

## It was just a closet under the stairs...

...where his Aunt Susan stowed brooms, mops, and buckets. But the moment 10-year-old Graham spotted that space, he knew what it could be. "Can I sleep here?" he asked. "Just like Harry Potter?" And so he did—nestled among blankets and pillows from the guest bedroom.

What is it about tree forts and tents, attics and understair spaces that sparks kids' imaginations? What do they find there that they can't discover anywhere else in the house?

In part, it's the chance to own a space—to personalize it, to crawl inside and try on a new role for size, to sample life beyond the world they know. "When children role-play in this way," says Dr. Patti Zomber, "they're striking out toward more creative and independent selves."

### thinking outside the box

While you may see only a blanket tossed over a card table in the middle of the living room, the area beneath it is your child's own creation. And what a place that darkened square can be! Today it's a

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rocket ship hurtling through the galaxies. Yesterday it was a secret cave deep in the recesses of a mountain. And tomorrow it might be an undersea cavern ruled by a giant octopus (and perhaps a hungry shark or two—oh no!). Playing in a world they've created, kids can stretch their imaginations and face their fears. As they overcome their imaginary troubles, they're developing problem-solving skills.

## empowering your kids

Kids-only spaces also give kids a chance to call the shots. That's one reason you'll find them posting "keep out" signs on their bedroom doors or rearranging their furniture weekly. It may be the only place in their lives that they can control.

And it's in these spaces that kids' thoughts and relationships can really flourish. "My son and his best friend spent a long time building a fort," Dr. Zomber recalls. "It turned out to be their place for confiding in one another. And ultimately, that became more important than the building itself."

# ace

"guess how many  
kids are in here!  
wanna come in too. Dad?"  
Leslie, age 8

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## fantasy and role-playing

### ● ages 2 to 5

"We can have cookies here in my mouse house," squeaks 4-year-old Elise as she throws back the pup-tent flap for her best friend, Cara. Kids ages 2 to 5 love to create their own special worlds under tables and beds, in their closets, and in tents, says Detroit art teacher Maria Hildreth-Stephenson. "Then they invite you to play inside their new world with them." Young kids—notorious for drawing on furniture and walls—also need to know where it's OK to get creative. You can help by making a special table or wall just for art. (Check out idea number 5 on the next page to learn how!)

## learning independence

### ● ages 6 to 8

"Keep Out" is posted on 7-year-old Matthew's door, but his mom isn't worried that he's antisocial. He's exercising his independence and need for personal space. "Parents need to allow kids to have their own space or their own time in a space," Hildreth-Stephenson says. Children ages 6 to 8 start to establish a greater sense of self—and space. If they exclude you, don't feel shunned. It's part of their evolution toward a more independent person.

## reshaping their worlds

### ● ages 9 to 12

When 10-year-old Lisa wanted to redo her room, her mom was all for it. They collected paint chips at a home center, then together they painted the walls pink and purchased a matching bedspread. Kids ages 9 to 12 are interested in reshaping their physical worlds to match their likes and styles and take pride in establishing that ownership. "If your child's design plans are too far-fetched for you, make a list and work out a compromise, such as, 'I can go for three of the things you want, but not all five,'" Hildreth-Stephenson says. "Learning to compromise is part of growing up."



recommended ages

● ages 2-5 ● ages 6-8 ● ages 9-12

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