

HOME TRENDS



Mom design blogger Gabrielle Blair gives an old piano new life with a fresh coat of green paint. Instruments on the wall double as art.

Kristen Loken

Motherly design

Blogger mom of 6 writes the DIY book on making space for family, parenting

By Chantal Lamers

Oakland mother of six Gabrielle Blair has been sharing hard-earned tips for living with kids since she launched her blog Design Mom (www.designmom.com) almost nine years ago. Her new book, "Design Mom: How to Live With Kids: A Room-by-Room Guide" (Artisan; April 2015; 288 pages; \$29.95), is a thoughtful take on how to create beautiful, well-organized functional family spaces, and is a cool parenting handbook to boot.

Blair began blogging while living in New York, after her fifth child was born. She'd recently left her job as an art director but craved a creative outlet beyond coloring books. Her sister, Jordan Ferney, who founded the San Francisco blog Oh Happy Day, introduced her to the do-it-yourself publishing platform. Blair thought she could carve out a niche sharing parenting advice and accumulated kid-friendly design knowledge.

"I was 31, I had just had baby five, I'd been married for a while," says Blair. "My peers were just getting married or having their first baby. I was for sure the weird one, but I was also this experienced person."



Gabrielle Stanley Blair

With DIY crate-style box shelves, Blair creates a whimsical reading loft for her family for less than \$125. The open design lets the brightly colored wall peek through.



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Blair designed and built this craft table to accommodate the whole family. The materials cost less than \$100 and a tutorial is available on her blog at www.designmom.com/book.

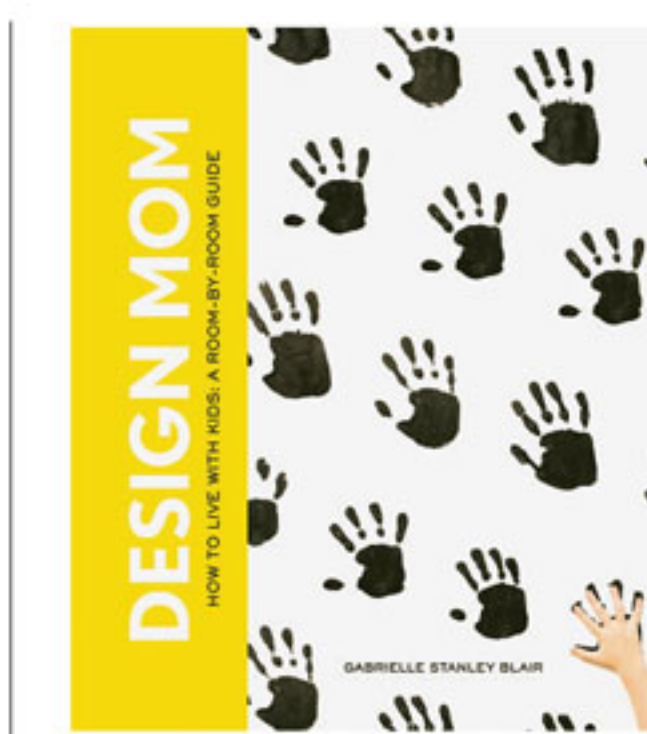
Blair calls her blog "the intersection of design and motherhood," and that's precisely how it started.

"There wasn't a lot of great gear yet," she says, "but as a designer I cared about that kind of stuff, so I sought that kind of stuff out." Neighbors, sisters, friends inquired where she got outfits and how she dreamed up party themes. "So I could see motherhood or parenthood through the lens of design. And it really was."

At the time, there weren't a lot of social media outlets, so she shared posts with friends and family via e-mail. Based on the occasional comment that appeared on a post she began to suspect she had a broader audience. So Blair dreamed up, and is ultimately credited with, the first blogger-reader giveaway: She asked followers to comment to win a necklace and hairpin, and some 70 people responded. Today, she averages about a half-million readers each month.

Now, she writes her blog from her Oakland home. But between California and New York, her family moved to Colorado, then spent more than two years living in the French countryside and traveling across Europe. The 1950s-era East Bay home she and her husband purchased two years ago, aptly named the Treehouse, is nestled beneath a canopy of bay laurel, eucalyptus, oak, pine and redwood trees.

Blair considers herself a great-grandmother of blogging and six years ago launched Altitude Summit in Salt Lake City with another sister, Sara Urquhart. The iconic retreat for lifestyle bloggers and other creative entrepreneur types has since grown into a biannual gathering, attracting keynote speakers such as Martha Stewart and former Wired magazine editor in chief Chris Anderson.



"I could see motherhood or parenthood through the lens of design. And it really was."

Gabrielle Blair, blogger, author

She credits her creative/entrepreneurial spirit to her folks. One of eight children, she grew up in St. George, Utah, where she and her siblings spent summer breaks helping their father,

Mike Stanley, a public school teacher, launch side businesses, from a basement frame shop to a newspaper for snowbirding seniors.

Her mother, Donna Stanley, an artist and college English teacher, had an easy knack for making their suburban home look cool without spending much money. In the dedication to her new book, Blair thanks her mother for proving "it doesn't take deep pockets to create a beautiful space where your family can thrive."

Readers could say the same for Blair's book. The anthology of budget-friendly designs is an effortless mix of delightfully unfussy, lived-in family spaces that are achievable without compromising design or function. Along the way, Blair shares room-by-room, step-by-step design solutions that overlap with smart parenting lessons and the occasional DIY project.

She's quick to point out that her background is in graphic design rather than interior design, yet she approaches both as simple matters of problem solving.

The book is "what's working for us" maybe it will work for you. If not, here are some other ideas," she says. Ultimately, "You like your kids and you want them to be totally at home. Here are some options."

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Gabrielle Blair's cheat sheet

Start at the front door: With eight people coming in and out of the house every day, Blair knows the importance of creating a functional entryway. If the family is shedding a mess of stuff by the doorway, carve out space to store and organize. Blair's home doesn't have a hall closet, so she turned a hallway just off the front door into a stylish little niche for storing shoes and hanging coats and backpacks. It even includes a multitiered organizer, above, as the designated space to deposit that influx of paperwork, from mail to school permission slips.

Toys as decor: That vintage Tonka truck you scored at the flea market doesn't have to be tucked away at bedtime. Select a few cool toys to decorate bookshelves or top a stack of coffee table books. Blair's go-tos include a basket of wood blocks, a tin of classic dominos and a box of magnetized marbles.

Design within reach: Although she admits it might confuse houseguests, Blair keeps everything within reach for even the smallest family members. Not only does it foster independence but it also makes it easy for the youngest to set the table and put away dishes.



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Character conundrums: When it comes to Disney, superheroes and the like, Blair sets limits on character clothing and decor. If your little one falls hard for Nemo, she suggests an ocean-themed birthday party or scientific shark chart, above. For die-hard Buzz Lightyear fans, try space exploration decor via DIY papier-mâché model planets and NASA space photography.

Design for today: Don't postpone designing your home or plan for needs several years from now. Rather, design your home so that it works for your family now, making adjustments as necessary along the way. "Cribs that magically transform into daybeds, or that can be reconfigured to fit a full-size mattress hold no value for me," Blair says. "I can't think of anything I've purchased for my toddler with the hope that she or she will use it into adulthood."

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