

HOUSEWATCH

Katherine Salant

[Excerpts from]

In a Household Bustling With Kids, Comfort Comes First in Family Room

When your children are teenagers, your family room might finally look the way you imagined when you decided to buy a new house. But if they're very young when you move in, you will be happier if you start out on the spare side and let the family room "grow" with your children.

When kids are small, they need space to crawl, play and run around. If you put a lot of furniture in the family room, it will just be in the way. A sofa, a side table and possibly an armchair will be plenty, especially because only the adults will use them. Young children will spend most of their time on the floor.

Because you will be down there at least half the time as well, you will want flooring that you can sit on comfortably. Your best option for comfort and cost is wall-to-wall carpet with a good pad. No matter where your children take a fall, they will have some cushioning.

To keep your sanity, your carpet must be easily cleaned and in a color that will hide the dog accidents, vomit, spilled juices, dirt and other abuses that will be inflicted on it during those early years of child rearing, said Deborah Wiener, an interior designer in Silver Spring and the mother of two boys.

A wool carpet will do nicely, but wool is pricey and some children are allergic to it. For durability, Wiener recommends a synthetic material such as polyester, olefin or nylon treated with Dupont's Stainmaster. Darker colors such as chocolate brown, medium to dark blue or a dark taupe will hide stains, but they can make the room look more somber than you might want. Wiener suggested a bright but inexpensive throw rug. The rug should also be cleanable, but if something awful happens, you can throw it away and get another one.

Comfort in a family room also means adequate lighting, natural and artificial, Wiener said. All the windows that make the family room in the builder's model bright and sunny are not necessarily included in the base-price house, but they definitely enhance the space. On cloudy days and in the evening you also need illumination. Wiener suggested recessed light fixtures to avoid lamps with cords that will get tripped over and pulled out of the wall.

If you plan to have furniture that "floats" in the middle of the room, not against the wall, you should have outlets installed in the floor during construction. Otherwise, when you eventually put in side tables and reading lamps, the cords will stretch halfway across the floor to a wall outlet. Figure out about where your furniture will go, put in the outlets and childproof them until they are needed.

You will need some kind of window treatments, and Wiener recommended honeycomb shades, such as Hunter Douglas Duette. When they are pulled down during the day, the light that comes through is wonderfully soft and diffuse, and the shade can be opened from the bottom up or the top down. The latter position provides both sunlight and privacy, which can be an issue if your neighbor's house is only 10 feet away, as it is in many new subdivisions. Many manufacturers offer such shades. Whatever you select, make sure it has safety features so that a small child can't get a cord wrapped around his or her neck or swallow plastic parts.

Practicality and initial sparseness in the family room do not mean you have to look 100 percent plain. Hang artwork and splurge in good conscience on a sturdily built sofa that looks great while withstanding the rigors of child-rearing.

*Durable carpeting
window treatments,
adequate lighting
and artwork
can enhance a
family room*

Everything Starts With the Sofa

When furnishing a family room, many parents figure they can use the old ratty sofa they've had since college and buy a new one for the living room where it won't get messed up.

But it's more sensible to put the new one in the place where you'll be spending most of your time, and more sensible still to get a good one that can withstand the rigors of child rearing while serving a multitude of functions — eating, napping, roughhousing and reading. The sofa also should be comfortable, Silver Spring interior designer Deborah Wiener said.

She recommends one with a sturdy hardwood frame, a "spring down" seat (the seat underneath the cushions has steel coiled springs that are wrapped in down and covered in Dacron) and down-blend wrap cushions (the back and seat cushions have a high density foam core that is wrapped in down and also covered with Dacron).

Comfort also depends on size. To accommodate the widest range of adult height and body shape, sofa seat depth can range from 18 to 22 inches, and seat depth, 16 to 22 inches. The only way to know what's right for you is to go to a showroom and test the sofas until you find one that you can sit in comfortably, Wiener said.

If you're tall, standard sofa back height — 34 to 36 inches may not be enough, but for an additional charge, many sofa manufacturers will raise the back two inches, Wiener said.

You need upholstery fabric that is stain-resistant and easy to clean.

The most durable upholstery fabrics are commercial ones. Because most commercial-grade fabrics are sold at design centers and not directly to the public, you will have to purchase one with the help of an interior designer or decorator. You can use the fabric on a sofa that the designer helps you select or one you buy

yourself — almost all sofa makers will accept a "customer's own material" (usually referred to as COM).

You may wince at the thought of a polyester-covered sofa, but fabric manufacturers make synthetics that look and feel like natural fibers.

The most foolproof upholstery fabrics are the commercial ones with added treatments that greatly enhance stain and moisture resistance (if there's no water resistance, spilled liquids can soak into the cushions, producing mold and unpleasant odors). Wiener recommended Crypton, which has been available for more than 10 years. Gore Seat Protection, which was introduced about a year ago, is less known. Both will work well in residential settings that include rambunctious children.

For residential use, the most significant difference between the two treatments is that Gore Seat Protection can be used on a wider variety of fabrics. Assuming that it gains wide acceptance among upholstery fabric manufacturers, consumers will have more choices.

How much do these wonder fabrics cost?

Commercial-grade fabrics are a lot more expensive than residential grades. Retail prices of Arc-Com, which offers both Gore Seat Protection and Crypton-treated fabrics, range from about \$30-\$40 a yard. To cover a three-seat sofa and cushions takes about 20 yards; a two-seater takes 15 yards; and an ottoman generally takes three yards. This sounds pricey, but the fabrics are soft, the colors are gorgeous, and having one nice piece of furniture in the middle of a lot of chaos can have a tonic effect.

For more information on the Web: Crypton is a www.cryptonfabric.com; Gore Seating Protection is a www.goreseatingprotection.com; Arc-Com is a www.arc-com.com.

— Katherine Salant