

Family togetherness: The benefits of having siblings share space

By BETH DONOVAN
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When Julie and William Heflin moved into a spacious new home in Bethesda, Md., last year, the four children were tucked into just two of the house's six bedrooms. Close quarters, the parents figured, would foster life lessons in sharing and cooperation.

"My husband's one of 13 children," said Julie Heflin. "For him, it's a matter of principle for the kids to share, and they don't mind."

On weekends, she said, their three boys and one girl, ages 11 to 4, sometimes pile into one bedroom. Experts in child development would say the Heflins are on to something, and many of them suggest that other families with space to spare consider doubling up the kids, at least for a while.

"Children who share rooms learn a lot about give and take. It can be early training for college, for jobs and for marriage," said Patricia Dalton, a clinical psychologist in Washington. "Kids have to learn to work things out on their own, and what better place to do it than their rooms?"

There are benefits for the rest of the family too. Space gained when children share a bedroom can be put to other uses, such as a quiet zone where parents or kids can read, work or just watch a few minutes of television alone.

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Patricia Dalton, clinical psychologist from Washington.

said Patti Cancellier, education coordinator for the Parent Encouragement Program (PEP) in Kensington, Md., a Washington-area organization that offers parenting classes. "But now we've gone to the extreme, where people think the more space the better. The problem is that humans are very social animals. Isolation is not good for us."

And isolation is often easy to come by in the ever-growing houses dotting suburban landscapes today. The average new house has 2,330 square feet of living space, up from 1,500 square feet 30 years ago, according to the National Association of Home Builders.

A whole new industry has stepped up to furnish today's children's chambers, with catalogs and online shops, including Pottery Barn Kids, BombayKids.com, and Land of Nod, to name a few.

Land of Nod, currently a catalog and online site, is planning to open free-standing stores with the help of partner Crate & Barrel.

even from children of different ages.

"Other cultures think we're almost abusive in the way we put children in separate bedrooms at night," Scarlett said. "Family beds are commonplace in other parts of the world. Shared rooms are certainly the norm."

For many American families, the first private room is the nursery, often painted, personalized and perfect before the baby is even born. But as any parent knows, newborns often end up being brought into the parents' room (and bed) for months while feedings and crying interrupt the night. After they start sleeping through the night and long before they notice decor babies are perfectly suitable roommates for older siblings.

Although parents sometimes worry that an older brother or sister will feel displaced, experts note that from toddlerhood up through the early elementary years, children typically appreciate the company.

"Sharing a room eases certain issues for children feelings of aloneness or isolation. It can help them with their sense of attachment and security," said Scarlett.

Maggie Hudak, a mother of four in Washington, can attest to that. Her four children, now ages 15 to 8, shared two rooms until this spring, when a renovation designed by her husband, architect Jeff Stoiber of Stoiber & Associates in Washington, added a family room and two additional bedrooms.

"We had our little one looking for someplace to go at night after she finally got her own room," said Hudak. "There was a real comfort level for even the older ones when they were together."

Hudak's children came along boy, girl, boy, girl and the family initially put the two oldest together in one room. While mixing genders like this is not common in the United States, many child-development professionals said it was just fine for young children.

Several explained that somewhere between the ages of 4 and 8, boys' and girls' interests diverge, and separation by gender makes sense when it's possible. Whatever the children's gender, experts also note that a shared room is a safe place to practice compromise and cooperation. Sure, the kids might need to negotiate about which shelves will house whose dolls, trophies and Legos, but in the process they'll be learning to acknowl-

edge another's needs, possessions and wants.

"People do 'getting along' pretty well," said Janice Abarbanel, a Washington clinical psychologist and family therapist. "But we don't have very good models for conflict and not getting along. Sharing space with a sibling can help us learn how to resolve some of these issues."

And as the Heflin family hopes, sharing space can trim any budding notions of entitlement, as children work out conflicting schedules, differing needs for order and taking turns in the top bunk.

"It doesn't always go smoothly," said Julie Heflin. "My husband and I still laugh about the masking tape that divided his space from his brothers' when they were little."

Dalton, who frequently works with families, said, "You may or may not have parents who cater to you, but there's no such thing as a sibling who caters to you."

As children enter middle-school years, the need to express their individuality becomes increasingly important. Parents can help them do this in a shared space by providing each child with a bulletin board, a wall to decorate or deliberately unmatched bedspreads.

