

# Family-Friendly

THEATER, from cover

Raneil recommends recessed cabinets and shelves for speakers and televisions instead, which provide more flexibility for homeowners. Overhead speakers, stadium-style seating and thickly padded carpet are frequent requests from Raneil's clients. At times, he hears unusual requests. "We had to create a light fixture that tied into the ductwork and phone line for one buyer," Raneil says. "We figured his stereo would be so loud he'd need a visual cue to find out that someone was at his door or that his phone was ringing."

Thomas Frick, a sales representative for Best Buy in Baraboo, Wis., says the key to a successful multimedia room is balance. "You can't have a 50-inch television and dinky speakers," Frick says. "If you're going small-scale, you should keep everything in proportion, that if you're going all out, you have to address all aspects of the room."

Frick says the sky's the limit for a full-blown multimedia room, claiming that he's helped customers spend anywhere from \$5,000 to \$20,000 on equipment. "It's a pretty expensive hobby," he says. "It's not for the weak of heart, especially since something you buy today may cost half of what you would pay a year from now."

Frick says most home theaters include a quality television, preferably something that is high-definition, a server for video, preferably a DVD player but a VCR is still acceptable, a receiver capable of producing surround sound and Dolby, and speakers and a subwoofer. "I tell people five speakers and a subwoofer," Frick says. "If you want any kind of a surround-sound theater experience, you'll need at least five speakers." Frick also recommends hiring an experienced technician to install your system. "You would have to spend all this money and then take the next two months getting everything to work right," Frick says. "For a couple of hundred dollars, it's worth every penny."

Kevin Jackson, a Dallas-based audio and video consultant, suggests adding at least a 20-gigabyte hard drive and an iSON line for every media room. "You'll have a way to download and store everything quickly and a place to store your music and video clips. And as technology gets more sophisticated and less expensive, you'll already have your infrastructure in place." Jackson thinks one day soon everyone will watch movies and shows from a wide selection of Internet sites. "You always get so many choices with satellite dishes and digital cable as it is but we're not even scratching the surface in terms of options yet."

Back to University Heights, Ohio, where Reynolds' multimedia room includes a 40-inch, high-definition Philips 4870P817 television — \$2,999 list price; a Toshiba SD2470 — \$289 list price; 181 Cinema ProPack 680 audio system, which includes speakers, a subwoofer, an audio-visual receiver and a CD player — \$1,199 list price and "an assortment of other toys and gadgets," according to Reynolds, who estimates he spent about \$10,000 on all his equipment.

But he's been wrong! "It says I never imagined," he says. "It's where I get together with my friends to watch Brown games and Indiana games. Sometimes, three and I have a few couples over and we watch movies — loads going off, planes flying overhead. We hosted 'Paul Harbor' a few weeks ago and the house was shaking." ■

—Tishue Media Services

## Watching your home when you can't be there

By Cyndi Sola

Ever have that nagging feeling when you think you left the coffee pot on but you're at work and still have eight hours before you arrive home? Or you forget to leave a light on for security purposes?

Now it's possible for homeowners to check the status of lights, heaters and cooling units on the homefront — all from a personal computer via home automation. Home automation allows homeowners to monitor and control appliances in their home by simply logging onto their work computer to change or check appliance status.

Richard Heitke, president of HomeNet Technology in Bedford, N.H., explains quite simply, "home automation is access to the home via the Web."

"With security becoming more of a concern, home automation is growing in popularity. The software is getting easier and better, too."

The requirements are simple — a personal computer and DSL or cable modem. Heitke says that the system will work with a dial-up connection, "but that can be a hassle, and with DSL or cable, it is always connected."

Using existing powerlines (AC wiring) and radio frequency signals (RF technology), home automation systems such as ActiHome from x10.com allow homeowners to remotely control

lights and appliances.

Jeff Demuth, public relations director at x10.com in Kent, Wash., explains, "Each lamp or appliance that you want to control is plugged into a module that is then plugged into a wall outlet. Using an easy-to-program address system, you can send on/off commands via a handheld remote or ActiHome software interface on your PC screen."

According to Demuth, "the kit works with your computer to transform your home into a network of controls allowing lights, appliances and security systems to do what you want when you want." The set-up and usage process is simple — no additional wiring is necessary. Just plug in the appliance you want to be programmed into one of the white modules that come with the kit, plug the module into the wall (which has an assigned address to your computer) and put the CD in your computer to program the module.

Homeowners can control things in every room of the house. Users even schedule time and days for lights and appliances to turn on and off. Since the software is programmed with what to do, you can turn off your PC. All of the information is stored in the computer interface, which allows control from any outlet in the house.

even when your PC is turned off.

"A homeowner just types in the Web site (IP address from the home computer/domain name) and it will display all devices (hooked up to the system) and if they are on or off," Heitke explains.

HomeNet offers the same service using eH technology through existing

powerlines. HomeNet also can limit the time the television or a video game system is on.

The HomeNet software (\$88 for PC; www.HomeNet.com) and ActiHome starter kit (\$50 for PC, \$70 for Mac; www.x10.com) are available for purchase online. ■

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There are plenty of home monitoring tools at your disposal. Putting them to work is simpler than you think.

