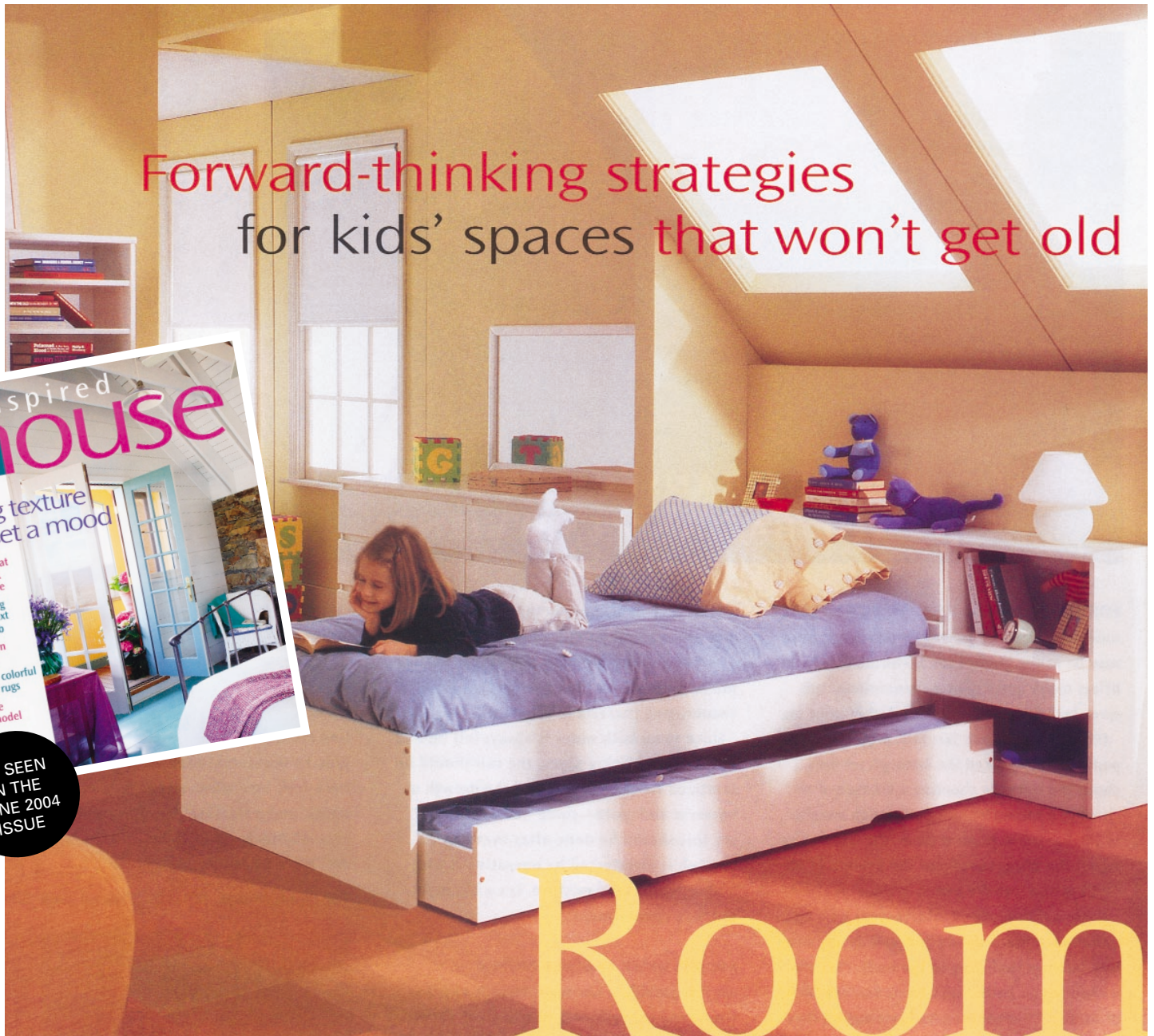


Forward-thinking strategies for kids' spaces that won't get old



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Room



PRETTY AND PRACTICAL

Kid's furniture doesn't have to be fussy—pieces with simple lines will last into the teen years. Give careful thought to lighting (left) and storage, and you won't go wrong.

What is it about a baby that drives even the most frugal and level-headed new-parent to Disney-esque extremes when it comes to decorating? Why do we go gaga over pink and blue everything, hang \$85-a-yard nursery-rhyme wallpaper (and matching framed prints), buy castle-shaped bookcases, then proceed to stuff them with more plush animals than baby could possibly play with in a lifetime? We know this stuff won't last. And yet we persist in decorating over-the-top children's rooms that need to be redone every other year for the simple reason that kids grow up.

