



Keia McSwain made over the living room in a family's Philadelphia home featuring [Sunpan's Veera sofa](#). Photo: Rayon Richards

AD IT YOURSELF

How to Make a Living Space Feel Grown-Up But Also Work for Kids

Keia McSwain shares her secrets

By [Allie Weiss](#)

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Designer Keia McSwain.

Photo: Rayon Richards

“Soft ottomans are not my favorite,” says interior designer Keia McSwain on a recent phone call. “Let’s put that on the record.” She’s speaking about that particular plush furnishing because it’s often an item that families with young children request, since it doesn’t pose the safety hazards of a sharp-edged coffee table. Still, it’s important to McSwain to find that sweet spot between decor that screams “baby on board” and more refined interiors that are completely not kid-friendly.

She was able to do just that in a recent Philadelphia project, where the Kimberly + Cameron Interiors principal transformed a formal living room and a den for a family with two children. Below, she breaks down her top tips for how to design spaces for kids that everyone in the family can appreciate.

Age matters

Unless you have toddlers, don't be afraid to bring some maturity to your design. Kids who are a bit older like to be taken seriously, and it's nice to meet them where they are. "There's a difference between designing for a family with a three- or a four-year-old, because they are constantly running and moving," McSwain says.

Her Philadelphia clients' kids were in their preteen years. "This enabled us to bring in another level of luxury, and to create a space that would grow with the family. I got to design something that was funky, something that will keep their attention, but that will also keep them grounded and comfortable." The glass coffee table with brass detailing, black embossed crocodile pillows, and colorful artwork from [Leftbank Art](#) provided visual interest and brought some excitement to the living spaces.

Functionality matters even more

No matter their age, children (and adults!) sometimes paint outside of the lines. McSwain has learned that no matter how many questions she asks about a young person's habits—where they do their homework, and so on—they may end up doing something completely different in practice. "They'll be wherever in the house they want to be," she says. "Now I'm much more in tune with what they say versus what the reality is." That learning has inspired her to weave functionality and durability into every room and piece of furniture—there shouldn't be places or items that are off-limits, as it's almost inevitable that they will end up getting used.



Photo: Rayon Richards

Be smart about materials

As such, think carefully about the materials used everywhere in a house. “We opted for a glass coffee table specifically for the fact that kids don’t care about coasters,” Keia McSwain says. Avoid wood surfaces that can be easily water damaged, or Corian countertops that are prone to scratches. Also important? Performance fabrics for upholstery and darker colors that won’t stain as easily. (Many retailers offer performance fabric options, even for seemingly delicate textiles like velvet and bouclé.)

Don’t forget the floors, either. “We ask: Do you have a high volume of company coming in and out on your rugs? The kids are going to spill; the parents are going to spill,” McSwain says. She chose patterned rugs from Jaipur Living that are more likely to conceal marks.

Bring the kids into the process

It's rewarding to get kids excited about the design process. "Having them be a part of the project in the smallest ways enabled me to create something that the four of them could appreciate," McSwain says. "I try to get tidbits from [the kids] about what's important to them, what they would like to see. If what they shared makes its way into the project, then you have parents who are also pleased."

Asking children to pick out specific furnishings may be a step too far—but getting their opinions on what they gravitate toward and how they want to use a space is a nice way to make sure you'll all be happy at the end of the day.