Teenagers are busier than ever before. But even the busiest teens need places to unwind and relax with friends. Many parents aspire to create that type of environment in their homes but don't know where to begin.

Having teens close by and interacting with them on a regular basis can benefit families. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics notes that parental involvement correlates to higher grade point averages. Research from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says certain parenting styles, including those that set rules and monitor teens in supportive ways, develop kids who are more likely to wear seat belts while driving, while such support also lowers crash risk. Involved parents also may reduce the chances of teen drug use and promiscuous behavior.

Parents who want to keep teens nearby can create hangout spaces at home that make it easy for teens to feel comfortable with their friends. These “teen caves” can be private but permit supervision when necessary. With a few modifications, it's possible to transform a room in a home into a teen-friendly hangout space:

- **Talk to your children.** Involve teens in the process of renovating a home to create a spot in which they would like to congregate. Talk about elements they would like to see in the space, whether it be a particular design style, technology, or activity.
- **Establish a shared budget.** Paint is inexpensive and can transform just about any room in a single afternoon. If the room being renovated is the teen's own bedroom, allow him or her to choose the color palette and other accents. Even if it isn't to your taste, he or she will be proud of the results and may want to share it with friends.
- **Have a snack station.** Some teenagers always seem to be hungry, and hanging out with friends while enjoying food is a popular pastime. When renovating a room into a teen cave, find a way to make food a focus. Install a mini-refrigerator and non-alcoholic bar where kids can serve snacks to friends. Think about a space you would like as an adult and modify it to be more accommodating to teenagers.
- **Add more seating.** Having friends over means having enough seating to handle a small crowd. Beanbags, cushioned benches, a daybed, modular seating, and more can ensure everyone has a place to sit.
- **Make a private outdoor spot.** Teen spaces do not need to be restricted to the indoors. Design advice site Houzz says an outdoor escape zone that includes comfortable seating in a private area — particularly a spot that can also be enjoyed into the evening — will be a coveted spot.
- **Invest in “indestructible” materials.** Teenagers are bound to make messes, and having other people over means contending with a certain measure of damage. Design the space with indoor-outdoor carpeting, water-resistant fabrics, distressed wood, and other durable materials.

Adolescents are always looking for spaces to gather without overbearing adult interference. Homeowners can create such spaces for their children in their own homes.
Energy bills tend to be high in summertime, when many people crank up their air conditioners in an attempt to combat the heat. For some households, higher energy bills might be stretching their budgets, while others might be looking for ways to reduce their carbon footprints.

Conserving energy can help homeowners save money and help the planet at the same time. And reducing energy consumption in the summer does not require men and women to sacrifice comfort in the name of conservation. In fact, various strategies can help homeowners and apartment dwellers reduce their summertime energy consumption:

**Stop cooling an empty home.** A cool home might be the ultimate necessity during summer heat waves, but there’s no reason to cool a residence when no one is home. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, operating thermostats more efficiently can help homeowners trim their cooling costs by as much as 10 percent. One way to be more efficient with thermostats is to keep the house warmer than normal when no one is home. Programmable thermostats can be set so air conditioning units turn on shortly before residents arrive home, ensuring the house is comfortable and no energy is wasted.

**Narrow the gap between indoor and outdoor temperatures.** The DOE notes that the smaller the difference between the temperature indoors and outside, the lower cooling costs will be. While it may be tempting to set thermostats to room temperature (68 degrees Fahrenheit) on days when temperatures reach 90 degrees or above, that’s an enormous temperature gap that will result in a high energy bill. Instead, the DOE recommends setting thermostats to 78 degrees whenever possible.

**Open the windows at night.** Daytime temperatures, particularly during the dog days of summer, may necessitate the use of air conditioners. But men and women who live in climates where temperatures drop considerably at night can sleep with their windows open. This reduces energy consumption and saves money, and can be a great way to introduce fresh air into a home during a time of year when air can become stagnant.

