

A House is A Baby's Castle

by: June Allan Corrigan

I sensed trouble was brewing when I brought the haul home from my baby shower. Sure, the high chair festooned with Disney characters was adorable but it did nothing for my French Country kitchen. The same could be said for the baby swing erected next to an Eames chair. And then there was that big blue clunker of a playpen. But these were minor upsets compared to the real source of decorating despair. The one that came wrapped up in blankets garnering ooh and aahs from everyone.

At first my baby daughter just lay there and all was well in the castle. Flash forward eight months and see me sprinting to snatch away collectibles from the fast reach of prying little fingers. I continued to strip down my home in this fashion until it bore all the character and warmth of a Zen monastery.

The paraphernalia of babyhood started to take over. Alphabet blocks taunted us in hallways and large stuffed animals loomed menacingly at night. Toys with wheels lay stealthily in wait on the stairs. Art books that once adorned the coffee table were replaced by tomes involving a rabbit and a rather grumpy farmer.

Baby bottles, baby bibs and baby spoons piled up in the kitchen, not to mention baby food splattered on the wallpaper that took me a month to select. The bathtub featured a collection of rubber ducks and frogs who worked in tandem to dispel any myth of a delicate fairy-like retreat.

The sanctuary of the master bedroom was not immune to my child's decorating whims. A trying stretch occurred when one year old Katie decided that shoes on closet racks looked much better piled in one great heap. Daily she proceeded to do her re-arranging. No amount of cajoling could persuade her otherwise. Once the shoe task was accomplished she would turn her attention to my purses. Slinging four or five of them across her shoulders, off she'd toddle. I learned that despite a selection of the best baby toys, my possessions were always more appealing.

It seems a baby's sense of order is often inversely proportionate to your own. That would explain the joy they take in emptying a shelf of its books time and time again and the dismay they express at the broken cookie offered them. You or I, of course, would accept a cookie in any shape or form but would really prefer the books remain on the shelf in the alphabetical order in which we placed them.

Drawers and cupboards fascinate babies too, not as convenient and practical ways to store things but as compartments that simply must be emptied on a daily basis. Child-proof latches would seem a solution but unfortunately the mechanisms stumped even me.

My standards grew lax. Whereas once I fussed over the placement of sofa cushions, now I simply wondered if there were enough of them to hide juice stains when company came over.

My breaking point came one day when I picked up a decorating magazine at the doctor's office. Flipping to a feature of lovely rooms, I wistfully admired the window treatments. White clouds of fabric cascaded into hemlines that lay generously and wantonly on the polished hardwood floors. Astonishingly, a family with four small children lived there. I laughed out loud and rather hysterically judging from my seatmate's expression.

So I went home and re-assessed. Okay, my French Country kitchen was looking a little worse for wear. It's never been quite the same since that unfortunate grape juice incident. On the upside, the baby swing has been outgrown and along with the playpen is long gone. Visitors might find the collection of one-eyed teddy bears on the sofa slightly disconcerting but I think they add eclectic charm. Besides nothing stays in one place long. My daughter likes to mix it up.

Frequently I'll find my hairbrush nestled in a bush or a doll chilling in the refrigerator. Shelf clearing and drawer emptying happen less frequently as our daughter inches towards age three. Nowadays I think she only does it for old times' sake. Maybe she's reluctant to give up entirely on the carefree days of youth. Even I am slightly sorry to see such unabashed exuberance wane.

As for the airy castle viewed in the decorating magazine - secretly I think those four children don't live there at all. It's telling that the family photo was taken outside. More likely the little darlings are not allowed to set foot inside the main quarters and instead reside in a children's wing that looks an awful lot like your house and mine!