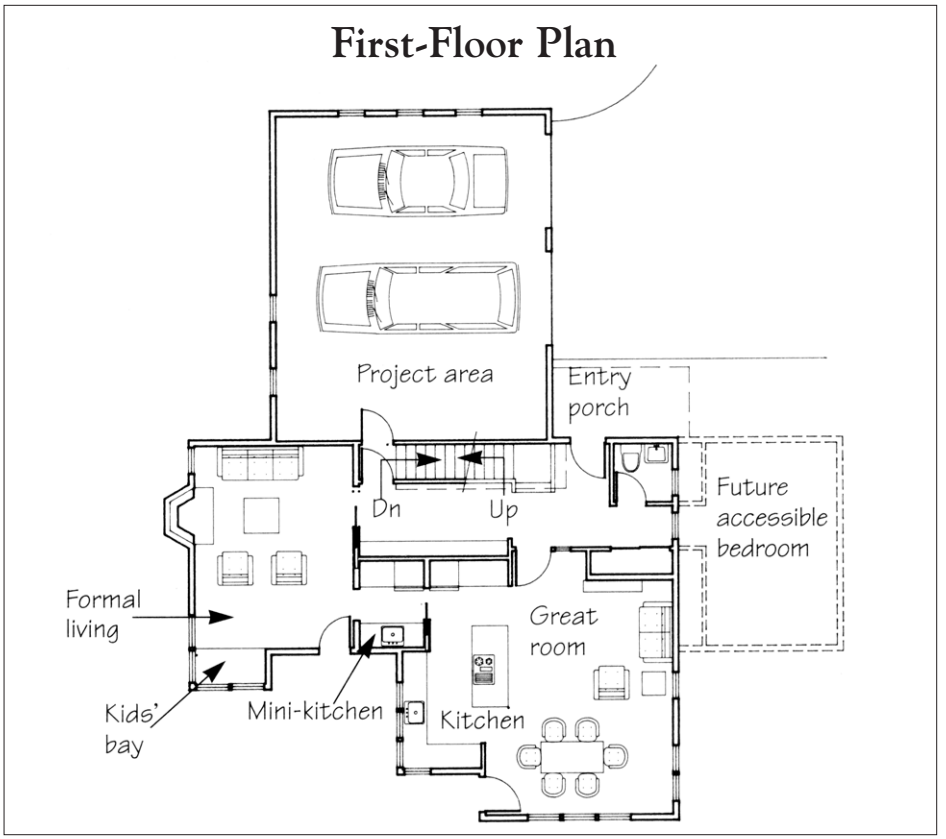
This is typically done by creating a formal living area with a fireplace and books, and an informal "great room" or "country kitchen," where you cook, eat, sit around a woodstove, or watch TV.

This arrangement, however, has a major flaw: Both groups are likely to need the kitchen at the same time. One solution is to design the kitchen with doors that isolate the space. But few modern buyers like separate kitchens since the cooks are typically also the hosts and want to be in the thick of things.

Divide the Kitchen

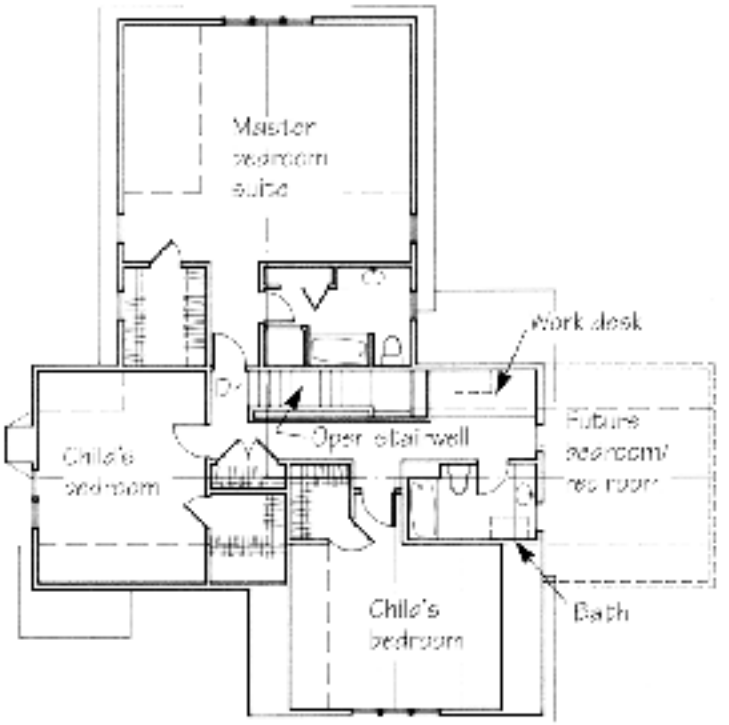
There are many lifestyle solutions to the problem: stagger meals, accept intrusions and welcome the kids, have one group eat out, and so forth. There is also an architectural solution, however, illustrated in my case study design: Create an inexpensive second kitchen to serve the other living space.

