

California Life
HOME & GARDEN

Q&A: DEBORAH WIENER

Designing with family in mind

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White carpet. Pale yellow walls. Cream upholstery with matching drapes. Does anyone really live in the rooms featured in home decorating magazines?

"Sure," says interior designer Deborah Wiener. Her specialty is designing interiors that look good — and can be lived in. She spoke with us by phone from her home in Silver Spring, Md.

Q: *Is it possible to have a beautiful home even if you have young children or pets?*

A: Absolutely. But your home should be easy to maintain. No one has time to fluff pillows or clean fingerprints or vacuum every day. It is much less stressful and far more economical to make design choices that require little maintenance to keep things looking nice.

Q: *What changes did you make in your home?*

A: The first thing I changed was the carpet. I brought home samples and put them down by the front door. I knew the kids weren't going to take off their shoes and my husband wouldn't wipe his feet, so any sample that couldn't hold up against cleats and dirt was tossed out. In the end, the only thing that worked was coffee brown.

Q: *What about pets?*

A: If you have pets, decorate around the color of the pets so that you won't have to vacuum every day. If you have a golden retriever, go with beige carpet. If you have a black lab, go with dark carpet so the dog hair won't show.

If your dog sits on the sofa, buy a dog-color sofa.

Q: *But the dirt and dog hair is still there.*

A: Yes, but you won't have to look at it, and if friends drop in they won't notice the dog hair.

Q: *After a carpet change, what came next?*

A: The next big problem in my house were the kitchen chairs. I did the same test with chair fabrics that I did for the carpet. I brought samples home and pinned them to the chairs. If I couldn't get ketchup stains out of the samples, I tossed them. What I ended up doing was laminating fabric for the chairs. That way I can wipe off sticky spots with a sponge.

Q: *Is that like applying a plastic coating?*

A: Exactly. But I didn't want it to look like plastic so I used a matte finish. It's the only thing that could hold up against the bad table manners of my boys.



'Real life' designer Deborah Wiener with sons Sam, left, and Jacob.

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Q: *You can't put plastic on the walls. What about wall color?*

A: Color is the key to keeping walls looking clean. Color can hide a myriad of spots and stains. In my house, shoes are kicked against walls, and garbage misses the can. Colors hide a lot of that.

Another key to clean walls is selecting the correct finish for the paint. In high-traffic areas like hallways, the kitchen and the family room, use a finish with a slight gloss. My favorite is Benjamin Moore pearl. It is rated for institutional use, and my house is kind of an institution. This stuff holds up well to frequent scrubbing.

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Q: *Woodwork is a problem for many people. Do you use the same type of paint on that?*

A: Here's my best paint trick. I match all my trim to Wite-Out (correction fluid). I use Wite-Out to touch up all the little dings in the woodwork, and it works great. You'd have to get on your hands and knees to see places I've touched up. I want something I can touch up at 1 o'clock and by 1:02 it's ready to go. Wite-Out is perfect.

Q: *Any tricks for touching up furniture?*

A: In children's rooms, I frequently match painted finishes to crayons or Magic Markers. When a kid crashes a truck into the dresser over and over, it's going to show. You can just fill in the chips and dings with crayon.

Q: *Is there a trick to keeping window coverings clean?*

A: If you have young children or pets, drapes are a problem. Kids always run to the window and grab the drapes to look out. Pets hide behind drapes and get them hairy. I solved the problem by getting rid of drapes and installing shades that pull up out of reach of dirty hands. Pull them up during the day and put them down after the kids go to bed at night or at least after they have had a bath.

Q: *Do you have a suggestion for upholstery fabric?*

A: If I ruled the world, there would be three kinds of upholstery fabric: leather, Ultrasuede and 100 percent solution-dyed acrylic.

I love the way leather holds up over time. And even as it ages, it develops character. But you have to buy good quality. The way to test it is to run your finger nail over the store sample. If you can't see a scratch, it is the good stuff.

Ultrasuede is soft but tough. You can spot-clean it, and unlike leather, it comes in unlimited color choices.

Solution-dyed acrylic is fabric used for outdoor furniture. It comes



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in all kinds of textures so it looks like linen, chenille or cotton and it comes in solids and prints. Besides holding up under tough use, it doesn't fade in sunlight. It's a perfect choice for families with kids.

This room designed by Deborah Wiener emphasizes scrubbable surfaces, heavy-duty fabrics and patterns that hide everyday wear and stains.

Q: *Couldn't you just turn down the lights to hide the dirt?*

A: Lighting is really the most important factor in designing an interior, and it is most often overlooked by homeowners. Good lighting will make modest rooms look impressive and poor lighting will make impressive rooms look modest.

If you have art and collectibles, use lighting to your advantage to show them off. But also think practical. I don't like tables that are cluttered with lamps and kids are murder on table lamps. I use a lot of floor lamps and hanging lamps. They are out of the way, yet easy to reach.

Make good use of dimmers on lights so that you can adjust the mood of the room. Turn the light down during dinner, turn them up if you are playing board games.

For more design tips or to ask Wiener a question, go to www.mydesigningsolutions.com.



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Wiener recommends laminating fabric for kitchen chairs—sticky spots can be wiped off with a sponge.