

Designing for Children

by David Woolf

"We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us."

— Winston Churchill

The house a child lives in offers something the television and computer screen cannot: the physical experience of real spaces and real surfaces. Yet too often, children's needs are overlooked in the planning and design of houses. A little foresight and consideration can create a house that welcomes children and invites exploration and play.

Democratic Homes

Kid-friendly measures can take the form of major floor-plan considerations or small details. For a two-story home, one feature greatly appreciated by clients is to build the house's main stair near the front and then add an inexpensive second stairway (a carpeted one enclosed between two walls and finished with carpet, with a pantry or

utility closet beneath), connecting to halls or rooms on both floors. This makes all the rooms in a house feel connected and keeps the children from feeling isolated anywhere in the house. Communication is easier; safety is increased in case of fire; and the two stairs seem to make a home feel more "democratic," since there is less of a hierarchy of rooms and always a choice as to which way to go. The double stairs open up tremendous possibilities for game-playing, as the house contains almost no dead ends.

In single-story homes, I try to achieve similar effects by creating what I call an "open" circulation system. That is, I arrange the rooms around a centralized cluster of architectural elements, such as a central staircase or a half-bath and entry or utility closet. The roughly circular floor plan that results creates a dynamic circulation pattern, minimizes dead ends, and

gives the children a loop to run around. If the core is a stair, the stair provides an extra "exit" from the loop.

Other plan features that take on added importance in homes with kids include attics, basements, and mudrooms. These provide needed extra storage or elbow room as well as extra play areas. Keep those areas as kid-safe as possible, and in mudrooms, include a lower (3

Simple Stool

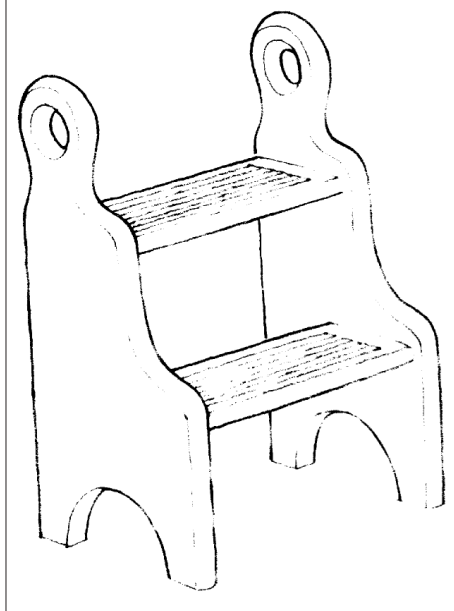


Figure 2. The author built this brightly colored “waterfall” step stool, with nonslip treads and carry handles, for his children, who used it for years to reach high shelves, sinks, and counters.

over their environment. Putting light switches at door-knob height, for instance, makes the switches easier for small children to reach, yet no less convenient for adults. Low clothes rods and shelves in children’s closets give them the opportunity to both select their clothes and take responsibility for putting them away.

Small children want to be able to see outside while they are standing, just as adults do. Low windowsills throughout a house allow this, and even lower windows in a children’s room mark those rooms as theirs. (As with any window, provide adult-height latches, screens, and other safety measures to keep anyone from tumbling out an open window.) Most children also like window seats, which are like little rooms with a view. They also provide storage in a bin or shelving beneath.

Though I’ve used low plumbing fixtures in preschool situations, I don’t think them necessary in the home. A better, more flexible solution is to provide a stool and perhaps a nook or corner in the bathroom where it is kept, and maybe a second stool in the kitchen. Kids can move these stools

wherever they’re needed (Figure 2). To provide bathroom sink access, another possibility is a deep drawer with a sturdy sliding top; the children can pull the drawer out and stand on the lid to reach the sink.

Child-Scale Details

There are many other opportunities to make a house kid-friendly. Below are a few I’ve found particularly successful.

- Include a low mirror or two (either nonbreakable plastic or safety glass) in kids’ bedrooms and in whatever bathroom they use.
- Include a removable panel in a wall on which growing kids can mark their heights and ages; the panel spares a door jamb from similar defacement and can be removed and stored later as a keepsake if the family moves.
- Keep steps no steeper than a 7-11 pitch.
- Include a “balcony” space or two, such as a bedroom loft, an actual loft over a living area, or a wide stair landing or balcony that overlooks main living areas. These make great vantage points for kid’s reconnaissance or games.
- Create a few spaces (such as a cabinet in a kid’s closet) that are too small for children but big enough for their “kids” — their dolls or toys. This lets them play the “adult” too big to enter such spaces.
- In the bathroom, use nonabsorptive flooring materials, especially around the toilet. It’s also good to keep baseboard heating away from the toilet area, since I’ve seen heaters prematurely rust from being splashed upon by those with poor aim.
- Provide a semi-secret play space outside by providing access underneath a porch or deck. Again, make sure such places are safe and don’t lead beneath houses or to hot pipes or electrical conduits. ■

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