

CREATING AT-HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

by: Jamie Kern, ASID, President

Design Theory Interiors

The most important goal when creating a study area for a child of any age is to provide a nurturing environment that encourages a sense of security within your child. Far too often, I see parents skimp on a child's room while putting all their interior design budget into the spaces within the home that are most visible to guests. Furnishings, lighting and color work in concert to guide your child into the appropriate mindset for studying and should be given top priority in your home.

FURNISHINGS

A child's room should have a particular area within that is designated for study and is not used for playing games, surfing the web, or instant messaging their friends. A desk is imperative and must have a non-glare surface that will reduce reflectance from light sources within the room. Opt for plastic laminates, matte finish metals and plastics, and wood surfaces with low gloss finishes.

The desktop must be large enough to accommodate a computer, as well as space to spread out books, papers and necessary supplies. An L-shaped desk that can be placed in the corner is the optimal design if it can be adapted to the child's room. The L-shape gives the child plenty of room to spread out and swivel between the two surface areas with ease.

When laying out the furniture plan of the space, keep in mind that the desk should be placed facing a wall, or in a corner when using an L-shaped desk, to minimize visual distractions from around the room. At the end of a study period, children should be encouraged to clean off the desktop and organize study materials. A desktop with a pile of papers and books chaotically strewn across it will actually discourage a child from sitting down to take on the task of studying.

Consider ergonomic desk seating that will adapt to your child's body size and the activities being performed. The chair should be adjustable to allow room for growth. Take your child with you when shopping for a desk chair so that he or she can sit in the chair. Adjust the seat height, arm height and pitch of the seat back and let your child tell you if it is a comfortable fit. Take some time to shop your resources. In the past, these ergonomic task chairs have been utilitarian in their appearance but the market has opened up and now parents have the option of both function and aesthetics.

LIGHTING

Lighting can affect physical conditions within the body that can either enhance or destroy a child's ability to concentrate. Inappropriate lighting can cause eyestrain, tension, headaches and irritability. Natural daylight is the most important light source but is not always readily available in the appropriate levels. Therefore, we rely on artificial sources to supplement our lighting needs.

While science tells us that natural daylight provides vitamins and is necessary to our health, our daylight source in an interior space is usually limited to what comes in through a window, and that can often result in glare if not managed properly. In a study environment, a window treatment must be provided on all windows to diffuse the light levels and the potential glare. Adjustable treatments like

panel-style drapes or blinds allow you the flexibility of closing the treatment to diffuse the light when necessary and open it on those occasions when you need more illumination.

Artificial light sources include ambient, accent and task styles of lighting and all three work together to create a lighting plan that is conducive to study. Ambient light is the general illumination that softens the contrast between brightly lighted task areas and the surrounding areas. It allows you to see clearly all visible surfaces of the room without straining the eye. Ambient sources include general ceiling light fixtures, recessed incandescent lights and wall sconces. It is highly suggested that all major ambient light sources be dimmable to enable the flexibility required to create adequate, appropriate lighting scenarios. Accent lighting is usually in the form of a directional light fixture that spotlights a particular element in a room – an architectural element or artwork – and reduces monotony and glare by providing subtle highs and lows on surfaces. Task lighting is the beam that shines directly on a work surface, making all tasks easy to see. The simplest form of task lighting for your child's study area is a desk light with an adjustable neck so that the beam can be adjusted as needed.

COLOR

Color is perhaps the most important element, and yet, often the most underrated. Numerous scientific studies have determined that the color of walls and ceilings have the power to either relax, thereby enhancing a child's ability to focus, or to escalate anxiety and irritability causing your child to drift away from the task at hand. This particular topic can't possibly be summed up in a few sentences, but there are some bullet points that can help in selecting an appropriate color scheme.

- A dreary impersonal environment actually encourages irritability and fidgeting in children as a compensatory reaction to the lack of visual pleasure. A white room causes eyestrain and anxiety while browns, grays and black are perceived negatively by children of almost all ages as a wall color. However, adding wall colors for the sake of adding color is an exercise in futility and the assumption that bright primary colors are conducive to a child's ability to learn is far from the mark.
- In general a child's positive or negative reaction to color is based more on age and his or her development toward adulthood. However, a child's color preference is not always conducive to study and growth and parents should consider wall colors that encourage concentration, learning and nurturing at each age group
- Breaking up the wall colors is one of the most effective ways to avoid the eye tension experienced in a monotonous room. Painting the front wall – the desk-facing wall – one color in a palette shown to encourage a child's concentration will draw attention and focus in the direction of that wall, defining it as the learning center. Break up the visual monotony by painting side and back walls a color that is a subtle contrast to the front wall.
- Children in kindergarten through elementary school perform best when surrounded by soft, warm colors that will actually compliment a child's natural tendency as an extrovert. Light salmon, soft, warm yellow, corals, and peach on the desk-facing wall will have a calming affect, reducing tension, irritability and anxiety, thereby enhancing the child's ability to concentrate on a task. Side and back walls can be painted a soft, cooler hue.

- Older children and secondary school students are more comfortable working in rooms with a more mature color palette in subtle, cool hues. The facing wall is most effective when painted soft-to-medium tones of blues, greens and blue-greens. Acceptable colors for side and back walls for students in this age group include soft beige, sandstone and light tan.

While the topic of designing study spaces to bolster a child's educational growth is complex and multi-faceted, it is one that deserves careful consideration and priority. A professional interior designer can simplify the process by providing parents with peace of mind and educated suggestions based on industry experience and research. The best investment we, as parents, can make is in the advancement of our children's educational experience, thus ensuring their future growth and development toward adulthood.

*For more information on professional interior design services and children's spaces, **contact Jamie Kern at Design Theory Interiors, 404-843-3086 or email jkern@designtheoryinteriors.com.***

www.designtheoryinteriors.com
www.designtheoryinteriors.blogspot.com