

Helen Walters, age thirteen, has a room that is 12 feet long and 4 feet wide, with a 7-foot ceiling. It is tucked under the attic ceiling, and at one end an alcove adds an additional 4 by 7 feet of bed space, under a ceiling that slopes to 2 feet on one side and climbs to 5 feet high at the opening to the alcove. Helen's parents, Terese and David, placed a 44-by-42-inch roof window over the bed, which can open as a vent, even when it's raining, swings in for cleaning, and potentially serves as a fire escape. Helen watches the stars through it as she falls asleep. At the other end of the room a closet and drawers fit into the sloping space, for more storage.

Helen's brothers, Samuel and Kevin, share a more normal room, next door, at one end of the attic. Terese explained that Helen's room was built before Helen's sister Margaret, now six, was able to sleep away from Mom and Dad. "We built it thinking, 'Helen will grow out of it in a few years,' but she hasn't." Currently, Margaret has the largest bedroom in the house, next door to and more than thrice the size of Helen's, but the room is so big that Margaret prefers to play in her closet.

Terese has tried to convince Helen to move in with her sister, so the alcove can be converted to a sewing room. Helen replies that she'd rather figure out a way for Margaret to move into her room. Helen's room is the favorite play space for Samuel, Margaret, and school friends when they visit, so popular that Helen has installed a doorbell, and dedicated a drawer in her room for each of her younger sibling's stuff. Terese admits it's the coziest room in the house and when her whole family is away, Terese sleeps in Helen's room.

This sense of control is something everyone agrees that children should have in their special place. Parents offer this sense by resisting the urge to design or decorate a perfect bedroom for their children, and instead allow their children, as parenting expert Elizabeth Pantley suggests, "to choose a few new things, such as bedding, curtains, and wall decorations."² Some parents go farther and designate a room, a wall, or an outdoor loca-

tion that children are free to rearrange and decorate in absolutely any way they please (we'll explore this in more detail under "At Home Outside"). If it's outside, children will have only the natural limits to restrict them.

SHARING ROOMS

Until fairly recently, almost all North American children shared rooms, with a sibling or a relative, and some people still believe that

children who don't grow up sharing rooms will have a difficult time living with a spouse, and will learn to be roused by every snore and sigh in a room, and fall prey to insomnia in the future (see Aleidria's story, this chapter).

Some children who share a room meticulously divide it, using furniture, a curtain, or an imaginary line on the floor. Others prefer sharing a bed, but still having a private space for their things. Parents can help children divide



KIDS IN SMALL SPACES: LEFT AND CENTER: A CLOSET CONVERTS INTO A TODDLER'S ROOM. RIGHT: HELEN'S ROOM

their room into private cubbyholes and shared play space, a balance between public and private, and a microcosm of the larger house and world. (see Barbara Tognocci on page 198)

A PARENT'S PLACE

Parents develop a number of ways to enjoy living in close quarters with their kids, and to control the chaos of clutter. Laurel and Charles built a 710-square-foot guesthouse, intending to build a larger main house quickly. The house, and the much-lower mortgage payment worked out so well that they stayed for ten years, and only started on the second house when their kids were teenagers. Laurel writes,

My initial fear was that my husband and I would never have any privacy from our three kids. But they each have a room of their own to retreat to (or to be sent to), and once they're in bed asleep we have the entire living room, kitchen and our bedroom to ourselves, which is ample

(okay, that's 400 square feet total, but we're not playing basketball).

Daytime racket can be worse in small spaces, especially if everyone is home most of the time. My husband runs a business from his desk in our living room, so a portable phone has really saved some situations; the front porch is 2 feet away. Our kids have also learned to respect the need for 'indoor voices.'

I imagined the kids might not have enough space to spread out into involved games of pretend or make big art messes, but one 5-by-7-foot living room rug has comfortably accommodated countless block constructions and games. It just has to stay on the rug, and get cleared away before bedtime.

Family members have their own place at the kitchen table, and as I go through the day I stack stray belongings at the owner's place at the table. Before they can sit down for dinner, they have to put away their stuff. I have a des-

ignated place near the front door for "Things Going Out" to help remind me to get them to the car.

We have a tall ceiling in the kitchen/living room, so I hang baskets from pegs in the rafters for extra storage, using a hooked pole to reach them. I keep several stepladders to make easy use of high shelves.

Part of the success of Laurel and Charles' house is that they live in the countryside, in a climate with fairly short winters. "Big art and other messy projects are outdoor activities," Laurel explains. "We're outside a lot."

At Home Outside CHILDREN'S SHRINKING RANGE

Recently my sister overheard neighbors commenting with surprise about an unaccompanied(!) nine-year-old boy seen bicycling around the local park. A generation ago, most school-aged children were allowed to walk around their neighborhoods, alone or with friends, or even take public