"The way the boys share space is easier," Hudak said of her four children. "Even though the age difference is the same as with our girls, the boys' stuff and their interests are similar: sports and music. But there's a big difference in the toys and things that interest an 8-year-old girl and a teen-ager."

Her 13-year-old daughter, Julia, said: "A girl's room is her space. Boys' rooms are places to sleep."

Architect Susanka said there are many tricks parents can use to create a sense of privacy in a single room. She suggests a placing a fort made of sheets and ladders in the middle to divide the space. Personalized chairs, a shimmering shower curtain pulled along a high wire, a folding screen or even a dresser can be used as a divider.

"Children are much more flexible than adults when it comes to defining privacy," she said. "It's hard for adults to get out of their preconceived notions about space and privacy, but children naturally gravitate to cooler, smaller spaces. That's why they love bunk beds and alcoves."

As habits and hobbies diverge, reading lights and headphones can help maintain the peace. And when friends start to sleep over, parents should get involved to help decide whether a sibling stays or goes, or the sleep-over is staged in another room. During adolescence, sharing a room can become more complicated.

On a purely practical level, a teen's sleep schedule is generally unlike any other in the house and homework often requires more time and concentration. Emotionally, teens have a greater need for privacy than younger

children. Although it's important for parents to respect these changes in their children, psychologists and architects say parents should think carefully about their child's maturity and needs before giving up communal space or calling in a builder to create a new room.

Several psychologists, having seen their share of troubled teens, caution against putting children in basements with sep-

bedrooms for years in their Washington home. But for the first time each needed space that didn't easily accommodate a sibling: The oldest just wanted privacy, the 8 year old needed quiet for homework, and the 4 year old still wanted to deploy his superheroes. So she and her husband, Steve Walsh, decided to let the family computer room double as a bedroom.

"Children are much more flexible than adults when it comes to defining privacy."

Sarah Susanka, architect/author

arate entrances and overloading their rooms with electronics. The line between appropriate privacy and unhealthy isolation is easy to blur, they say.

"Teens can share rooms," said Dalton. "Sometimes it's for the best."

Even very small spaces can work just fine as bedrooms. Susanka tells of one family in which a teen wanted his own room, but there was no affordable way to add on or renovate. So the parents allowed him to create a room in the attic. Though he's too tall to stand upright there, the boy covered the walls with posters, put his mattress on the floor, and made it work.

"It bothers the parents a great deal that he can't stand up," she said. "But their son loves it. He calls it his cocoon."

When Marianne Robb's oldest son turned 11, she said it was time to rethink the family's bedroom configuration. Her three boys had comfortably rotated through two

"I want us to be a family made up of individuals," said Robb. "It's awkward having the computer in our middle son's room, and we may have to change that at some point. But it was the best answer at the time."

Architects and family therapists say it's smart to think of space as an evolving commodity. A room's purpose needn't be designated once and forever. Sometimes a parent needs work space or the children need play space. The child who needs companionship one year might yearn for privacy the next. Even without a grand addition, many houses can accommodate a family's flow.

"Parents should slow down and think about the value of children sharing rooms before they just set everyone up on their own," said Abarbanel. "The important question for families to ask is, how are they sharing space in other ways? Some families are more comfortable with a lot of shared space, but every family needs some."

"It's always been a sign of improvement in family life for each child to have his or her own room. But now we've gone to the extreme, where people think the more space the better. The problem is that humans are very social animals. Isolation is not good for us."

Patti Cancellier, education coordinator for the Parent Encouragement Program (PEP), Kensington, Maryland

"The extra bedroom can be made into an away room, a retreat for parents and children," said North Carolina architect Sarah Susanka, author of "The Not So Big House," a 1998 bestseller that has made her something of a celebrity on the subject of living well in less space. "It can become a place where you can close the door for quiet activities or for the TV and the Nintendo."

Many parents put each child in a separate room without giving the issue much thought. Of American families with children, eight in 10 have one or two under age 18. And the average home in this country has three bedrooms, according to 2000 Census data.

"It's always been a sign of improvement in family life for each child to have his or her own room. It says, 'We've made it,'"

The featured decor is colorful, creative and idyllic: headboards adorned with moons and stars, bookshelves built to look like dollhouses, chairs modeled on race cars.

It's all a far cry from generations of children who shared rooms and even beds with one another, or with other members of the extended family. And that certainly is still common practice among families with limited means or who come from cultures where sharing sleeping space is the norm.

George Scarlett, chairman of the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development at Tufts University in Medford, Mass., said one of the most striking differences between American culture and most others is the way we segregate children from adults, and

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