**Do not set air conditioner thermostats at lower than normal temperatures when turning them on.** The DOE notes that setting thermostats at lower than normal temperatures when turning air conditioners on will not cool homes any faster than setting them at typical temperatures. Such a strategy will only lead to excessive energy consumption and higher energy bills.

**Install ceiling fans.** Ceiling fans can improve cooling efficiency in a home. According to the DOE, ceiling fans allow men and women who use air conditioners to raise the thermostats on their AC units about 4 degrees without adversely affecting comfort levels. Men and women who live in temperate climates may find that ceiling fans are enough to keep rooms cool without the need for air conditioners.

Homeowners can combat high utility bills and excessive energy consumption during the summer with various eco- and budget-friendly strategies.

Ceiling fans can reduce reliance on costly air conditioners when cooling homes in summertime.
THE BENEFITS OF WATER FEATURES IN garden landscapes

Many homeowners aspire to make their homes appear as beautiful and welcoming as possible. Exterior renovations may be high on homeowners’ to-do lists, and landscaping is oftentimes a key component of those projects.

When planning gardens, homeowners may benefit by considering more than just flowers and shrubs while giving thought to other elements that can breathe vitality into their landscape designs. Water features can do just that, as such features provide more than just visual appeal:

**Aesthetic appeal:** Water elements stand out against the greenery and foliage and can be used to create focal points around the garden or yard. A single fountain can draw the eye, while a trickling stream or waterfall can deliver water to various spots in the landscape.

**Soothing sound:** Rain drops on a rooftop or waves lapping on a shoreline elicit feelings of harmony and relaxation. Water features can bring that gentle sound close to home, further enhancing the ambiance.

**Brings texture:** Water has its own unique and fluid texture that can provide stark contrast to blades of grass or the hard lines of architectural elements, such as pergolas or retaining walls. A pond or fountain can soften lines.

**Enhance the natural ecosystem:** Water features can attract wildlife to a property. Birds may visit to take a quick sip, and dragonflies are sure to dart and hover over the shimmering ripples. Inviting natural wildlife to the yard can add hours of enjoyment by enjoying the animals and insects.

**Remedy problem areas:** Rather than fighting with the landscape, homeowners can adapt it. An area of the yard prone to soggy conditions or flooding can be transformed into a pond or waterfall to work with natural surroundings.

**Foster a passion:** Many people turn to water features so they can explore the hobby of nurturing an outdoor aquarium. Koi ponds are relatively easy to install and maintain, and the vibrant fish add visual appeal.

**Add a personal touch:** Water features are as unique as the homeowners who create them. To set landscaping apart from neighbors’ homes, homeowners can add fountains, ponds, or flowing water elements to their properties. Decorative water features also can be melded with pools and spas to help these man-made recreational areas seem like they were carved right out of the natural landscape.

Water features can take landscapes to the next level with sounds, texture, movement, and beauty.

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**How to hang photos and artwork with ease**

Personal touches turn a house into a home. Hanging pictures, whether they’re personal photographs or artwork, can really change the character of a room.

Unfortunately, some people may not know the proper ways to display pictures on a wall. Design maven Martha Stewart advises that the first step is to gather all of the pictures that are in consideration for hanging. This will enable a person to see what is available and edit his selection based on the space available, theme, or color scheme.

Having the artwork there enables a person to move it around like a puzzle until the placement feels just right.

Next, plan on hanging artwork at 57 inches on center, according to the renovation experts at Apartment Therapy. “On center” means the middle of the photograph or painting will always be at 57 inches, as this measurement represents the average human eye height. This height is regularly used as a standard in many galleries and museums.

When the goal is to hang multiple pictures, treat the entire grouping as a single unit. This means creating the layout and finding the center of the middle piece of the grouping. To make picture grouping easier, use paper templates with arrows to indicate whether the artwork will be hung horizontally or vertically. These templates can then be easily taped to the wall and rearranged until the grouping is ideal.

