

A little less noise, please

Building in peace and quiet is worth it, homeowners say

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Cathy Reick stood downstairs, in her Glen Ellyn home's family room, and shouted upstairs to her 10-year-old son, telling him to hustle or he'd be late for school.

The response? Silence.

Reick had to march up the stairs and open her son's bedroom door.

"I asked him, 'What are you doing? Didn't you hear me calling for you?' " Reick said.

Thing is, Kenny didn't. Not a word.

That's how soundproof her 4,200-square-foot house is, Reick says.

"When my kids are in the upstairs bedroom, if they're playing video games, we can't hear them at all down in our family room," she said. "And if we're downstairs watching TV, they can't hear anything up in their rooms. It's pretty nice. It's really good, actually."

When it comes to luxuries at home, most people think of granite counters, whirlpool tubs and high-end appliances. But this year's annual Home Features Survey from the National Association of Realtors adds another amenity to that list: sound deadening.

According to the survey, 65 percent of respondents pointed to soundproofing as an important or extremely important home feature. Respondents also said soundproofing would add to their home's resale value. Thirty-eight percent of respondents said they wanted soundproofing throughout their entire home, and 48 percent said bedrooms were the most important rooms to soundproof.

At the same time, houses that don't have adequate soundproofing are proving to be a major annoyance to their owners. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that noise is the top complaint that people have about their neighborhoods, beating out crime and litter.

Part of the problem may be that today's home construction practices are contributing to the ruckus. Some developers are building homes closer together or in busier areas. And they're using new products, such as plastic pipes, that are louder than the products they've replaced. Soaring, two-story living spaces also are popular but do little to prevent noise from traveling throughout a home.

It's little wonder, then, that an entire soundproofing industry is springing up to address these complaints.

"Acoustics matter. Homes are being built closer to roads, airports and each other, and people are going to want it to be quieter inside," said Randy Clark, general manager of the research and development facility for Jeld-Wen, a window and door manufacturer. "Homes are being built with offices and family rooms that are sectioned off to keep spaces quiet or isolate noise. They're even putting insulation in interior walls simply for noise-reduction benefits."

"With the addition of more laminate flooring and hardwood, there are more echoes in homes," said Jeffrey Hughart, chief operating officer with Knight-Celotex, a Northbrook-based company that creates sound-deadening products for both existing homes and new construction. "There's another factor too. If you look around the Chicago area, you can see that there is tremendous building going on closer and closer to large noise sources, places like O'Hare, Midway Airport, expressways, railroad tracks, Metra stations and CTA bus stops. The problems of too much noise is growing very dramatically."

Soundproofing Reick's home was no easy task. Pat Coveny, president and owner of Hinsdale-based custom builder Arch Construction Management, faced the formidable challenge of dealing with a large two-story family room and entry. A second-floor landing overlooks these two-story rooms and leads to the upstairs bedrooms.

To prevent noise from spilling from the family room to the bedrooms, and vice versa, Coveny insulated every floor, wall and ceiling in the home, whether or not they faced the outside.

"I knew that if I didn't put something behind the walls, I'd probably be hearing from them," Coveny said. "It's worked well: I haven't gotten any noise complaints from them."

Soundproofing doesn't just make a residence more livable, it can help when it's time to sell, says Jeff Salhani, a real estate agent with Rolling Meadows-based RE/MAX At Home. A noisy house often moves off the market slower, and for a lower price, than does one that is more effectively shielded from sound, Salhani says.

"Pretty often it happens that people don't buy a house because they're worried about the noise," Salhani said. "When we show a property that is close to a busy road, buyers will pay very close attention to the amount of noise they hear inside. If they hear a lot, they will definitely consider another property, even if that property has everything else they want."

How does Salhani get around the noise issue? Price, of course. He prices noisy homes lower. Buyers, then, get more house for their money as a reward for putting up with a noisier residence.

Teresa Zubricki is no stranger to noise, either. She grew up in the shadows of Midway Airport and remembers how her eardrums would rattle whenever a plane would soar above.

"My mom had a sun porch, and when you were out there you could see the bellies of the airplanes passing overhead," Zubricki said. "You'd get used to it, though. You'd be talking on the telephone and you'd have to stop your conversation and say, 'Wait. There's a plane going overhead. Give me a minute.'"

Today Zubricki, a real estate agent with RE/MAX Home Center, located at 6000 S. Pulaski Rd., the heart of Midway country, sells homes in the same neighborhood. This means she deals with noise issues in an entirely different way.

"People get a little shaken at first when the airplanes come overhead," she said. "Sometimes they might say, 'This isn't for me.' Other times they just say, 'Wow.'"

Things, though, are improving, Zubricki says. The city offers residents of specific blocks near Midway triple-pane windows that greatly reduce the amount of noise seeping into a home, even from jets.

"I'll tell you, it really does make a difference," Zubricki said. "You'd be surprised."

Sounding it out

Noise, measured in decibels, is all around us. Sounds of less than 75 decibels, even after long exposure, are unlikely to cause hearing loss. But prolonged exposure to sound over 85 decibels can cause deafness, says the League for the Hard of Hearing in New York and Oakland Park, Fla.

Whispered voice: 20 decibels

Refrigerator: 40-50 decibels

Washing machine: 50-75 decibels

Dishwasher: 55-70 decibels

Vacuum cleaner: 60-85 decibels

TV audio: 70 decibels

Usual conversation: 60 decibels

Ringling telephone: 80 decibels

City traffic: 80 decibels

Blender: 80 to 90 decibels

Lawnmower, subway trains: 90 decibels

Chainsaw: 110 decibels

Jet engine taking off: 150 decibels

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