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Kids and clutter

Family life doesn't have to be so messy

by Carolyn Campbell

Five years ago I won the CHAOS contest, or "Can't Have Anyone Over Syndrome," because my house was so cluttered and disorganized.

When my sister suggested that my husband and I enter the competition, I laughed because we were so deserving. Walking through our house, my family automatically stepped over everything from cassette tape cases to diaper wipe containers. If a plastic toy broke underfoot, we didn't even flinch. We were used to looking through piles of disarray to find a paper or pencil. Any coupons we uncovered were already expired.

Our dining room table was piled halfway to the chandelier. If I cleared it, my kids knew company was coming. If we couldn't find a battery or a box of cornstarch, we just bought another. Once my 5-year-old son found an iron-on patch in a magazine. He said, "Mommy, I wish we still lived in our old house." When I asked why, he said, "Because we used to have an iron there."

I cringed every time the doorbell rang. I tried to think of an original explanation for why my house was a such a mess that day. Usually, I just shrugged and hoped the visitor would somehow understand. So what if our house was filled with a jumbled assortment of junk composed of mateless socks, computer discs, basketballs, LEGOs, receipts, newspapers and dishes?

I'll never forget the night we won the contest. Returning home after dumping our first 100 pounds of clutter, we saw that our driveway was filled with cars. Our newly spacious living room was bathed in a warm, glowing light. For the first time, our high-school-age son had invited friends in to play a board game.

That was my first sense of how much my clutter affected my children.

Since winning the contest, I give talks to church and women's groups. The overwhelming question is: "I keep my house pretty clean and can change my own habits—but what about the kids?"

The contest sponsors, Pam Young and Peggy Jones, two professional organizers



illustrations by Tom Deja



known as the SLOB sisters, say that my family suffered from a condition known as being “organizationally impaired” or “domestically challenged.” They believe that disorganization is genetic, and that each family usually gets one “born-organized” child. They believe that “too much clutter” is a problem in at least 60 percent of families.

“While 80 percent of people consider themselves organized, 85 percent list becoming more organized as a common goal,” says Monica Friel, president of Chaos to Order in Chicago.

Luci Gutman, owner of What’s Organized, with clients in Northbrook and Chicago’s northern suburbs, adds, that “organization skills can be learned by anyone. Often it’s a matter of observing behavior and customizing the organizational process so that it is intuitive for the client, rather than asking the client to change who she is.”

Here are the suggestions of a handful of professional organizers to help the domestically challenged among us learn to be organized:

- Be creative.

Young and Jones suggested our family use the highway department in Portland, Ore., as our organizational model. The department tags cars that have been left abandoned. After 24 hours, the cars are impounded. We used bright orange stickers for tagging any belonging that was out of place. If it was still there 24 hours later, the person who abandoned it would be charged 25 cents. Our kids loved telling on us and each other, and collecting a quarter every time.

- Plan ahead.

Tackle those harried, unorganized mornings the night before by packing lunches and backpacks and choosing the next day’s clothes, suggests Marie Ramirez, owner of I Simply Organize in Evanston. Ramirez, who is, after all a professional at this, has a clear plastic organizer with 24 pockets—two rows for each child—hanging on her pantry door. “I put socks in there, along with brushes, goggles, mittens and library cards. Anything one of my children might need quickly in the morning could go in one of the pockets,” she says.

She expands that concept to her children’s sports equipment, with a tote bag for each sport. “As soon as my son finishes with his cleats or shin guards, they go in the bag. After I wash his uniform, it goes there, too.” After the season, the tote bag is stored in the laundry room. “My son knows where his equipment is the next season. Clients tell me it actually saves them money not to have to buy new sports equipment each year.”

- Opt for simplicity.

Amy Karatz, owner of Natural Order in Chicago, says, “In my experience, quantity is the culprit. The more kids have, the messier their playrooms and bedrooms will be.” Her answer: Don’t let so much in and learn how to get rid of what you have.