There are no hard-and-fast rules concerning frames, meaning they do not all have to match. But placing framed artwork side-by-side can give a person a feel for whether the images and the frames work together in the space. Some people like to use frames of similar colors and sizes. Others want the eclectic mix-and-match appeal. It’s ultimately up to the homeowner.

Measuring is key to hanging a picture correctly on the wall. Take into consideration the type of attachment, whether it’s D-rings, sawtooth hangers, wire, or other fasteners on the back. Measure from the top of the frame to the hanger. Measure the wall to achieve the 57-inch on center location, and then calculate where this falls within the height of the artwork and frame top. Adjust accordingly and mark. Then measure the distance from the frame top to the hanger location on the wall.

Be sure to take the weight of the picture into consideration when selecting hanging hardware. Wall anchors may be needed if measurements determine a wall stud will not help secure the artwork — to keep the frame sturdy in the drywall. Home improvement resource Today’s Homeowner also suggests using self-adhesive rubber bumpers to the bottom corners on the back of the frame before hanging so that the picture will not damage the wall and will help it hang level.

It can take a few attempts to hang pictures correctly, but with practice it should come with greater ease. The good news is there are new products constantly being evolved to make picture hanging easier, including those that enable removal and relocation of artwork without damaging walls.
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Many homeowners are eager to step outdoors upon the return of warm weather. Outdoor living spaces have grown in popularity as more and more homeowners embrace opportunities to entertain and lounge around in their yards.

Outdoor entertaining areas can be great, but such spaces may go unused when summer sun makes it uncomfortable to spend time outdoors. But a retractable awning can change all that. Homeowners often find awnings can be worthwhile investments that can be beneficial both inside and outside of the home:

Increase usable yard space
Awnings can create privacy and establish boundaries for outdoor living areas. Place an awning over a deck, tables and chairs, or an entire patio area. Some people like to install awnings over a portion of their pools to provide shade for those who want to escape the sun’s rays. Motorized awnings can be retracted with the push of a button, which can help homeowners with physical limitations.

Protect against sun damage
Awnings provide excellent protection against sun damage, as they can shield outdoor furniture from direct sunlight, helping to reduce the chances for discoloration or fading.

Reduce air conditioning costs
In addition to shading outdoor living areas, smaller awnings can be placed over southern- and western-facing windows, shielding interiors against the sun’s rays. In turn, this may reduce reliance on air conditioners.

Expand gardening possibilities
Some plants require very specific light conditions to grow. Awnings can protect shade-loving plants from harsh sunlight and filter the sun for plants that require indirect light. They can be placed over a patio container garden or permanent garden structure.

Add value for buyers
For those who may be selling their homes soon, an awning may help them receive top dollar. Today’s buyers want houses that have attractive and functional exteriors, and an awning can provide that competitive advantage over similar homes in the neighborhood.

When renovating outdoor areas, homeowners should not overlook awnings that can make outdoor living spaces more livable.
Laundry room renovation ideas

To former apartment dwellers or those who have never enjoyed the benefit of a dedicated laundry area, even the smallest washer and dryer space can seem like a luxury.

The benefits of dedicated laundry rooms abound. However, disorganized laundry rooms can nullify such benefits. Depending on the needs and preferences of each homeowner, laundry room designs can be customized for convenience:

Employ vertical space
Floor space may be at a premium in a laundry room, especially for those who want to devote as much space as possible to bulk-size washer and dryer units. Therefore, utilizing wall space is key.

Use shelving, wire racks, hooks, and other organizational tools to store items on the wall. Shelves can be tucked into just about any space, and there are different options that can fit into corners or shallow areas. These are a great option for keeping detergents, fabric softener, and other laundry essentials nearby.

Clean designs reduce clutter
Simple, clean designs can be an asset in a laundry room. If budget and space permits, cabinetry built into the design will help keep items out of sight in the laundry room. Cabinets hung directly above the appliances can store detergent, bleach, and fabric softener. Use cabinets elsewhere in the room as catchalls for cleaning supplies used in various other rooms around the house.

