

GENERATIONAL DESIGN

Demographically inspired design ideas

Child-Friendly Kitchens Spotlight Easy-Care Materials

By John Filippelli

Like ice cream and Harry Potter books, the best-designed child-friendly kitchens are suitable for people of all ages.

So says Patti Boyd-Bowles, interior designer and manager for Fairfield, IL-based B-Way Design & Decorating, who believes that kids in the kitchen require practical design to ensure safety, accessibility and easy maintenance for those inevitable spills.

She explains, "Children are being [taken into consideration] more than ever when it comes to the prep areas. For instance, we have been lowering microwaves so that children can have greater accessibility [and independence]. We're also incorporating other parts of the bar area where they can be in the kitchen with the main prep person. This creates a continual open space for doing homework as well as eating, helping with meal preparation and making conversation. Overall, I think it makes the kitchen a bit more interactive."

Kurt Rust, designer for Simi Valley, CA-based Kitchens Etc. of Ventura County, adds, "For growing families, the height of the work area is a crucial element [if you want to] include kids in the preparation of meals. [I have seen designers] integrate a load area [into the design] that kids can work at when they're smaller. You also have the option of installing a larger, taller area [for when they grow]."

But, the designers note, there is a delicate balance that goes with creating a layout that caters to an interactive environment while not giving children access to items that are potentially dangerous.

Says Steve Egan, production manager of Sea Girt, NJ-based Design Line Kitchens, "In my own kitchen, I reverse things and keep dishes down below instead of small stuff that could be dangerous to the child. And, obviously, glass cabinets down low are a definite no-no."

But, in the end, Barbara Geller, ACSD, PKBP and president of Boca Raton, FL-based Kitchens & Baths by Neal Is...The Place for Kitchens, Inc., offers: "[Design professionals] need to make the



▲ Designed by Patti Boyd-Bowles, interior designer and manager for B-Way Design & Decorating, this kitchen reflects the trend of furniture styling with lots of detailing – something frequently seen in child-friendly kitchens.



▶ A common element found in child-friendly kitchens is the lowering of electronics to make them more accessible to child-sized users, as seen in this kitchen, designed by Boyd-Bowles.

kitchen function for whatever is important to each individual client. If we do that, then the aesthetics will always follow."

FOILED AGAIN

Although most of the designers interviewed cite cherry and maple wood cabinets as growing in popularity, it is thermofoil cabinets that they consider to be the preferable choice for kid-friendly kitchens.

Says Egan, "Clients will start to see a lot of nicks and dents [on hardwood cabinets], with a lot of cleaning up and food splattered all over the place. The wood is getting beat up and finishes aren't holding up."

He adds, "The luster is beautiful on hardwoods, but [I don't think] they're going to hold up like thermofoil doors."

Indeed, nearly every designer interviewed noted that thermofoil cabinets offer an ease of maintenance and durability that makes them ideally suited for families with children.

As Chris McLean, owner of All About Kitchens, based in Wolfeboro, NH, says, "Thermofoil is best because it spray-cleans. If there is damage, there is no repairing involved. But, at least you can replace it and still keep your kitchen perfect."

Geller offers a way to avoid this dilemma. "If you want to get around kids banging into wood cabinets, you go to a distressed finish. Then, you don't worry about it."

"We are working on a thermofoil door that has an applied glaze over it," offers Egan.

In fact, Egan notes that his com-

pany is installing a lot of painted, sprayed doors in a latte, with a scrimshaw finish. "It is a bisque color with a brown glaze in the corners to give it an antique look," he reports.

Thermofoil can also help designers maintain a cohesive aesthetic with other design elements, such as solid surface and granite, since it blends well with other materials.

Boyd-Bowles sees a slightly different trend developing, however: "We are seeing that our clients with children are looking for more of a furniture style and detailing."

Geller adds, "Contemporary is coming back, and cherry is very popular right now."

Egan concludes, "People should take into consideration what [the materials will] withstand and what children really can do to a kitchen. A young toddler who is just learning to eat with a spoon will get messy. Think about cleaning that entire mess off of wood raised-panel doors in the kitchen."

MATERIAL MATCH

Complementing these requested looks, according to Boyd-Bowles, are a mixture of such materials as granite and easy-care solid surface, accented by bolder colors and speckled patterns that hide dirt.

"We are still very big on solid surface materials. It's getting into a granite look, but we do more with solid surface because of its ease of use in different design profiles," she explains. "We're also doing a lot of the speckled particulates on countertops, where it looks more like a granite."

Boyd-Bowles adds, "We're pretty much getting into the medium tones to dark tones on the countertops. We are not using too many light [colors] anymore."

