



Up the wall: here's one way of getting round technology – quite literally. Interior designer Sean Cochrane has given her daughter a bedroom climbing wall



Coats of many colours: Ashlyn Gibson of Olive Loves Alfie has developed her own range of paints for children's spaces, with kids encouraged to choose their favourites

TURN OFF THE TECH, TUNE IN TO CREATIVITY

Technology helps with the homework but can starve a child's imagination. **Kate Burnett** discovers how good bedroom design can encourage young minds to wander wonderfully

TECHNOLOGY is transforming children's experiences of home life. But while parents and professionals struggle to decide whether it is a force for good or evil, others simply worry that children might forget how to play, creating their own games and stories. Could good design encourage children to spend as much time with their imaginations as they do with their iPads?

Ursula Wesselingh, an interior designer specialising in kids' space, says: "Five years ago parents were keen to put TVs and computers in their children's bedrooms, now it is a firm 'No'. Families want technology in a more public part of the house, where they can all see what is going on and how much their children are using it."

THE NONCONFORMIST MUM

Designer Ashlyn Gibson feels strongly about making sure that technology is just another option for play available to children. Her company, Olive Loves Alfie, avoids the seemingly ubiquitous branded products for children (goodbye Hello Kitty) in favour of well-designed and well-made products from a variety of sources. "I'm not interested in toys that are too prescriptive, or that encourage gender stereotyping," she says. "I want to create a much more exciting and nurturing environment – it's a much more old-fashioned approach."

Ashlyn's daughter, Olive, is now 10 and like many mums, Ashlyn believes in making time as a parent by putting her own technology aside – no phones, no laptops – in order to play. Olive is encouraged to be creative, and their colourful and vibrant house is full of playful pieces such as a carousel horse, vintage dressing-up clothes, hula hoops and Russian dolls. Olive doesn't yet have her own computer but her mother has always made a point of engaging her to share in the design of the home.

A DAD WITH A DESIGNER'S EYE

In architect Francesco Draisci's household, technology is cautiously welcomed as a tool to enable creativity, though laptops are preferred to computers so they can be put away when in danger of becoming a distraction. Like many Londoners, Draisci does not have a lot

of spare room at home. His two sons' room is the size of a train sleeping car and is designed to maximise storage space as well as provide two purpose-built bunk beds for the boys, aged 10 and six. He worked with them to develop the design of the room and choose the digital-image wallpaper (from £27 a square metre from Mr Perswall) that covers one wall. The chosen image of a birch forest makes the room seem larger. Draisci used his computer to show his sons the room as he designed it and he is happy for them to use technology to explore ideas. "We realise that our boys use it a lot to learn, to acquire knowledge," adds Draisci. "They really like designing comics, for example, and develop ideas that eventually end up on paper."

THE DEMANDING CLIENT, AGED 10

Suzi Harris, director of interior design company Homeology, says: "One client's son is a bright 10 year-old who develops phone apps in his spare time. When asked what he wanted in his bedroom he gave me a computer-generated presentation. He specified yellow – something to do with his favourite football team." She added primary blue and red, an Eames chair, and a Jielde lamp as 20th-century classics. "The paint finish on the wardrobe doors and the headboard can be written on with a marker, so he could scribble down his ideas."

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION

Creating a magical world at home is, of course, every parent's dream but short-ages of time, space and money are not easy to overcome. For stretched parents it can be tempting to take advantage of the hypnotic effect of technology: after all, nothing absorbs a child's attention quite like a TV, games console or iPad. Professor Mitch Blair, officer for health promotion at the Royal College of Pediatrics and Child Health, cautions against having TVs and computers in the bedroom and recommends less than two hours a day of screen time: "We are becoming increasingly concerned, as are paediatricians in several other countries, as to how this affects the rapidly developing brain in children and young people. There is evidence that over-exposure has an impact on attention span and concentration as well as



Welcome to my world: a child's room is the starting point for many imaginative adventures, with or without the worldwide web. Interior designer Kate Lovejoy and her nine-year-old daughter chose this Suzy Hoodless wallpaper, Rosabella, from Osborne & Little, £49 a roll, for a new-look bedroom

Left: this Mondrian-inspired bedroom came about after interior designer Suzy Harris worked with her client's son on the idea. The painted surfaces can be written on with a marker pen and then wiped clean

appetite control – and then there is the big subject of computers encouraging a more sedentary lifestyle."

OUT OF THE ZONE

Simon Williams is managing director of audio-visual company Olive (not related to Olive Loves Alfie) and he is often asked to help parents configure systems for the family home. "A lot of parents ask me how you can control and contain it [technology] to make sure kids don't have a one-track mind. In larger houses with solid structures – but not in smaller flats, say – it is possible to limit wifi supply to certain rooms." Williams also suggests other options including modems that can be configured to block inappropriate content. Internet service providers can also restrict certain types of content, and children can be given a dedicated area close to the rest of the living space where they can use technology for games and homework – with parents nearby.

Aside from these limits placed on devices, the most effective limits must surely be placed by the parents themselves. Any restrictions work best when the focus is not simply on limiting one activity but encouraging others, such as using design to engage children in their spaces.

Design can be a call to action for kids, empowering them and helping them to create relationships with new friends, hobby groups and clubs that extend beyond technology out to the wider world, as well as into their own imaginations.

Far left: interior designer Charlotte Crosland's bedroom for her son includes a boxed-in bed with a curtain for an enhanced sense of privacy and personal space

Left: Ashlyn Gibson watches as her daughter, Olive, 10, plays on the carousel horse in her bedroom

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