

Positive Parenting
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WHAT A MESS!

Walking through our living room one morning, I found a pile of children's books on the floor, couch pillows askew, Lego pieces in the Russian samovar, tiny china puppies in a duck box, and paper signs, with kindergarten lettering taped to the playroom door. What a mess! What a delight! It was proof positive that our three precious grandchildren had been over to play.

When our children were young ... and, yes, messy ... I dreamt about the day when I would live in a clean, neat house. Now I do ... and I miss the presence of the mess makers!

In the past week, I have been with parents of preschoolers, gradeschoolers, and adolescents. Some live in the inner-city, some in the suburbs. All were figuratively tearing their hair out over the messes their children generate.

I listened closely to their lived wisdom and ways of coping with messes. Here are ideas worth sharing and passing on:

- Pick your issues. What is worth hassling and battling over?
- Be consistent. Let your child know what the rules and expectations are.
- Don't threaten consequences, without follow through.
- Use "when... then...", rather than "no." Example: Instead of "You can't have a friend over to play. Your room is a mess." try "When your room is picked up, then you can have your friend over." The ball is now in their court.
- Cut down on the sheer volume of toys, games, books, and clothes. Donate to kids who have very little. Sell at a garage sale. Or, pack away half of the toys and rotate in a few months.
- When a child leaves things lying around in shared living space, put the items in a trash bag for a week. (Make sure that your child knows this will happen. Then, do it! They will check to see if you really mean it.)
- Describe precisely what you mean by a "neat" or "clean" room. For example: Your room is clean when your comforter is smoothed over the bed, clothes are in the laundry basket, toys are in bins, and nothing is lying on the floor.
- Offer to help. This is not caving in; this is supporting your child to learn how to clean and neaten and supporting them in doing it. "You pick up the cars and trucks. I'll pick up the blocks." It helps your child stay focused.
- Make sure that your child has places to put their things. My husband built long, low shelves. We bought plastic dish pans, marking them with a picture of what went into each bin. It was an easy way for our children to store their things and find them.
- Confronted with a big mess, pause for a moment and bless the mess, thanking God for children who are healthy enough to play with toys and generate dirty clothes and dirty dishes.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. Decrease the volume of “stuff” at your house.
2. Do Family Clean Up. With two or more doing the cleaning and neatening, it gets done quickly, with time left for Family Fun Time!
3. Decide what is truly important to you and focus on that. Let go of the rest. My husband said, “I think we have a finite number of wins. Let’s use them for the things that really matter.”
4. Do a little judicious ignoring. Close doors, to avoid looking at messy rooms. Let kids deal with the consequences. Didn’t put clothes in the laundry? No clean clothes (or, at least not the favorite ones) to wear. Messy room? No place to play with a friend.
5. Don’t project that this is the way it will be forever. My son, whose bedroom as a child was an unmitigated disaster, has a machine shop, in which everything is put away, filed, elegant. (Be prepared to be delighted when your adult children call you to bemoan how messy their children are!)