Egan disagrees however, noting, "All of the colors have come and gone, but white has always been here and white will always stay. You can accessorize white with different color countertops, flooring and still have it appeal to resale value."

McLean continues, "You're always better off contrasting with white and black."

Egan concludes, "What is new is the bisque color and the antique

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white. There is a whole line of bisque appliances, and I've done a number of them. It creates a happier, warmer look."

HAVE A SEAT

According to Rust, proper seating is a key component that designers must take into account when creating a child-oriented kitchen.

"The main focus is seating in the space so that people can include the children in the kitchen area and keep them from getting underfoot. Bar seating and seating at the island are the main two types we [tend to install]. These help parents monitor the children [when preparing meals] and also allow for easier feeding."

He continues, "The raised bar or split-level island seems to be popular right now. We do a lot of that for families because of the different aspects it adds for [work and traffic flow] in the kitchen."

Geller concurs: "A lot of clients

want more than one prep area, and if they have kids, they want some sort of seating so that the kids can do homework while they are preparing dinner. We will usually drop the counter down to table height to make it more comfortable and kid-friendly."

But, while Geller agrees that bar seating is popular, she also points out that designers need to take the overall function of the kitchen into account, as well.

"I have a client right now who wants a bar and seating in the kitchen. The client can't get seating at the bar and get the couch and seating into the other room at the same time. As a result, the seating has to be placed off of the kitchen."

She continues, "I also don't like putting seating behind a cooktop if they are planning to put kids there, because the kids can easily reach over [and hurt themselves] on something hot."

But, she does note, "Overall, bar seating does give you different

options. You can put electrical on the backside of it and you can hide faucets or other things that would normally be on the counter."

SAFETY FIRST

While safety is certainly a concern when designing any space, the issue becomes much more pertinent when children are involved, believes Egan.

"There are things that are good for the safety of children and still look good. For instance, there have been a lot of innovations with safety gates to make them look better," he remarks.

McLean adds, "Some people have considered hinging, such as the type of hinges that can open all the way but kids still cannot break them off."

"I will use products such as magnetic lock systems," Egan says.

McLean continues, "The other big concern is sharp corners, which, obviously, should be avoided. We won't build a custom

square edge with a sharp corner at head height."

Says Egan, "I would definitely avoid having a countertop overhang for seating right at the top of a five-year-old's head."

Geller concludes with another suggestion that designers should consider: "I recommend selecting professional cooktops and wall ovens because a professional range throws a lot of heat out of the front of it [which is] down where the kids will be."

ALL-ACCESS PASS

Egan believes it is quite feasible to make a kitchen accessible for children as well as adults.

"I will put in a Sub-Zero 24"-wide undercounter refrigerator, so that when the kids want a drink, they can get their drink. I guess the same application can be used for a freezer, so when the kids want ice pops, they can easily get them, as well."

McLean suggests another option.

"A big family should consider using two dishwashers; one is always clean while the other is dirty [which makes clean-up easier]."

McLean also suggests that designers consider installing a wall oven.

"I put them higher so it is very comfortable for a normal-height adult. It will also keep the toddler from being able to reach it. My kids can barely reach ours, and they are five years old. [I think] it is more comfortable when it is located just above waist height, as well," he says.

Says Rust, "When we are doing multiple-height counters, we soften the corners and make sure that the work surface for the kitchen is at a different height than the counter space for eating. That separates the two areas [visually and functionally]. Therefore, whatever is going on – whether it be cooking, cleaning or meal preparation – can be done in such a way as to accommodate the needs of the dif-



▲ Shaker-style thermofoil doors are one consideration for clients and designers who are concerned about damage to cabinets from active children, says Steve Egan, production manager of Design Line Kitchens.

ferent family members."

Rust continues, "Appliance selection is also important in that aspect, especially when making sure the appliances are controllable from the correct side."

To that end, Rust points out that his firm frequently integrates snack centers for families, such as

installing microwaves next to the refrigerator and leaving those appliances near an entrance to the kitchen.

KID STUFF

Conversely, Rust notes that, for a kitchen to be truly accessible to children, it should offer ample

storage space. In fact, he describes a recent project that reflects this key design need.

"We did a maple kitchen for a growing family, where they incorporated a tremendous amount of additional storage as well as a one-level eating bar. They also dramatically upgraded their appliances," he relates.

Geller also describes a natural maple kitchen in a navy blue hue that she recently designed. "[In this kitchen], the whole back wall behind the range is a plate of glass. We suspended wall cabinets with no back on the glass. We had to do the glass in three sections because we suspended the hood in front of it. There is also a tall cabinet for the kids' school supplies and arts and crafts projects."

She continues, "My clients never have enough storage. You can never have enough storage."

She concludes that designers can find extra storage space for kids' supplies in base cabinets.