Incorporate a sink in the design
Some older laundry room setups have a slop sink to drain discharged water from the washing machine. However, newer homes may have plumbing installed directly through the floor or walls. It is still a worthwhile idea to have a sink in the laundry room for rinsing out stains, handwashing items, and having a go-to sink for messier cleanup.

Utilize a tension rod
A rod installed between two cabinets or across a narrow width of space in the laundry room is a handy spot to hang shirts or pants to prevent wrinkling. Repurposing a ladder and suspending it from the ceiling also creates a spot to hang clothes.

Consider laundry room flooring
It’s important to select flooring materials that will not be damaged by contact with moisture or spills. Vinyl, tile, and some composite products often make good laundry room floor materials.

Resilient flooring that mimics the look of hardwood may add a classy touch, and give the appearance of wood without having to worry about damage. To alleviate fatigue while spending long moments in the laundry room, invest in a memory foam mat that can be placed underfoot.

Keep lighting in mind
Lighting can be important in the laundry room. Rely on task lighting, under-cabinet strip lighting, and overhead lights as needed for efficiency.

Laundry room design can maximize the space available and make it more convenient to launder and sort clothes.

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returns on home improvement projects vary. In its annual Cost vs. Value Report, Remodeling magazine notes the projects that yield the best returns on investment in a given year. But a host of factors, including the type of market (buyers’ or sellers’) and the region where the home is being sold, ultimately combine to determine if homeowners’ investments in home improvement projects will provide the returns they were hoping for.

Though there’s no way of guaranteeing a home improvement project will yield a great return, real estate professionals often cite improving curb appeal as an excellent way to attract prospective buyers and potentially get the asking price or more when selling the home. Improving curb appeal makes even more sense in today’s real estate market, when many people do their own searching via real estate websites such as Trulia or Zillow. When using such sites, buyers will likely be less inclined to click on a listing if exterior photos of the property are not eye-catching.

Various projects, including tending to lawns and gardens, can improve curb appeal. An added benefit to focusing on landscaping to improve curb appeal is it promotes spending time outdoors in spring and summer. In addition, many lawn- and garden-related home improvement projects need not require professional expertise.

1. Maintain a lush green lawn

Lawns that fall into disrepair may not give buyers a correct impression about how homeowners maintained their homes. Lawns with multiple dead spots and grass that appears more brown than green may lead many buyers to assume that the home’s interior was equally ill-cared for.

Maintaining lush green lawns is not as difficult as it may seem. Applying fertilizer and aerating at the appropriate times of year (this varies by region) can promote strong roots and healthy soil, making it easier for grass to survive harsh conditions like drought. When watering in summer, do so in early morning or evening so as little water is lost to evaporation as possible.

2. Address brown patch

Even well-maintained lawns can fall victims to brown spots. According to the lawn care professionals at TruGreen, lawns in regions with hot temperatures and high humidity can be infected with brown patch, a common lawn disease that is caused by fungus, which can produce circular areas of brown, dead grass surrounded by narrow, dark rings.

Penn State’s College of Agricultural Sciences notes that removing dew that collects on grass leaves each morning, which can be accomplished by mowing or dragging a water hose across affected areas, can be an effective way to reduce brown patch. Homeowners without much lawn care experience can consult professional landscapers to address the issue.

But those looking to sell their properties should note that buyers often walk the grounds of homes they are considering buying. So addressing any issues on the lawn should be a priority for sellers.

3. Confining dogs to certain areas

Dog owners may want to let their pets roam free in their yards. But homeowners about to put their properties up for sale may want to confine their four-legged friends to certain areas. That’s because dog urine can be high in nitrogen. Nitrogen itself is not harmful to lawns, but in high concentrations it can contribute to yellow or brown spots. Also, highly acidic dog urine may even adversely affect pH levels in the soil.

Curb appeal can go a long way toward helping homeowners sell their homes, and a lush lawn can be used to catch the eye of prospective buyers.