

A Happier, More Organized Home for Distance Learning



Interior designer Breegan Jane's sons love the spaces their mom made for them to study, read and create. PHOTO BY KATEE GRACE

(for those scorching days) and a long wooden table Azoy's husband built where the kids can sit spaced out to join their classrooms through video conferencing and to make their crafts. "They can't be on the computer all day in kindergarten; it's all about cutting and drawing," Azoy says.

The parents didn't forget to make recess feel special. The backyard, already green and lush with shade, now looks like a mini park. "I had my husband put a climbing rope and swings in the tree," Azoy says. "The kids love climbing the tree and expending all that energy."

If Azoy's transformation of her home sounds extensive, it's because she's accepted the status we're in with the pandemic. "We're not planning on going back to the school [this year]," she says. "Even if we do go hybrid, we'll still have a pod situation."



The "back to class" shop on Zulily.com is selling home and school items for up to 70% off. PHOTOS COURTESY ZULILY

With this kind of acceptance of our houses as schoolhouses for the foreseeable future, we spoke to a few interior designers to uncover some fresh ways to re-envision our homes with an eye toward creating a synchronous flow of beauty, joy and organization.

If you still feel like your home isn't really set up for distance learning, it's not too late, says Lyssa Cripe, a [Zulily](#) shopping and retail expert and graduate of FIDM Los Angeles.

L.A. Parent™

But first things first. “When redesigning or reorganizing your home with learning in mind, start by taking inventory of the space you have to work with,” she says. “It may be an entire room, or just smaller spaces under stairs or near windows that go largely unused.”

In other words, look at all the nooks and crannies in your home with new eyes. “Challenge your family to rethink the areas less traveled and see what they would like more of in the home,” Cripe says. “This allows for a little side project your whole family can work on and look forward to. Unused guest rooms can be repurposed into a playroom with a sleeper sofa or Murphy bed, while wide hallways or under-stairs space can also be turned into study or craft areas with custom built-in storage cabinets or desks. The opportunities are endless.”

Get organized, yes, but make it pretty ... and comfy

If mom's not happy ... can anyone else in the house truly relax? If the sight of your kids' notebooks, worksheets and other materials trailing the house is making your eyes hurt, Kate Lester, founder of [Kate Lester Interiors](#), says there's no reason to sacrifice decor during this time of virtual school. “If you're like me, you are probably struggling with how to wrangle all of your kids' toys, crafts and school supplies while everyone is at home during quarantine,” Lester says. “Um, hello – I want my dining table back!

“A few weeks ago, when I had just about had it, I decided to create a cheap plus cheerful storage system for my 5-year-old daughter for all of the toys and crafts she uses the most. Not only is it functional, but it's really chic and ties in perfectly with the rest of her existing room decor.”

Since visually appealing kids' storage systems are few and far between, Lester decided to create her own. “I purchased kid-size bookcases from Target, as well as the ivory coil baskets with leather-trimmed handles. Then, I added black chalkboard/rope tags that I labeled with a chalk pen.”

More of Lester's tips and tricks that she says won't “break the bank or make your eyes bleed:”

- “Make sure pieces jive with your existing decor,” she says. “I went with the white and wood bookcases because my daughter has another white piece of furniture and various wood accents throughout. I selected two bookcases first, then found those great knit bins in various sizes.
- “Stay away from clear or perforated bins. It just gets too busy and looks like a mess. A solid bin gives the appearance of everything being perfectly organized even if it's not.
- “Sort and separate supplies and toys by category and label the bins.”



Lara Celaya Azoy has turned her backyard into a classroom and recess space for her children. PHOTO COURTESY LARA CELAYA AZOY

And at night, Lester says, everything goes back where it belongs. “That's right: back into its designated bin, back onto the shelf...”

For small spaces, Cripe suggests using beds with drawers, bunk beds, painting the bedroom a bright or neutral color or taking off closet doors to open up the room. Start by defining smaller areas within larger rooms that can be cornered off for something special, such as a reading nook or coloring corner. Define the space using area rugs, lamps, tables, bookshelves and other furniture to help differentiate this space from the rest of the room.