Make it the policy that when you bring home one new toy, one old one goes out, suggests Stephanie Denton, a professional home organizer from Cincinnati. Let the child choose which toy to give away and take him to the thrift store so he can see that his old toys are going somewhere where they are needed, she says.

Help children learn to hang on to memories rather than things, says Gutman of What’s Organized. Help them take photos, make a scrapbook or write a journal about their possessions. And, she adds, let them see that you donate stuff, too.

An alternative suggestion to the one-in, one-out method is Karatz’ “all at once clean” approach. “Seeing all your stuff lumped in one place gives you a perspective on what is useful and what you can live without,” she says. Ask kids to give away what they don’t use, rather than what they don’t want, since kids want everything, she says.

Alternatively, Karatz suggests avoiding clutter by keeping it out of the house. “Who decreed that all birthday presents need to be kept? Go through the party gifts and decide what your child will play with—all parents know which toys their kids will like—and give away the rest immediately.”

How? By donating them to charity or selling them at a garage sale, says Kim Cosentino of the Declutter Box in Chicago. My 10-year-old daughter was thrilled with the garage sale idea. She tends to keep everything, so I was amazed at the amount of items she was willing to sell. The key was that she was in charge of her table and could keep the profits to spend as she chose. She also agreed to give unsold items away to charity.

- Make it easy to organize.

If closet bars and shelves are too high, or dresser drawers are hard to open, kids

won't bother. Gutman suggests a box or basket system for kids' closets. Label each box, with words for older children or a picture for nonreaders. "That way, husbands, play dates' moms and household staff can all figure out that the ball must go in the bin marked 'ball,'" Gutman says.

- Emphasize the benefits.

"Organization really contributes to a child's success in school," Denton says. "Remind them that if they know what and where their homework assignments are, their mornings are less frantic, and they may be able to sleep in five to 10 minutes later."

Gutman suggests creating a homework center, complete with supplies, a filing system, a place for ongoing projects, a calendar to track assignments, a computer and resource books. If there is not room for a dedicated space, put the supplies in a rolling cart that can be pulled into the kitchen and then put into a closet or hallway.

Organizer Julie Signore of Maui, Hawaii, notes that teaching organization frees up your time, too. "You will no longer hear a small voice say: 'Mom, where is ,' or 'I forgot my homework and got another detention' or 'Do I have a clean uniform for the game today?'"

- Get kids invested in the process.

Kids' rooms can be fun to organize. Whether you do it with their participation or not is open to debate. Signore sees it as an invasion of their privacy; Karatz sees it as a gift to kids who like coming home to a room that is efficient and organized. Besides, she says, if kids know a parent will insist on cleaning out the room, they are less likely to hoard or collect unwanted stuff.

- Take it one toy at a time.

Playrooms or play areas are challenging to organize because there is often a myriad of toys, many with small parts, says Kathy Zima, owner of the Organized Advantage in Geneva, Ohio. Her best advice:

"Teach children to pick up and put away one toy or activity before going to another. This concept takes practice and, most importantly, patience."

Friel advocates rotating toys so that they are not all available to the child at all times. Denton suggests keeping a small toy basket in each room where kids play. At the end of the day, toss toys in the bin for a quick cleanup. If there are more toys than will fit in the basket, put some away for another day.

And Cosentino suggests enlisting children in the cleanup 15 minutes before the end of play time. Assign each child one thing to pick up and one place to put it, she says. "For example, say, 'John, pick up all the LEGOs and put them in this container.'" Make it a game by having a race to see who can pick up the most toys the fastest.

- Tame the paper tiger.

Papers can clutter anyone's life, even a child's. "One of my clients saved everything her child ever did—each set of math problems and every English paper. She had a sea of papers. If you keep too much, you can't find what's really important," Friel says.

