



How to Get the Family Back into the *Family Room!*

by Jackie Davis

I grew up in a time when having fun and spending family time together seemed a lot easier than today. Back then if you had a television it was usually a big black and white one in a cabinet in the living room or den. We gathered around it as a family. We watched programs, played along with the game shows and yelled, "it's back" when the commercials ended. But, it wasn't an all night event. We stopped watching to do other activities together. The first color television in the neighborhood brought the community together. We could see the color of Dorothy's hair and her dress and of course the rainbow.

In the wee hours of the morning the Star Spangled Banner played. The station signed off and the viewing day was completed. Today there doesn't seem to be a viewing day; it's more like a viewing life. The programming rarely ends and we're stuck staring at the light like gnats around a lamplight on a summer night. If it's not the television, it's the computer screen. We interact with the television, the interactive video game or the computer rather than each other.

As a parent today you may be overwhelmed by the demands on your time. It's difficult to find opportunities for quality interaction with your children. Sometimes you only see each other when you're the chauffeur, banker or recreation director.

You've designated a room in your home for family functions – the family room, but only the children seem to use it – and that's to watch television or play video games. You and your family are disconnected. How do you put the family back in the *family* room?

The family room is more than a label

Many people making family life a priority are searching for ways to design their home environment to support interaction. They want to spend more time with their families doing activities – together at home. Starting with a room called the family room is a good beginning, but it takes more than a label.

Often my clients come to me when they're trying to redecorate to create a space where they can relax and nurture family relationships. The main problem is what I call "fictitious family envy". They've seen a picture in a magazine and forgotten they don't live in a photo shoot. They are working to create the space rather than creating the space to work for them. Do you really think re-creating the picture in the magazine is going to bring the family together? Do you notice there are no people in the room in the photo?

If the family room you're picturing is a space in which people gather, a space which renews the spirit of togetherness in your home, then you'll want to pay careful attention to some common design pitfalls.

Mistakes to Avoid When Designing the Family Room

Failing to plan how you want to use the room. Think about the family members and how you want the room to function to support interaction. Have you created space for conversation, games, reading, and yes, watching television and playing video games – together? Survey each member of the family to find out everyone's goals for using the room. Then use these goals to develop a plan that creates the functional room that meets your needs for family activities.

Thinking the television is the only focal point. When your space is geared primarily to accommodate T.V. viewing, it's difficult to imagine—and often difficult to *do*—other activities there. Have you identified architectural focal points in the room? Perhaps you have an expansive view out a window, a fireplace, or a built in unit for books and a window seat. Have you thought about how to use these spaces?

Maybe the view can help the family reconnect with nature and each other: look out and identify the flowers and wildlife in the spring, or venture outside to build a snowman or make snow angels during the winter. Or, think about the fireplace as the heart of your home; gather around it to toast marshmallows, and to tell ghost stories.

Cluttering a room with a million collectibles or papers or toys. If papers are stacked all over the room and the children have commandeered the space with their toys, have you identified a lack of storage? Think about a place for everything and everything in its place. Bring storage units or multipurpose

pieces of furniture into the room. Use storage to make family activities easier to initiate. Have what you need at hand. Create a place for the games, books, cards and other entertainment items that your family enjoys. Edit your collectibles so you can see them and appreciate them individually.

Thinking that just because there's a wall, there has to be a piece of furniture against it. Think outside the box to avoid the waiting room effect. Float the furniture in the middle of the floor, opening up areas around the perimeter of the room for other pieces of furniture to support activities. Is there space for a piano? How about a sing-a-long? Arrange seating so you can use the computer together to play games or research the family tree.

Placing all the seating pieces facing the television. Did you create a conversation area? Have you positioned the furniture so you're facing each other and you're close enough to hear without shouting? If you really want interaction, make sure there's enough seating for everyone to easily participate in activities.

Using only overhead lighting to illuminate the room. Overhead or general lighting is ideal for allowing you to enter a room and move around it safely. But, it's inadequate for most other activities. When you want to read or play games you need task lighting positioned on tables or low floor lamps next to chairs. It makes it easier for you to see the task and avoids eyestrain.

Sticking with a wall color you hate because the paint is not on sale. How do you feel when you enter a room and you're surrounded by a color you don't like? Uncomfortable? Color affects moods, so think about how you want the room to feel. Choose warm colors such as red, orange, and yellow when you want a space for lively. Or, select soothing colors such as blue, green or purple when you want a calm relaxing "retreat." Whatever the colors, choose the ones your family members most like; picking colors for the new family room could be the first activity you do together in it!

Living in a room that doesn't reflect the family's personality. Your art and accessories speak volumes about who lives in the home. What are they saying about you and your family? Have you thought about how to incorporate your hobbies

or your children's art into the family room? Make things together. Hang them at different levels so adults *and* children can enjoy them.

Why do you have a place to live? Shelter? Protection? Rejuvenation?

Home is where we raise our families, store our belongings, let down our hair. Make a comfortable space for your family where members of all ages can use it – together. When you feel you have a place that fosters family interaction, you can approach life and family activities with new vigor.

© 2005 Jacqueline R. Davis

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jackie Davis, redesigner and the owner of RoomScape Interiors works with individuals and families that value living in homes that support their lifestyle and work. She specializes in creating environments that help them relax, rejuvenate and reconnect. Jackie eliminates the guesswork and saves time, money and energy.

If you'd like details about her services or want to sign up for more FREE articles, tips and her monthly newsletter visit www.roomscape.com. You'll find lots of information to get you on your way to Better Design for Better Living.™

NOTE: You're welcome to reprint this article online as long as it remains complete and unaltered – including the "About the Author" info at the end and your send a copy of your reprint to jackie@roomscape.com. You're welcome to use my photo.