Lauren Meichtry of [Elsie Home](#) entices us to put comfort in distance learning. “We're all putting a lot of energy into setting up the best environments for learning in our homes,” she says. “I think what's equally important is making sure we prioritize the need for comfortable spaces where we can all unwind.

“Whether you're having to assist your child through their Zooms all day or they're old enough to manage themselves, everyone is going to need a cozy spot to take a break at the end of the day,” Meichtry says. “Perhaps buying a new couch is out of the question right now, but you can still create a comfortable space for lounging by adding new pillows to your current one.”

Elsie Home's 100% natural linen pillows are filled with responsible down and feathers, she says, perfect for giving a tired parent or child “a safe, comfortable and beautiful place to rest their head after a long day at the computer.”

Appeal to the designer inside your kid

They may not clean their rooms without us telling them 15 times, but children have an innate sense of what looks and feels good. Cripe encourages parents to “invite the kids to be a part of their own space-creation process so they feel more stimulated, comfortable and set up for success.

“Let them choose potted plants to fill up the room or select their own books for their reading nook that they’ll get excited to read,” she says. “Also stock the space with coloring books, tactile toys, dry-erase calendars and other items that keep things organized, build a sense of much-needed anticipation and encourage kids to get the creative juices flowing. If you’re sticking to a budget, check out our back-to-class shop on [Zulily.com](https://www.zulily.com), which offers these and other items for schooling for up to 70% off.”

All of the designers stressed the importance of making spaces kid friendly, especially keeping younger kids’ height in mind.

“Make sure you put markers, pens and pencils down at your child’s level and within reach to access something quickly,” says [Breegan Jane](#), a designer, lifestyle expert and mom of two young boys.

She created a dedicated workspace with a “workbook hole” to help her boys feel like they have their own special area. In addition, she brought in a sensory detail that screams “real school.” “I also like having an electric pencil sharpener,” she says. “It’s funny how much I remember those from my own childhood, but there is something about the satisfaction of a pencil and the respect of lead and writing things down. They love it, and it’s the smallest thing ever. It brings them so much joy.”

Take it outdoors



Lauren Meichtry of Elsie Home encourages the use of comfy pillows to help destress from work and distance learning.
PHOTO BY PUBLIC 311 DESIGN

Like Azoy, I have dreams of creating an outdoor classroom for my son to give him a change of scenery and more vitamin D. After months at home all day, it can begin to feel like the house is closing in on us. A longtime teacher friend, Deborah Krainin, who has taught in a variety of outdoor settings, adores the idea but with some caveats.

“If he’s going to have live classes, that’s a whole different ballgame,” she says. “If he is the kind of kid who gets distracted outside, maybe core curricula is not done outside. But any class that encourages creativity and imagination, then get him outside where he can literally use his imagination. Create for him his own outdoor corner, something that would really help him as if he has a place for himself out there that’s just for him.”

I’m picturing an egg chair situated kitty-corner under a nice slice of shade. But according to Cripe, I should, again, ask the 13-year-old what he wants. “Have the whole family choose fun, outdoor furniture they can’t wait to sit on,” she says.

Getting kids in touch with nature is also educational, so whether you have space for a large garden or just a few plotted plants, go for it. “My kids have also been planting,” says Breegan Jane. “They love growing things, and they check on them every day. We have also been propagating, [learning] how a carrot can grow another carrot and how celery will grow another piece of celery.”

On those few rainy and cool days that we’ll eventually get, remember to invite the sunshine in. “Decorate around your windows to be more inviting to your children so they want to be closer to the sun,” Cripe says. “If you have big windowsills, consider not hanging curtains and, instead, placing games your kids could play with or books they can read.”

Your home is your castle – and your kids’ school – so let inspiration lead you as you and your family create a sense of joy and efficiency to make the most out of this unique school year.

Cassandra Lane is managing editor of L.A. Parent.



Interior designer Kate Lester keeps design in mind when getting her daughter’s room organized for play and learning. PHOTO COURTESY KATE LESTER INTERIORS