



It is Easy Being Green

Creating an eco-friendly
kid's room

When Sesame Street's Kermit the Frog first warbled his theme song, "It's Not Easy Being Green," he was referring to the hue of his skin and the complexity of being different. Today, "green" refers to an ecological movement to rid the planet of toxins, but the task remains different and complex.

While small changes like purchasing energy-saving light bulbs, toilets and appliances mark a good beginning, undertaking an ecological metamorphosis is akin to a Broadway production. It requires an excellent script (planning), stellar actors (materials) and beautiful scenery (furnishings and decor). Nowhere in a home is this more important than in a child's room.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Turning a home green is well within the grasp of every homeowner. An experienced contractor can help decide whether it's best to retrofit the room or take it down to the bare studs.

According to www.healthychild.org, selecting the materials is fraught with angst. The task is made difficult, not because of the lack of availability of products, but because of the wide variety ranging from recycled cotton batting to shredded newsprint to water-based spray polyurethane foam, soy spray foam, hemp flax, wool and lower-formaldehyde formulas.

Non-toxic vegetable spray foams like Air Krete expand up to 100 times the original liquid size to penetrate every cavity and thus create a

ECO FRIENDLY

surprising resources including the stems and leaves of corn, coconut husks, hard sea and mountain grasses, henequen plant and conifers. Mohawk Industries' Everstrand carpet tiles are made from 100 percent recycled plastic bottles and Shaw Industries exemplifies the company's "cradle-to-cradle" philosophy by reclaiming and recycling its own carpet tiles.

Sustainability doesn't necessarily make hard-surface floors comfortable for soft baby knees, so area rugs made of wool and cotton are often called to the rescue. One of Heck's favourite tips is to sew several Ikea sheepskin wool pelts together. "Everyone loves their heavenly feel and freeform shape — especially children," she says.

SUPPORTING CAST

When it comes to furnishings, Mann advises that the best way to go green is to re-purpose, rather than replace items. "An old dresser or dingy chair gathering dust in the basement can be refinished, painted or reupholstered using non-toxic products," she says. "Flea markets, second hand stores and garage sales are great places to find treasures — everything from furnishings to fabrics." A little elbow grease saves them from decaying in a landfill.

The most practical new furnishings are those that transition from infancy through elementary school like cribs that convert into toddler or day beds, bassinets that morph into toy boxes, tables that double as chalkboards and dressers with change tables on top.

Because the lungs and digestive systems of babies are still developing during the first few months of their lives and they spend 50 percent of their time sleeping, the most important purchases



are a non-toxic crib and mattress. Happily, this is no longer a difficult task.

At Baby On the Hip in Toronto, a store that is among Toronto designer Gabrielle James' favourites, soft sided bassinets and baby hammocks can be moved easily from room to room and fold for quick storage. The company also carries soft, comfortable organic bedding (babyonthehip.ca). Muu's Sam cribs are not only green, they have interchangeable graphics on removable panels so parents can create customized nursery furniture in five minutes.

Tips From the Experts



Avoid furnishings made of laminated wood, pressed wood, plywood, particle board and others which contain formaldehyde. Stay far away from plastic, particularly polyvinyl chloride (PVC) which has been linked to birth defects, immune system disorders, reproductive health disorders and cancer.

When purchasing new items, always leave them in an unused space to allow time for off-gassing before placing them in the intended room.

Since it is sometimes impossible to avoid plywood and particle board, apply a non-toxic sealant to the exposed wood to keep fumes from being released into the air.



Purchase unfinished wood furniture and have it finished with less toxic low-VOC and water-based stains and sealants. Search for furniture upholstered in cotton or wool, a natural flame retardant. If possible, have your furniture custom-made and filled with organic cotton and wool.

Substitute cloth diapers for disposable.

According to www.moneychimp.com/calculator, 29 billion disposable diapers are dumped in North American landfills each year. After taking into account the cost of the diapers and the amount of water and energy used to manufacture and wash them repeatedly, cloth diapers are a fraction of the cost of disposable and far less taxing on the environment (www.parentingbynature.com and www.ecobabycanada.com).

Every crib at www.pristineplanet.com is made from sustainable woods. "Libby" by TerraLunaSol is classically-designed and priced to fit most budgets. "Lotus Blossom Blooming Crib," also by TerraLunaSol, sets the bar for creativity. Manufactured from sustainable maple and hemp, the unique bed features blossom-shaped head and footboards covered in fabric. Talk about wow power!

