

Family Room Ideas

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Family Room Overview By Lisa Montgomery

Modern family rooms function as many things—a media center, a reading nook, a party pad—make sure yours has the electronic oomph to support a variety of activities.

In the "old" days a family room consisted mainly of a beat-up recliner for Dad, a couch and a coffee table, and a tiny TV with a screen too small for a family of four. Over the years, thankfully, the family room has evolved into a space that truly speaks family. A 50-inch high-definition TV offers everyone a great view from as far back as the adjoining kitchen. Light fixtures managed by an intelligent lighting control system effortlessly transition the room from a mini theater to a cozy library—or a completely different type of environment to suit the occasion. The newfound sizzle has much to do with the many electronic devices and systems that can be woven seamlessly into the design of the room.

Entertainment

Once the TV became a permanent fixture in the home, it usually wound up in the family room. That hasn't changed. We still like to see TV in the family room, but with early planning, it can look and function better than that old black box you remember. For example, you might ask your architect to design a built-in wall-to-wall entertainment center. Supply him with the size and shape of the TV you plan to use, and a cavity can be carved to fit the TV (as well as other audio/video components) precisely. Remember, the screen shape (wide or square) and depth can vary widely, so measure carefully.

Another design option—especially if you think a big-screen TV might interfere with other activities in the family room—is to place the TV on a motorized lift that lowers the set into a credenza or some other piece of furniture. Or use a retractable video screen and video projector that drop down from the ceiling only when you want to watch a movie. This design may require extra ceiling clearance and special construction considerations, so it is important that your home systems installer know exactly what your preference is.

Of course, a good picture is only part of a great movie. To recreate the full soundtrack of a movie, have a complete surround-sound system installed (the equipment can be installed into a cabinet or a dedicated closet outside the room). The newest surround-sound formats—Dolby Digital EX, THX Surround and DTS-ES—call for seven (7.1) rather than five speakers, so be sure to inform your architect of your intentions (he'll need to leave enough space on the walls for built-in speakers). Tell your home systems installer and interior designer too, as the furniture arrangement and acoustic properties of the room will influence the best position for each speaker. These same speakers can be used to broadcast music when connected to a whole-house music system.

Lighting

Besides music, lighting is one of the best ways to create ambiance. That's why in a room as multifunctional as a family room, a lighting control system is particularly useful. Rather than adjust each dimmer switch individually (a large family room might have as many as a dozen), you can engage a single button to simultaneously set the intensity of all or just a few fixtures. Bingo, instant ambiance.

Of course, sunlight or a bright floodlight shining in from a neighbor's yard can kill the mood (as well as a TV picture), so be sure to install heavy draperies on the windows of a family room. By hanging them on a motorized track, you can open and close each drape as easily as changing the channel on your TV. Your electrician will need to run power to each drapery location, so again, decide early.

5 Things to Consider in Your Family Room Make the family room functional for everyone! Here are a few options that everyone in the house can enjoy...

- Big-screen TVs

- Lighting accents and control
- A drop-down screen that can be hidden until movie time
- Furniture specifically designed for audio/video equipment
- Internet access

Family Room FAQs

- There's always too much light in our family room for TV watching-even at night! Is there a type of screen I can buy to make it better?

The atmosphere can certainly make or break a movie-watching experience, so you don't want sun or street lights peeking in. Your best option is install heavy draperies. You can pick from a variety of materials and colors to match your décor, but just make sure they are thick enough to shield you from the light. And while you're at it, consider adding motorized window treatments. With the proper remote, you can dim the lights, shut the window curtains and cue the DVD at the touch of a single button.

- Where is the best place to install keypads?

There really is no right or wrong answer to this one. You should install them where they are the most accessible. Many of today's panels are designed with décor in mind, so you don't have to worry about hiding them behind plants and furniture.

- My equipment is getting out of control; I have a DVD player, a VCR, a DVR and now I want to add SACD. What do I do with it all?

Sounds like you are on your way to the ultimate Electronic House! Too many components is not necessarily a bad thing. However, some of us are a little short on space. You might want to consider condensing. A lot of manufacturers are combining equipment-a VCR/DVD player, a DVR (digital video recorder) and DVD player combo, etc. If you don't want to throw out what you have, consider putting everything into an A/V closet. This way, everything will be neatly stacked in one place. Another option is building a rack into one of your walls. Just make sure you leave space for new purchases!