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ORGANIZING WITH CHILDREN

By Claudia Smith

Remember, “Do as I say and not as I do” is never an effective way to teach.

Calming the chaos for children starts with putting organization in our own lives. The general principles of organizing adult’s lives are the same for children. Let’s take a look at what they are so you, the role model can go first!

REDUCE the amount of things in your life. This includes material possessions as well as time commitments. Keep only the things you really need, love or value.

ORGANIZE what you keep in your life so you can decide how it fits. Your belongings need a specific *home* and your activities need a specific *time slot*. Once you’ve pared down the amount of things in your life to what you are committed to keep; assign each one a place, put it and nothing else in its place.

Pick a prime spot. Whether it’s your aerobic shoes or your exercise time, be sure it’s put in a place where you can get to it. Put the things you value the most in the easiest to reach spots. Planning to exercise at 5:00 a.m. may not be a “place” you can easily get to. Just as storing your aerobic shoes in the back of a crowded dark closet may not be a place you can easily get to. Make your priorities a priority.

MAINTAIN your system by keeping it fresh. Life isn’t stagnant and neither is our attention to organizing. Planning ahead, being honest with yourself and following through on things are key behaviors to staying organized. The areas of your home that always seem to be a mess are probably the systems that need updating or just more thought. The time commitments you never seem to keep probably need more thought as well; perhaps they are no longer really needed, valued or loved.

We live in a materialistic culture and let’s face it; stuff keeps coming into our lives. Make a conscious effort to keep equal amounts going out. The same rule applies to time commitments; if you always say “YES” eventually you need to learn to say “NO”! There is only so much space in your home and only so many hours in the day. There comes a point where you must carefully pick and choose what you really have room for. Clutter is sometimes a reflection of whom we used to be or who we wish we were. Often this is also the case with time commitments we resent. Take the time to be honest with your self about the craft projects you never seem to have time for or the volunteer work you no longer enjoy. Clearing out this unwanted clutter can free you of the guilt you feel every time you think about those things you no longer value.

O.K. now it’s time to move onto our children. **REDUCE** the amount of things you put into their lives. Is their room crammed full to toys, school projects and activity related items? Are their days so full they don’t even have time for homework? Perhaps they need to reduce their belongings and their time commitments.

The first rule of helping someone clear their clutter is that the owner of the clutter determines what stays and what goes. Every person should have a memory box in which to keep the really

special memorabilia throughout the years. Select a size that is realistic for you to store and let your child decide what goes inside.

Next, help your child make choices in deciding what to part with. Teach them about various charities in your town. If they understand where their donation will go they may give more willingly. If they are really resistant to parting with anything, help them pack up the things they never use, list the contents on an index card, tape the box shut and tuck it away for six months. If no one has even thought about the things inside, tell your child it's time to donate it WITHOUT opening the box. The index card serves as an inventory for itemizing your tax deductible donation. For items not being used but not still considered keepers, pack them up in the same manner, no need to tape the boxes shut and rotate them in and out of a storage area. This also applies to items being saved as hand-me-downs. Now that you have reduced the amount of items in the room, let's organize what remains.

ORGANIZE. Next, the remaining items need to be assigned a home. Children are naturals at categorizing their belongings. Take a look around their room and together, select the most obvious large categories of things. Some examples are books, small manipulative, dress ups, arts & crafts, or stuffed animals. Now, make notes of the approximate size for each group of items and go shopping for bins or baskets to store them in. Have your child make labels with words and pictures. The pictures may be drawn or snapshots. This makes remembering where everything belongs a snap. The most frequently used items should be stored in easy to reach locations in open bins.

MAINTAINING the organization is a huge part of the process and often overlooked. It's so frustrating to spend the weekend organizing your space only to see it cluttered again within the month. You must develop a schedule to return everything to it's assigned home. Help your child develop the habit of putting things away at routine times of day such as, just before school, right after school, and just before bed. Most children as young as pre-school age are happy to put their clean laundry away, if there is room in the drawer, and they know where everything belongs. A word of caution; you need to get into this habit yourself before you ask it of your kids. It is nearly impossible to maintain order in your home if you're only there to mess it up but you're too busy to clean it up. If you can't get caught up, how will you ever get ahead? If a mess exists in your child's bedroom or play space ask yourself these questions:

Do these things have an assigned home? (Is there still room?)

Does my child know/remember where the assigned home is?

Have we scheduled in time to return things to their home?

Why isn't it in it's home?

Think about not only how crammed your closets are but how crammed your time is. De-stress your family's lives by allowing sufficient time for transitions. One less activity may be just the ticket to a happier, less chaotic family. Remember, you will never find spare time, you have to make it! What better lesson is there to teach our children, than to fill your life with those things that you truly need, love or value. In the words of William Ellery Channing; "May your life preach more loudly than your lips." Now go on out there and get organized!

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