When it comes to mattresses, the options are growing daily. Hästens specializes in cotton or genuine horsehair mattresses that absorb body heat and moisture and allow natural ventilation. They can be used separately or in combination with thick mattresses. (hastens.com/en-ca/accessories/For-the-kids/)

The Clean Room offers other green alternatives including organic innerspring mattresses by PureRest Organics, handcrafted cotton by Royal-Pedic and natural latex by SavvyRest and Naturepedic. The online store also carries wool-filled bumpers and mattress pads with 100 percent unbleached cotton covers, as well as quilts and pillows (www.thecleanroom.com).

WAITING IN THE WINGS

Non-toxic crib pads, sheets and blankets — the items closest to a baby's skin and nose — can be found at a number of retail and online stores. At www.parentingbynature.com, the mattress pads are vinyl-free and blankets are made from heavily 100 percent organic cotton velour and fleece trimmed in silk. Sleeping bolsters designed as co-sleeping aids convert a bed into a safe place for the entire family. Vancouver Island's online store, www.BlueZooBoutique.com, specializes in colourful swaddle wraps and blankets reflecting the "workMOMship" of the owner who makes many of the items by hand.

Babies may appear small but their needs are great. In addition to cribs and dressers, shelves are essential. Furnishings from www.babyuniverse.com are designed with an eye to multiple uses and the chests have brightly coloured star, truck and wiggly lizard knobs that delight both kids and parents.

At www.oeufnyc.com, shelves take on a new dimension. "Mini Library" has staggered open and closed shelving designed for easy access. Made from solid birch and a non-toxic water-based finish, it easily transitions from cradle to college. Three tilting shelves on "Toy Store" eliminate the search for an elusive item stored in the very back.

GRAND FINALE

Window treatments — like stage curtains — can create magical settings. But even the positive qualities of natural cotton are negated if the label reads "fire-retardant," a phrase synonymous with harmful chemicals (PBDEs). Parents are often forced to make difficult choices. One of the toughest is whether to opt for fire safety or air quality.

There is no doubt where www.ModgreenPod.com



wind-proof barrier that eliminates air leakage, the primary cause of energy loss.

However, if you are determined to go natural, then cotton and wool insulation may be the best options. Two excellent choices are UltraTouch Natural Cotton Fiber made from 100 percent recyclable material that is soft to the skin and completely nontoxic and wool insulation from Good Shepherd Wool Insulation in Rocky Mountain House, Alberta which is flame resistant and absorbs air pollutants (www.goodshepherdwool.com).

Because the air we breathe is a major source of irritants, humidifiers and purifiers are recommended by pediatricians who prefer appliances for the relief of colds and respiratory ills to syrups

and pills. Humidifiers and Air Purifiers ease symptoms and speed recovery. Airpura, AirFree and The Allergy Machine air filtration systems carry the HEPA high efficiency particulate air rating of 99.7 percent (www.thecleanbedroom.com).

A-LIST ACTORS

Once the insulation is in place and the walls have been sealed, the fun begins! Decide on a theme and then hone in on the paint colour. Gone are the days of smelly paints that take hours to dry and emit toxins. Eco-friendly, allergy-free paints and stains with low or no VOCs (volatile organic compounds) are available at most home fix-it stores.

Victoria, B.C. designer Joan Heck of Design Expressions offers a word of caution. "It's important to read labels carefully because darker colours often have higher VOCs," she says. She recommends Rona's 100 percent VOC-free paint (\$26.99). The company has just announced Rona ECO which is made from 90 percent recycled quality paint. The product has low VOCs, emits four-times less greenhouse gas during manufacturing and comes in sixteen trendy colours (\$14.95).

A new recycled paint that came out this fall uses reclaimed products from domestic paints and stains reprocessed to meet specific performance specifications. CIL Naturalliving is available everywhere and comes in 500 colours (\$27.97 to \$33.97). Other excellent eco-paint brands include Benjamin Moore's Natura (\$49.95) and Sherwin Williams Harmony (\$40).

Wallpaper fell out of favour with designers for a few years but it is back with a vengeance. Though conventional paper containing vinyl or polyvinyl chloride (PVC) that releases toxins into the air is still available, new green lines are emerging. Home Depot's ECO-option, an FSC certified paper, and Mod Green Pod's vinyl-free cellulose paper imprinted with water-based inks are both toxin-free and tolerate gentle cleaning. (www.modgreenpod.com).

For a unique wallcovering, Naomi Mann of Mann Made from Nature enjoys using Tobias Stucco Interior Wall Finish. "It's hypo-allergenic and doesn't grow mold so it's especially good in snowy or humid climates," she says. "I've used it to achieve smooth, Venetian plaster and stucco looks." She also likes erasable blackboard and magnetic paints. "Simply mask off large squares or rectangles and paint as usual right from the can," she says. "Kids can draw and erase right on the chalkboard wall or attach art work to the magnetic paint with a simple magnet. No special treatment is needed." By applying chalkboard paint under a chair rail, you can turn the entire room into a palette where kids can unleash their creativity.