I put the main kitchen between the formal and informal living spaces, then split it into two unequal parts. The small kitchen next to the living room includes a sink, refrigerator, and microwave.



Each of the two living spaces — the formal living room and the more casual great room — has its own kitchen and can be closed off from the rest of the house. An addition to the right could provide a future office and extra bedroom or playroom.

Second-Floor Plan



The upstairs hall features a generous stairwell with a skylit kids' work space. All the rooms have cathedral ceilings, with finished space under the eaves. The bedroom skylights shown provide side light and cross-ventilation. Dormers in the master suite provide light and space for the closet and bath.

The group in the living room can serve buffet meals, drinks, or snacks using the secondary kitchen, popping into the main kitchen for any necessities that are not duplicated. Or, anyone can grab a coke from the second refrigerator without disturbing the diners in the country kitchen.

The strategy is exactly like a bathroom built with separate compartments. Different householders can use the space flexibly without having to schedule their use patterns. (If the zoning ordinance frowns on an extra kitchen, you can call it a "bar," since it has no range.)

Study Spaces

Kids often hate being alone when they do homework. While a family can arrange a work time after dinner where everyone reads or does homework at the dining room table, it helps to have a work space somewhere.

A good study space can be made by widening the upstairs hall to form a cozy study alcove, maybe lit by a skylight. This is often done in renovations, but seldom in new homes – yet it is an economical way to add useful space.

Home Theater

Special play areas are fine, but growing children need a variety of spaces for spontaneous play as well. Small children need plenty of room throughout the house for fantasy play. Here, the appropriate architectural response is to create dramatic "theater" spaces such as level changes, balconies, surprise windows from one room to another, and windows that look into double-height spaces – anything that encourages play-acting.

Children also need more private tucked-away spaces for play and for quiet activities such as reading. Examples include alcoves, narrow passages, and hidden nooks and crannies under the eaves.

Spaces directly under the roof are wonderful for kids because they create a powerful sense of shelter. You can hunker down under the eaves and look out at the world with security. It's best to insulate the roof planes so the owners can use all the space under the roof and avoid hard-to-insulate kneewalls.

A skylight placed down low adds headroom and light to an under-the-eaves alcove, making it a special place

Left Side Elevation

The roofs over the 24-foot-wide wings spring from the floor, while the roofs over the narrower 18-foot-wide wings spring from 3 feet up. Note the low window in the great room and the cantilevered front porch.

to read or listen to stories. Under-eaves closets can turn into play caves.

Attics are great kid spaces, heated or not. I know trusses are economical and are here to stay, but I suggest avoiding them if possible. If you do use trusses, spend a little extra and get special "attic trusses" that provide usable attic space. Put windows in the gables (making one an escape window) or add skylights. A drop-down stair will make access easier.

Close to the Adults

Special play spaces are fine for social play with siblings and friends, but there are times when a child needs to be underfoot. My favorite play space was a large cabinet in the pantry, within which I created an entire house for myself, to the detriment of my mother's pots and pans.

To accommodate this need, you should ideally provide a corner or alcove in every room where kids can read or play with blocks or puzzles alongside the adults. Window seats, corners with low kid-height windows, and built-in cabinets and furniture can work well. There can't be too many nooks and crannies, each with its own character, each as small as you like, either in the thick of things or off to the side.

With all children's spaces, the more options you provide the better, since how kids will use a space is hard to predict. And, of course, such spatial play greatly enlivens any house, supporting my view that a house designed for kids is the best place for anyone to live. ■

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