

## **Parent Proofing Your Home**

RE Magazine talks to experts about selling homes that are safe, comfortable and age-friendly!

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The American population is steadily growing older and living longer. According to a Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics in 2003, there were almost 36 million people aged 65 and older living in the United States, accounting for just over 12% of the total population.

As people grow older, they will experience changes in the vision, hearing, strength, and dexterity which can have a direct impact on how they relate to their home environment. So if they downsize, they look for homes that are “aging friendly” so they can remain there longer. “I have seen the need for home modifications increase steadily over the years, specifically because people are living longer,” said Barbaro Ponce, General Contractor for Adaptive Living Spaces, which provides accessible and economical home assessments, design and modifications to the elderly and disabled in the greater Atlanta area.

In addition, more and more homeowners, like Wendy Morris, are making room for their aging parents. She moved her 71-year-old mother into her Rockdale County home. Morris’ home was not adapted to an older person with debilitating health and she quickly realized that changes needed to be made. “I had to learn about her capabilities first,” explains Morris, “then I had to figure out what she was able to do and not do.”

For real estate agents, selling a home, which can be difficult enough in itself, may have a new caveat; to comfortably accommodate children and aging parents. For new construction, this can be more easily achieved. However, there are “fixes” that can be made to resales that can accommodate intergenerational living.

Many people wrongly, assume that making modifications to a home will be expensive and time consuming, but this isn’t necessarily true. There are affordable and simple ways to make an older persons living enjoyable and relaxing.

One essential thing that must be done first is to assess a space and a person’s abilities. Would an older person be able to maneuver with little to no difficulty? Agencies, like the Fulton County Community Housing Resource Center, can provide assistance to provide assistance to provide assessment information for accessibility, home soundness and aging and place. “We advise home owners of doing simple things like increasing light wattage in existing fixtures for easier visibility or taping down or removing area rugs for better mobility,” said Peyton Lingle, the center’s director. “Another thing that can be done is to remove doorknobs and replace them with door levers that can be more easily opened.” Lever-handles are not just good for doors, but for faucets in kitchens and bathroom sinks,

tubs and showers. Remote controls or paddle switches are excellent devices for turning lights on and off.

According to Eric Rothman, design director of Hammersmith, Inc., a building/remodeling company, the two biggest areas of concern in a home are the kitchen and bathroom because that's where essential daily functions take place. People want to be self-sufficient, to be able to get to food and to the bathroom on their own. "Accessibility is not necessarily wheelchair access, but good mobility," adds Rothman.

Bathrooms can be one of the most challenging places in a home for an aging parent. Since people of any age can easily slip and fall in a bathtub or shower, simple changes like installing a hand-held shower head instead of a conventional fix head can limit movement. This also allows the convenience and safety of a shower chair. Grab-bars can be decorated and can also be strategically placed as towel holders. These days, higher commodes that don't look like medical models are available to consumers.

"People want to be able to go into a bathroom by themselves," said Rothman. "That's why spacing is so important there." Widening a door is one option. Rothman also suggests the doorstop be removed. This is a piece of strip that is on the door jam which reduces the width by an inch and a half.

"In some homes there are bathrooms with a door that separates the bathing area from the commode. To give more space, take the dividing wall and doorway out," says Sandra McGowen, ASID of McGowen Interiors, Inc.

"Colors are a big factor for seniors because their eyes may not see where a floor begins and a wall ends. A good color contrast can help," says McGowen. Colors are also important in kitchens. "It can be hard to see if counter tops are the same color as the cabinets or the floors," notes McGowen. Some counter tops have intricate patterns which make items hard to see on their surfaces. According to McGowen, contrast is the key. Rothman adds good lighting is also a factor.

Creating a sitting area in a kitchen so people can work seated instead of standing is also important according to Rothman. A sitting area usually next to the kitchen sink is the most practical.

In addition to clear paths within a home, the flooring is very important. Since older people may not pick up their feet and some use walkers or wheelchairs, McGowen says to change thick carpeting to a tightly woven weave. The edges of rugs may also impede walking, so wall-to-wall is a better choice.

Of course, the ideal situation is to have a home that is already modified. There are homes that already exist that are easy for everyone to live in and have enhancements that are in place. "We believe in basic access for everyone and no remodeling because we truly believe that industry needs to create a house that is easy to live in," said Mettina van der Veen, Program Director of Easy Living Homes.

Easy Living Homes are the nation's first voluntary certification program that specifies criteria in construction to add ease and comfort in a new home. An Easy Living Home comes with basic features. There is a zero step entrance into the home and all the doors of the main floor have a 32-inch clear passage way. The main floor must also have at least one full bathroom and bedroom as well as a kitchen and an entertainment area. "It is not about ADA regulations," says van der Veen, but about the planning and design of the home. We believe that industry needs to create a house that is easy to live in."

"When we began this project we thought about the elderly people that end up in nursing homes because of lack of access, or people with temporary disabilities or the mother who can't get her baby stroller through the front door," said van der Veen. "We wanted to design homes that don't look like the 'handicapped house'. With Easy Living Homes no one can tell; people just say it is spacious."

"Builders are becoming more aware of universal design," adds McGowen. "People are looking for places to live that are safe and comfortable. We are seeing more baby boomers coming of age resulting in a big need for these types of homes."

So don't shy away from resells if your client is an older person or one with disabilities. Incorporating some relatively minor adjustments to an existing home, can make a home a home for a lifetime and improve the quality of life not only for seniors, but for all household members.