STAGING

The next logical step in creating a toxin-free room is flooring. Wall-to-wall carpeting made from petroleum-based nylon and polyester may be comfortable underfoot, but it emits toxins and harbours dust mites — both top asthma triggers. Other potentially harmful products include polyvinyls and any type of flooring with toxic adhesives or finishes.

Replacing existing carpeting with sustainably grown wood harvested in an environmentally responsible manner, will go a long way in creating a healthier room. Look for reclaimed hardwood or wood products certified by the Forest Stewardship Council Canada (FSC) that is marked with the FSC seal (a stylized tree with a checkmark on the left side and "FSC" beneath it, the initials FSC or the phrase, "Forest Stewardship Council").

Far from being limited to trees grown only in North America, FSC-certified lumber includes a collection of imported woods from Brazilian cherry to Patagonian teak to Tiete rosewood to white

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Tigerwood and more. However, FSC-approved domestic birch, maple, ash, Douglas fir and oak has a shorter journey to market and thus reduces its carbon footprint. Bamboo and cork, though highly sustainable, may contain toxic glues and sealants, so read the labels carefully.

According to Gabrielle James of Bria James Designs in Toronto, wood floors are not the only option. Marmoleum by Forbo is eco-friendly and can be cut into any shape or pattern. James, who specializes in healthcare as well as home design, has used the product extensively. "This is not the same linoleum that was popular in the 60s," James says. "It is completely non-toxic and comes in beautiful colours."

Like Marmoleum but easier to install, modular carpet tiles with non-toxic backing and glues go down quickly, even in odd-angled rooms. Did the baby throw up on the carpet or spill a jar of paint? Simply replace the soiled tiles with "spare tires." Layouts and colour combinations are only limited by the imagination.

Perhaps their most unique attribute is that carpet tiles can be manufactured from

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founders Valerie Percy and Nancy Mims stand on the issue. There's not a flame retardant, wrinkle guard agent (formaldehyde) or dirt retardant (PFOAs) to be found in any of the fabrics they've created. Patterns like hot pink butterflies flying across an airy gold background, red poppies growing on a white field or white squiggles on a gray background may not be child-specific, but they can be combined with matching wall paper and brightly coloured paint to create a room that grows with the child.

Beautiful accessories can be made from items found at home or even in sporting goods stores. The vintage lace or cotton eyelet tablecloths tucked away in your cedar chest can be fashioned into feminine curtains that delight wannabe princesses. Tie on gros-grain ribbon to match the colour palette and voila, window treatments with pizzazz. For boys, sports pendants marching across the top of windows and pillow covers sewn from team shirts personalize the space.

Small touches like dancing mobiles are educational and eye appealing and don't have to be store-bought either. "Kids love interactive art projects," Mann says. "Help your child make a mobile out of magazine pictures or wrapping paper glued onto sticks or dowels, then suspended from the ceiling on thread." Framed hand painted masterpieces and prized

possessions encourage creativity and promote self-esteem with only a small expenditure.

The latest trend is large removable wall stickers. They won't damage the walls or leave a glue residue and can be removed when the mood strikes. A wide array of eclectic designs coordinate with accessories like lamps. One whimsical series depicts a brave knight, his castle and a dragon. On a matching lampshade, he sits astride his pet dragon and appears to gallop around the circumference of a sky blue shade. Using multiple sets of three butterflies around the circumference of a room turns blah into princess pretty and is equally appropriate for baby or teen.

Other colourful accessories include circular wall mirrors in graduated sizes, decorative floor cushions, collapsible cloth drawers that can hold toys, clothes or books and brightly framed chalkboards.

ENCORE

Though the curtain will eventually come down on the eco-renovation, the applause will linger in the form of better health, reduced energy costs and kindness to the environment. Hopefully, the eco-replacements in the baby's room will inspire green improvements for the entire home. □

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MUU SAM'S CRIB

Robert Kwak's penchant for good design and his Zen belief that there is no difference between people and their environment led him to found Muu, a company dedicated to manufacturing and selling items that are safe, non-toxic and useful. Because the whims of children change with the wind, he developed a unique system of interchangeable crib panels attached with magnets. A thumb hole makes it easy for parents to remove one panel and replace it with a different design to satiate their child's obsessions - whether butterflies or trucks. Panels can also be customized and personalized. The clean modern design of the cribs and youth beds are also reflected in Muu nightstands, storage units and dressers (www.muukids.com).