The SLOB sisters suggest a family filing cabinet with a drawer for each child. Keep doctor's appointment cards, soccer schedules and other information there. They also recommend giving each child a large cardboard "memento box" that will leave the house with the child once he reaches adulthood. In our family, the perspective of a single box of papers helped our kids judge which drawings were worthy of keeping. Along with a filing cabinet, the sisters suggest a bulletin board to post activities within the week and possibly one art drawing to be displayed for that week.

- Keep it off the floor.

"Clothes often land on the floor because there is no hamper in the immediate vicinity," says Signore. The farther children have to carry the dirty clothes, the more likely they will end up in a heap on the floor.

Likewise for the garbage. "Does your child have a wastebasket in his room?" she asks. "My experience shows that the missing basket in the room is often the culprit. When dealing with kids—get creative. Install a small basketball hoop above the area for the laundry or wastebasket. This creates a much more interesting and fun way to encourage kids to put socks in a hamper or papers in a basket."

Cosentino concludes that adding a little organization, maximizing your space,

containing like items together as well as setting up routines for processing your stuff as it comes in the door can be life-altering.

“Change is not always easy,” says Cosentino. “But try it for three weeks, and it just might become a handy habit to keep you organized.”

ORGANIZATION	PHONE	ITEMS	WHO BENEFITS	Pick up?
Amvets	708-388-7800	Household.	Veterans	Yes
The Ark	773-248-1117	Household, clothing; appliances under six years old.	Refugees of Eastern Europe	Large items only
Assistive Technology Exchange Network	708.444.2836, opt. 4	Pentium I or higher Computers, hard drives, CD rom, software, monitors.	Illinois school children with disabilities	4 or more computers
Brandeis Book Warehouse	847-724-9715	Books. NO magazines or textbooks.	Brandeis University Library	150 books or more
Brown Elephant	773-549-5943	Clothing, crutches, wheelchairs, walkers.	Heller Brown Health Center	Yes
Cancer Federation	800-962-3260	Household, clothing, toys, books, instruments. NO furniture, microwaves.	American Cancer Society	Yes
Chicago Christian Industrial League	312-491-2009	Household, furniture, clothing. NO large appliances.	Chicago Homeless	Yes
Computers for Schools	800-939-6000	Computer, cell phone hardware.	Schools and other nonprofits, both City and suburbs	10 or more computers
Encore and More	847-853-8888	Clothing, accessories, small furniture, appliances.	National Council for Jewish Women - Northshore Section	Possibly
Goodwill	312-226-4072	Household, furniture, used computers. NO large appliances, mattresses.	Disabled training programs	Yes
H.O.M.E.	773-921-3200	Furniture, gas stoves, refrigerators, dishes, linens.	Low-income elderly	Yes
Lambs End Thrift Shop	847-327-9053	Household, furniture,	Residents of Lambs Farm	No

		clothing. NO appliances, mattresses, box springs.		
Mike's Appliance Pickup	773-276-0599	Any appliance (including broken).	For Profit	Yes
Ort Thrift Shop	847-433-1697	Household, clothing, furniture, small appliances, books, toys.	Women's American ORT education/community services	Furniture only
Practically Perfect Resale Shop	847-577-0267	Clothing, household, small appliances, furniture.	Clearbrook children and seniors with disabilities	Yes
Purple Heart Veterans	708-396-8995	Household, clothing.	Veterans	Yes
St. Vincent De Paul	773-378-8022	Household, small appliances	Catholic Charities	Yes
Salvation Army	312-738-4360	Used computers, household, furniture, clothing, used electronics, books.	Salvation Army Programs	Yes
The Sharing Connection	630-971-0565	Household, clothing, baby items, groceries, furniture, school supplies.	Various community agencies	Furniture only
Tri-County Thrift	847-526-0383	Household. NO large appliances.	Crisis Pregnancy Center	Possibly
Vietnam Veterans of America	708-371-4418	Household, clothing.	Vietnam Veterans	Yes

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