

FEATURE MATERIAL
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Building a Better Basement Playroom – Without a TV

In this age of computer games, competitive soccer leagues and organized play dates for tots, it may surprise some parents to learn that the very best thing they could do for their youngsters' development is to send them down to the basement to play – by themselves – without a computer or a TV.

“Unstructured free play has been demonstrated to prepare children for school better than just about anything,” observes Mara Kaplan, co-founder of the Center for Creative Play (www.cfcpc.org) in Pittsburgh.

“In a free play environment, children decide how they want to play,” Kaplan says. “They are free to use their imaginations and their own thought processes about how they want to move the play along without an adult telling them what to do.”

Kaplan offered these tips for developing a basement space that encourages the free play that is so important in developing essential cognitive, social, physical, and emotional skills:

First, childproof the space so kids can play safely. “Little ones need to be able to crawl around, explore and reach for things that capture their attention,” she says. “We don’t want to contain their activities too much, so it’s important that the space be comfortable and free of safety hazards.”

Cover up sockets and make sure there are no cords in which a youngster can become entangled. That’s made easier by not having a TV or computer in the basement, Kaplan points out.

Cover up a bare concrete floor to create a warmer, more resilient surface. Some parents start with a modular subfloor system such as DRIcore (www.dricore.com) that

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creates an air gap between the concrete and subfloor to block transmission of cold from the concrete. And, because it's a wood product, it is more forgiving of the inevitable childhood tumbles. Carpet or any floating floor such as laminate, vinyl or cork tiles can be installed on top.

With the basics attended to, unleash your own creativity to develop a space that will stimulate your child's imagination and encourage creative play. Some ideas:

- Set up a play kitchen.
- Make shelves for a pretend grocery store. "Stock" them with empty boxes and containers from the real kitchen upstairs.
- Paint one wall with chalkboard paint to give the kids a giant "canvas" on which to draw or scribble.
- Get the kids to help you design and paint a mural on one or more walls.
- If you've installed a modular subfloor, consider leaving part of it exposed without carpet. Kaplan suggested painting the squares in alternating black and white to create a giant checkerboard, or outlining a hockey rink, a hopscotch board or a four-square court. Finish with multiple coats of polyurethane for protection and see how the kids incorporate it into their play.

Provide a small table and chairs for games, art projects and play with blocks and puzzles. Blocks are one of the best toys to stimulate a child's imagination, Kaplan says. She recommends basic, high quality, wood blocks that can be arranged and rearranged infinitely, rather than the kind that come as a kit to build a something specific.

"Playing with blocks can help to teach spatial awareness, balance, art and math and a host of other lessons," she says.

Encourage dress-up play by going to your local thrift shop and buying all sorts of fun, used clothing. Then decorate a large box with fun designs to store the play wardrobe.

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And, be sure to set aside a quiet space where your child can read or daydream. Furnish it with some comfy cushions, fuzzy throw pillows or beanbag chairs and set it off visually from the rest of the playroom.

One of the rewards for creating an inviting, fun play space is that “the battle to keep kids from spending too much time in front of the TV or computer will be easier,” Kaplan says.

Photo Caption:

The floor of a basement playroom is warmer and more comfortable when a DRICore modular subfloor is installed under the carpet.