As a professional designer, I see this all the time—I myself once made the mistake of decorating my older son's room with pom-poms and polka dots. But I've learned a lot over the years. Now I say a child's room should be done twice: once for infancy and toddlerhood (I'm not completely against cute) and again around

the time the child starts school. This is not to say that rooms shouldn't evolve and reflect the changing tastes of the children who inhabit them, but I believe there are ways to design a functional—and fun—space that grows along with a child. (Keep in mind that by the time your kids become teenagers, they will have their own ideas about the design of their rooms).

Consider the following essentials for designing a great kid's room that affords privacy, a place to work, a place to play and a place to show off the things your child likes.

Let lighting show you the way

Too often lighting is an afterthought in room design, but it should be the first thing you consider when planning a child's room—think ahead to late nights of homework.

Sketch out, however crudely, where the furniture will be placed and install recessed lighting over work surfaces, bookshelves and the bed, where kids often read. Place additional lighting around the room's perimeter because that can help reduce the number of fixtures you need elsewhere. Using recessed lights instead of table lamps means fewer breaks and less damage from those indoor football games and pillow fights you aren't supposed to know about. Finally, place a lamp or light switch by the bed, low enough so it can be turned on or off while the child is lying down.

Natural light is important, too, so choose shades, blinds, and curtains according to your needs. Is your child awakened easily by the morning light? Is that a good or a bad thing? Does direct sunlight cause blinding glare during homework time? Mini-blinds



HOMEWORK HELP

Boys and girls need open shelves and roomy work surfaces, whether they're coloring, doing math problems, or writing papers on the computer.

to grow

BY DEBORAH WIENER

give you flexibility. They come in dozens of colors and finishes, and they filter light as well as eliminate it completely.

A good closet stands the test of time

Storage space is vital in keeping a kid's room organized. It also reduces the frustration that comes from losing a toy, homework, or the latest CD. I believe in investing in modular closet storage.

You can install it yourself by purchasing the materials at a home store, The Container Store, or Hold Everything. Or if you're like me and would rather leave construction of any kind to others, you can enlist the services of a professional closet company. They'll come into your home, design a changeable closet interior, and install it. I stayed away from the drawers and hanging gadgets that quickly run



up the expense of closet design. However, if you have the space and the budget, you can outfit yours with enough drawers and shoe cubbies to hold a lifetime's worth of clothing and accessories.

Shop around. Prices vary greatly but the materials are virtually identical. I wouldn't advise using wire racks; they're cheaper, but young children have trouble hanging clothes on them. Laminated shelving and metal hanging bars make it easy to switch things around as a child's wardrobe changes. You can move to double hanging rods and higher storage shelves as your child grows. So maximize the closet space in your child's room—because best of all, closets have doors.

A place to work and a place to play

Kids' rooms—and parents' budgets—come in all shapes and sizes, so I've included furniture options in a range of prices. Whatever your budget, I recommend that you try to think beyond babyhood and plan for roomy work surfaces. That toddler will one day be an elementary school student with piles of school papers. Middle school kids have dozens of books, and high schoolers have even more. And today it seems everyone needs room for a computer.

At the high end is Techline, a furniture and cabinetry system that comes in laminated finishes or in wood veneers. You can design a custom wall unit that can hold toys, games, and plush animals long before it has to go to work for the older child. You can get features such as keyboard trays, book shelves, and filing drawers that can

Storage is vital to keeping a kid's room organized.

double as clothes drawers. This furniture will last for years, but if you're worried about how it will look by the time your child leaves for college—and you reclaim the room—cover the desk top with a clear acrylic protective pad from an office-supply store.

At the mid-range is bedroom and home-office furniture in wood and wood veneers from Stanley, which I used in my own son's bedroom. Stanley offers office furniture that coordinates with bedroom pieces, so I was able to get a computer desk, table, and bookcases that match the tall bureau my son uses for clothes.

For girls' rooms, I've used pieces from Lexington Furniture, which carries an assortment of bedroom and office furniture. Some are licensed collections from well-known designers like Susan Sargent and Bob Timberlake. You can mix and match wood finishes or colorful painted pieces that won't go out of style anytime soon.

If your budget is very tight, be creative. A solid-panel door placed on top of file cabinets spray-painted in coordinating colors makes an attractive desk with plenty of work room. If all else fails, convert a long, narrow hall table or kitchen table into a desk with rolling



A CASE FOR CLOSETS
Closet organizing systems are well worth the investment. They keep messes in check, no matter how many toys or pairs of shoes your children own.





plastic file cubes stored underneath for papers. Remember that wide surfaces are great for homework, but they're also perfect for crafts, puzzles, and Legos. For additional display and storage, hang shelves or choose stacking cubbyhole units.

