

Helping Kids Conquer Clutter

Children are often **OVERWHELMED** by their clutter, but they don't know any other way to do things -- and so stuff just keeps piling up. The challenge is to **TEACH** children how to become clutter-busters.

THE WRONG WAY

Maybe you've solved your kid-clutter situation by closing the door to their rooms. Don't give in to that. Your children need and deserve to have **ORDER** in their lives. They blossom in a clutter free environment. To ask them to clean up a room stuffed with stuff and a closet so jammed that you can't see or sort anything is an exercise in futility. Children feel just as overwhelmed with clutter as we do, but we haven't yet taught them what to do about it. So their idea of cleaning is to stuff and stash and hide, cramming and jamming things with hopes that you won't notice. You do and you **REPRIMAND** them. But what is that teaching?

A GIFT FOR YOUR KIDS

To help them **SIMPLIFY** their rooms is one of the kindest gifts you can give them. You will help make their living space manageable and break that negative cycle of frustration and futility that a cluttered space generates. Do your own de-cluttering first, but let your children know what's happening. Share your struggles with them. Tell them about getting rid of those things you thought you couldn't do without. Tell them about how you feel seeing open spaces appear and clutter disappear. Share your excitement, joy, enthusiasm, relief, feelings of freedom or whatever. Then encourage them to start making their own **DECISIONS** about their belongings, too.

GET CHILDREN ON BOARD WITH YOU

The hope is that they will want you to help them de-clutter their closets and rooms when they see how the rest of the house is **CHANGING**. Shannon, a waitress, described her strategy to get her kids on board in clearing their house of clutter. She said, "I wanted to reduce the clutter in our home, and I knew if the children were not on my side, it would never happen. Many times before, I've tried to raise the bar in keeping our home neat, but those kids just limboed right under it." So she decided to start by clearing a spare room in the basement and she asked each of her children to give her a hand. Shannon persuaded her eight-year-old daughter, and together they sorted and tossed. They were surprised to be finished after three cleaning sessions. Shannon was delighted and to celebrate she took her daughter out to lunch and a shopping spree. When Taylor showed the others her new swimsuit, suddenly they all became interested in helping mom. And then they moved on to organizing their own **ROOMS**.

LETTING GO

Shannon recommends when you have the kids help you with your clutter, that you make a big deal about saying **GOODBYE** to some of your old favorites. Pretend to cry when throwing out your junky, smelly sneakers or slippers. Blow kisses, act as if you're leaving a dear friend. It helps them understand that even though it's not **EASY** to say good-bye to old things, it's still necessary.

THE CLUTTER COP

What's a Clutter Cop? Someone who is combating "stealth clutter" and asks a lot of **QUESTIONS** when anyone in the family (including herself) is making a purchase:

- Do you **NEED** it, or just want it?
- Where will you **PUT** it?
- Can you get rid of anything to make **ROOM** for new stuff?
- Will this be something that soon you won't need or want?

- Why are you spending money on it?

GETTING THEIR STUFF IN ORDER

If toys, books, puzzles and games don't have a happy HOME that the child can reach easily, then, you've got clutter. Make it easy to put toys, clothes and other items away by providing different containers for different toys. Put a larger container (box or basket) on the closet floor for sports equipment, one for art supplies, Barbie dolls or whatever. Figure out what family members really use and make sure it's ACCESSIBLE. Favorite cds, foods, clothes and toys should be kept within reach. Designate an exact spot for kid's gear, backpacks, shoes, phone messages, remote controls, supplies such as scissors, tape, and marking pens -- things kids use every day should be close by so they don't waste time looking for them.

KEEPING CLUTTER AT BAY

When your child receives new toys, help them select old ones to clean up and DONATE to a local charity. Children love the feeling of helping others. Teach them to keep asking themselves, "Why keep broken toys, tired stuffed animals, books with torn pages or covers, games with broken or missing pieces?" Especially if they are no longer INTERESTED in these things. Check out books from the library, and buy only the ones your children really love. Why spend money on books they'll never read? And quit -- or even better, never sign up for "Whatever" Of The Month Clubs. When you forget to tell them you don't want that month's selection, your kids end up with books and toys they do not choose, do not want, and don't play with.

SETTING UP A CLOSET

Make it easy to keep CLOTHES neat. Help them get drawers and the closet to a state where they can easily fit their clothes and other belongings into them without pushing or shoving. Put shoe boxes without lids in drawers to help keep clothes from getting jumbled. Maybe socks in one shoe box, underwear in another.

LABELING

Let children help label containers (they will be more open to using them) They can be as creative as they want with the labels -- either with WRITING or drawing PICTURES. Or take photos of the child showing what goes in each container. Encourage them to ham it up, to hold the toy up to his face and exaggerate pointing to where it goes like we see in commercials. Have fun with it, and your child will be more open to making the system work.

A LOOK AT FURNITURE

Some children have an extra twin bed in their room for sleepovers. But most friends know to bring a sleeping bag and pillow when they sleep over. Space is too VALUABLE to waste on a spare bed that just collects clutter on it. Unless the extra bed is used frequently, sell it or give it away to someone who will use it, and free up some SPACE in your child's room. Two options that do not use up floor space are: 1. a trundle bed where the mattress stores under the bed. 2. a bunk bed, but the extra bed could still become a magnet for clutter.

LAUNDRY

Put clothes HAMPERS (or baskets or boxes) in each child's room. Any dirty clothes not in the hamper don't get washed. To simplify the children's laundry, try assigning a separate signature COLOR to each child for towels, sheets and blankets.

SHARING A ROOM

Roommates handle their shared space better if a parent or someone helps to establish clear BOUNDARIES. This is Meghan's drawer and this is Cassidy's drawer; or this is Connor's shelf, this is Noah's shelf. And so on. Sometimes labels are needed to help keep things straight.

AN ALTERNATIVE SYSTEM

Too many toys, puzzles and books? PACK some away to be brought out:

- when a babysitter comes
- for a long car ride
- on a rainy day
- when visiting kids have left your child feeling used and abused
- on a sick day
- when your child just needs a spirit lifter

A PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKE

Stop clutter the moment it gets through the door. Assign all family members a shelf, box or spot each to put their things as they ENTER the home.

IT WILL CATCH ON

Some families will grumble about some of the new EXPECTATIONS and ways of life when the clutter is gone. But you are helping your family cultivate simple habits that will make their lives more calm, serene, organized, effective, productive and stress free. Stick to your guns. Your efforts will be appreciated one day. Everyone BENEFITS from clutter busting.

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