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## Simple childproofing can prevent tragedy

By Marco Bonaguidi

If you're not sure whether you should childproof your home, follow your two-year-old around for a while. Chances are you'll engage in a one-way conversation consisting of words like, "Don't touch that," "Stop," and "No!" These busy little hands and feet have a way of finding everything that's out of reach for them, so a smart homeowner should take steps to safeguard his or her home against potential hazards.

"A lot of the injuries we see come from basic mistakes at home," says Dr. Madeline Hagduk, a Philadelphia, Pa., pediatrician. "Sometimes the injuries are minor, like a laceration on the finger from a slammed door, but other times they're serious, like severe brain wounds from a pot of boiling water that was pulled off the stove."

How much or how little childproofing you need is a parental choice, but you should at least be aware of the basic pitfalls and preventative methods. Listed below are some ideas for childproofing your home.

Most items are easy to install and are readily available at major retailers like Target and Wal-Mart.

- Pet safety leashes on kitchen and bathroom cabinets to keep rodents, snakes and chimpanzees out of curious hands.

- Safety gates are a necessity. Richard Hernandez, a sales associate at Home Depot in Roseville, Calif., suggests using gates that screw into the wall rather than those that stay attached using tension bars or suction cups. Hernandez also suggests installing gates on stairways so that they open out to the floor rather than the steps. Gates should be kept at the entrance to your kitchen so they can be easily latched when you're cooking.

- Oven dial guards — small, plastic caps that lock onto your oven and stove dials — are too big for small hands to turn but just fine for adult hands.

- Window guards are effective in preventing your child from opening

### Don't forget your furry friend

By Billy O'Keefe

Go ahead. Move your dog's favorite floor mat into a different corner, stick a plant in her most cherished corner, or place her water bowl in a different room.

Chances are good that your little friend will drag that mat back into its rightful place, stare intently at the area where her bowl SHOULD be, and growl at that plant until it surrenders to turf and order is restored.

No one is Phyllis's boss here, but you forget.

Like their owners, dogs develop their own perception of their home and how best to live in it, says Melissa Milne, who works as a pet sitter in the Chicago area and observes several different animals in their own environments.

"I always find the pets I watch relaxing in certain favorite 'spots,'" she says. "They're just like people in that regard."

For some dogs, "comfortable living" means an elaborate set-up that includes toy bins, self-filling water bowls, fluffy beds and one of the myriad indoor and outdoor dog houses (and in some major pet stores). For others, it's as simple as a favorite old towel or some bathroom tile. Much as people have differing tastes, so do the hundreds of different breeds of dogs housing about.

"The best thing you can do is research," says Sue Poonds Hookitt, a veterinarian from Davis, Calif. "Different

breeds have vastly different needs when it comes to space, comfort and security. Some dogs are very protective of their space, while others want to be as close as possible to their owners. Some need room to run and play, others don't. A little knowledge and trial and error go a long way."

One thing that remains constant, however, is an adherence to common sense and safety. Whether you provide your dog with the best materials or a private wing of the house, make sure it protects first and pleases and entertains second.

"Providing for a dog means more than just toys and a fluffy bed," says Natalie Whalen of Coastal Blues Shelter Rescue, which takes dogs would-be adopters who don't have a fenced-in backyard. "In our case, shelter staff need room to run, but they also need to be safe. Without a fence to protect them, they might run off and get themselves in serious danger."

Milne says that it's important to allow dogs some freedom to find their own comfort zones, but that a little guidance and boundary training is an essential part of the process.

"You don't want them hanging out near wires or electrical outlets, for example," she says. "Sounds obvious, but they're curious animals, and they don't always know what's best for them." ■

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windows. Simply screw them in place on the interior sides of the frame and your windows won't open more than the length you've set. Be warned, however, that window guards can be a hindrance to one of a fire. You should have at least one window in each room safeguarded in case you need to make a quick exit. "The last thing you want to do is lock yourself into you own home," says Stan Jasnowski, a Chicago firefighter.

- Purchase cord fasteners for your blinds or simply tie them in place. A dangling cord is a potential strangulation hazard.

- Install outlet plugs in unused outlets and keep electrical cords under baseboards or taped into corners whenever possible.

- Test hardwood stairs may look great but it's probable your toddler will have a hard time making it to the bottom without slipping. Consider carpeting your stairs from

top to bottom. While runners look nice, they may not solve the problem, considering your child will walk on the uncarpeted side of the stairs to hold onto the railing. Charles Mariani, a carpet installer for Empire Carpets in Chicago, says he often goes to homes to rip out runners and install full carpeting. "I have a lot of stories about kids falling," says Mariani.

- Furniture: If your little guy's taking his first steps, you might want to invest in bumpers or cushions for your home. Those sharp-edged table corners are often eye-level to a toddler.

- All doors should have emergency releases on locks in case your child locks herself in a room.

- Water temperature: Teaching your son how to wash his hands has its merits, but not if he turns on the faucet to scalding water. Set the temperature of your water heater to approximately 120 degrees. ■

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