What if your child wants purple walls?

Individual style is what makes a kid love his or her room. It's reasonable to let your child choose a dominant paint color, but you can reserve the right to temper it. For example, if your child favors electric blue, you can do one wall in blue, three in off-white and accessorize with bedding, throw pillows, and curtain in shades of blue.

But what if your child prefers chartreuse, or black, or purple? Don't panic. If your kid's color palette is tough for you to live with,

TALL AND SMALL
High book shelves work on two levels: They encourage little ones to put things away, while keeping Mom's stuff out of reach.

incorporate it in a lesser way. How about purple stripes on the bedding? Or black mini-blinds. Think compromise.

Accessories are to a room what matching shoes and a handbag are to a great dress. Accessories are easily changed and are usually inexpensive, so let your kids go for it. I like Todd Oldham's dorm collection at Target—and kids do, too. Most inexpensive department stores will have collections that appeal to children, so let them choose. For more inspiration, look to what your child already enjoys and collects. Instead of a wall-paper border, hang baseball hats side-by-side for a functional style statement.

Kids love to pin things up, but favorite teams and heartthrobs change, and that can mean a lot of holes in your walls. I recommend covering an entire wall in cork—floor to ceiling and corner to corner—and then painting it to match the other walls.

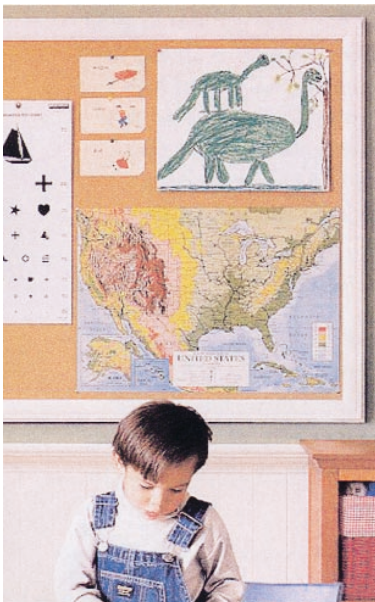
So what's the bottom line when designing your growing child's room? Stay away from kid-size furniture. Avoid the temptation to introduce a juvenile theme, like race-car beds or ballerina table lamps; themed items are expensive, and your child will probably hate them in just a few years.

The key is planning. Choose furniture storage, lighting, and accessories with an eye toward the older child your baby will become and you won't find yourself redecorating his or her room again and again—and again.

Deborah Wiener owns Designing Solutions, a firm specializing in real-life room design. She lives in a kid-friendly house in Silver Spring, MD., with her husband and their two rambunctious boys.

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Cork boards (or cork walls) allow kids to pin up favorite pictures on a whim—with no damage done to the paint job.



Photos, right: top, courtesy of Garnet Hill; center two, courtesy of Pottery Barn; bottom, Mark Finkenstaedt

TIPS FOR CLEVER, DURABLE DESIGN

DON'T BUY FANCY BEDDING THAT FADES

Use inexpensive solid-color sheets and pillowcases in combination with designer comforters, beds skirts, and throw pillows. Or skip the bed skirt and use a patterned fitted sheet to hide the box spring. Both Kmart and Target have a great assortment of high-thread-count, all-cotton sheets.



THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX WHEN CHOOSING ACCESSORIES.

Use decorative plate racks from furniture or kitchen stores for easily changeable art and book displays. Stock up on those colorful plastic milk crates that stack and can hold everything from Beanie Babies to schoolwork and important papers.

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CHOOSE PRACTICAL FLOORING.

For wall-to-wall carpet, look at Tactesse fiber, the softest, most durable, and most soil-resistant Stainmaster carpet available. Stay away from twists and cut pile and choose tightly looped or textured patterns, which don't show traffic wear. Use throw rugs in high-traffic areas.



FOR WALLS AND CEILINGS,

a matte finish hides imperfections in plaster and wallboard. Benjamin Moore's Regal matte finish paint is engineered to be scrubbable with just soap and water.

FOR EXTRA SEATING AND STORAGE,

try placing an upholstered lift-top bench at the foot of the bed. Cover it in Sunbrella fabric for maximum durability.

FOR ADDITIONAL LIGHTING,

buy colorful, bendable, clip-on lamps. They attach to the edge of the desk or bookshelf and give off a concentrated beam of bright halogen light.

