

CREATING LIFE ENHANCING ENVIRONMENTS FOR YOUR HOME



LYN FALK

Sleep well: Creating a healthy children's bedroom

» IN BRIEF

It's easiest to convert a child's bedroom into a healthy haven when he is young, before he claims it completely as his own territory. But even if you have teenagers in the house, it's important to at least provide them with a healthy bed and linens.

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CONSCIOUS SPACES

It's simply good sense to create a bedroom that nurtures a child while she sleeps. Seems like an easy thing to do: paint the walls in soothing colors, hang a wallpaper border for some visual interest, install cozy wall-to-wall carpeting, hang drapes to control the sunlight, get a comfy bed with a supportive mattress and a pillow of her liking. Make up the bed with fun poly-cotton (no wrinkle) linens and a couple of brightly colored fleece blankets with pajamas to match. Bring in a dresser, maybe a desk, an end table, clock radio, and some personal affects. Voilà, a cozy, personalized bedroom. What more could a child want?

Unfortunately, most parents consider this a healthy, nurturing bedroom. Most likely, the paints used contain multiple chemicals such as acetone, ammonia, and formaldehyde – chemicals which will off-gas pollutants into the air for weeks. The wallpaper border is probably vinyl and applied with a toxic adhesive. The furniture is made from medium density fiberboard, which also contains formaldehyde, is assembled with toxic glues, and finished with a toxic urethane finish. The draperies, carpeting, bed linens and pajamas are most likely a combination of nylon/polyester (petroleum) and cotton fibers, colored with chemical dyes, and possibly treated with stain- and wrinkle-resistant chemicals. The mattress will be (by code) treated with a chemical fire retardant (studies are now showing links between these retardants and learning disabilities and ADD in children). All of these textiles serve as sponges that absorb all of the off-gassing toxins, only to re-release them back into the air over time.

Then there is the electrical equipment that will slowly begin to flood the room as the child grows up, beginning with the baby monitor, which is eventually exchanged for a clock radio, then a TV, computer, printer, and phone. I can only imagine what other electronic devices make their way into a teenager's bedroom. Finally, as pets become a part of the family, dogs, cats, reptiles, and/or birds can take up residence in the room, adding another layer of pollutants.

If Mom or Dad is allowed in to clean the room from time to time, the cleaning solutions or air fresheners used out of desperation to mimic a clean room are the icing on the polluted cake.

I know; if it isn't enough to worry about your child's diet, social skills, soccer tournaments, piano lessons, addiction to the com-

puter, or lack of exercise, now you have to be concerned with his bedroom! But think about the amount of time he spends in this room. In addition to sleeping (which is when the body takes time to balance, recharge, grow, heal, etc), he spends time on the phone, on the computer, doing homework, watching TV, reading, etc. It's his haven. You'll find it's easiest to convert a child's bedroom into a healthy haven when he is young, before he claims it completely as his own territory. But even if you have teenagers in the house, it's important to at least provide them with a healthy bed and linens.

Since time and money are generally of concern, it may be a matter of changing things gradually. Here is a quick list of things to consider when remodeling or updating your child's room.

Flooring

Replace carpeting with a hard or resilient floor covering (hardwood, bamboo, cork, linoleum); ask that adhesives and finishes used are non-toxic.

Add an all natural (e.g., organic cotton, silk, wool) area rug if you want something soft underfoot by the bed (if your child has asthma or allergies make sure the fibers are woven vs. cut/plush/pile as this latter type of construction will disperse fibers into the air and can aggravate airways; this is especially true for wool which is a naturally short fiber).

Walls

Avoid wall coverings, which can also attract mold and mildew.

Paint with natural or non-toxic paints. If you want to add some texture to the walls, trowel on a natural clay plaster.

Colors

Choose medium to light shades of cool colors (greens, blues, purples) which have a calming effect. Taupes are good neutrals as they are a blend of cool grays and warm tans. Use warmer colors (reds, oranges, yellows) with discretion, as they are stimulating.

Windows

Replace fabric draperies with wood blinds, or anti-dust metal blinds.

Make sure windows are operating well and screens are in good condition so you can bring in fresh air (although if you live on a busy street, only open windows when traffic is light).

Furniture/Beds/Linens

Buy furniture made with solid wood or fiber board that is free of formaldehyde; if you choose to finish it yourself, select non-toxic stains, paints, and sealers and do the work outside.

Mattresses and pillows are pretty personal so best to have the individual (generally 12 years and older) who will be using them try them out before buying. Two of the most common mattress options are: chemical-free solid core natural latex (no metal springs), and pure organic wool and cotton batting with springs. Wool and latex are naturally dust mite resistant. And wool is naturally flame retardant. If you buy a mattress that needs to be treated with a flame retardant, ask for a boron-based retardant, which is much safer than the chemical retardants used today. If you're concerned about chemicals in an existing mattress, there are wool and cotton mattress toppers available to help separate your child's body from the mattress.

There are plenty of healthy pillow options to choose from: natural fills such as millet, kapok and buckwheat, natural latex rubber, wool, and cotton. There are also mite resistant covers available for use over existing pillows.

Buy healthy bed linens made from organic cotton, silk, wood and bamboo fibers (yes, silky soft fabrics are now being made from wood from sustainably managed forests, and bamboo!). It's important that all the linens (including pajamas) are made from natural fibers that breathe. Our bodies evaporate quite a bit of moisture when we sleep so it's important to have fibers that help with moisture dissipation.

Buy organic cotton pajamas. Don't compromise.

Furniture Placement

The bed should be placed so the head is facing the entrance door or towards the door. If this is impossible, then place a mirror on a wall so you can see the door to the room from the bed. This makes for a more restful sleep, as the occupant is less likely to be surprised by a person entering the room when they can see the entrance. Vastu design (ancient design practices from India based on the laws of nature, particularly solar orientation and the earth's mag-

netic fields) suggests that we shouldn't sleep with our heads facing north.

Electrical Pollution

To minimize electrical pollution in the room, avoid beds with metal springs and head/foot boards, and keep wires at least 6 feet from the bed. Optimally, the power should be shut off to the room at the circuit breaker, which means you'll need a battery-operated alarm clock!

Lighting

Use full spectrum light bulbs.

Cleaning

Let the mattress air out for about an hour every day (just pull back the covers and, weather permitting, open the window and let the fresh air and sun in!). Wash linens often and with natural, non-toxic detergents. Hang up to dry (if possible). If you use a dryer, avoid scented dryer sheets. (By avoiding polyester, you'll have little, if any, static cling to deal with.) If you want a fresh scent in your linens, put some lavender oil drops on a clean rag and throw it in with the linens.

Use a vacuum with a good HEPA filter and change all filters on your vacuum regularly. I put a drop of lavender on a small piece of tissue and drop it into the vacuum bag before I use it. Use a vinegar and water solution to clean glass.

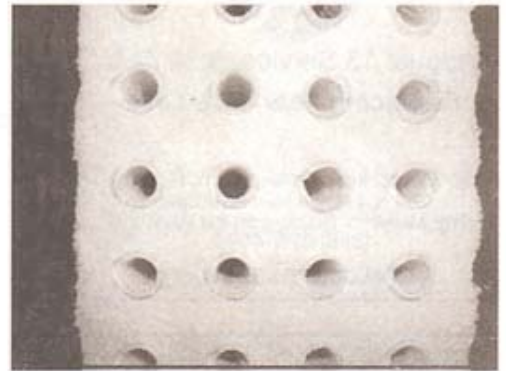
Artwork and Decorative Accessories

You'll only have so many years to influence this part of the room before the children take over. So while you can, choose items that are soothing to the touch and evoke positive thoughts and restfulness.

Make it a fun "bedroom makeover" project in which your kids and their friends can get involved. Film the process from start to finish. Have them conduct Internet research. Take them on a field trip to Future Green in Bay View, or Satara in Madison (info below) so they can see and feel fabric made from bamboo or trees, and try out a pillow filled with kapok, millet, natural latex, or wool. Stop by Safe Building Solutions in Waukesha to look at flooring and paint options. Give them a hand-held camera to film certain tasks. Your children will thank you - some day - and maybe even their friends will, too. And everyone will sleep better because of it.



A close-up of buckwheat hulls and millet.



A chemical-free solid core natural latex mattress.

Resources

Healthy Bedding Retailers:

Future Green, Bay View

www.futuregreen.net 414-294-4300

Satara, Inc., Madison

www.home-environment.com 877-251-4905

Healthy Floor and Paint Supplier:

Safe Building Solutions, Waukesha

www.safebuildingsolutions.com 800-697-5371

Watch for the one-hour television show, "Healthy Style," airing this fall on Milwaukee Public Television. It's about healthy, eco-friendly design and living, and one of the segments is a healthy bedroom makeover for an 8-year-old boy. Lyn Falk, in association with Solterra Studios, created the show and is executive producer and writer.