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Psychologist, designer, TV personality show how to rid the kid clutter in your house

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We've all seen it: The house that's overrun with kids' stuff because the kids run it.

Disorganization is everywhere. Homes strewn with toys in every room on HGTV horrify would-be buyers. Your neighbor's living room is like an obstacle course filled with video games, dolls, bats and balls. Or, even worse, it's *your* home that's a disaster.

Now that the kids are out of school for the summer, the clutter is bound to multiply. Clothes dropped all over the house like Hansel and Gretel bread crumbs. Bedrooms that have more stuff on the floor than on the shelves.

So why is this happening? And what can you do about it?

"I think more parents are both working and hypertasking more," says Christopher Lowell, the TV personality and author who was dubbed "The Doctor of Design" by *U.S. News & World Report*. His new series, *Work That Room With Christopher Lowell*, premieres Friday on the Fine Living Channel.

"Kids are rewarded more and part of that reward is toys end up everywhere. It seems that the more successful parents are, the more toys are cluttering the home. Toys used to be just upstairs, Now they are upstairs and downstairs. I think parents feel as guilty about working as hard as they do."

Who's in charge here?

Weston child psychologist Dr. Jeff M. Bauman agrees some of the blame can go to the parents. Both parents working outside the home may mean less supervision.

"You can't get mad at the kids if you don't supervise them," he says. "If you see kids taking over lots of the area, they are in charge of the family. And that's not the way it should be."

But Bauman also says it's the nature of some children to be messier than others. And in extreme cases, they may be messy because they have Attention Deficit Disorder.

Parents can try to change messy behavior by providing the proper tools to get organized and by being



good role models, he says.

"The children have to have a place for everything," Bauman says. "Each evening they should spend 15 minutes to police the area. When parents bring in the mail, the mail shouldn't just be put down on a table. Bills should go in a place for bills."

Parents should also compliment the kids when they pick up after themselves.

"Say something like, 'Thank you for picking up your shoes. That really helps me.' Soon the kids will be picking up after themselves without you having to ask them to do it."

Knowing their places

Lorrie Browne, a [Wellington](http://www.wellington.com) licensed interior designer who has started a self-help design Web site (mydesignsecrets.com), says the biggest problem she sees is a lack of a specific place for the kids to put their stuff.

She suggests clients use everything from bins on rollers to lockers by the door the kids use most often. She also likes open shelves with cubbyholes that can be used to stow baskets or colorful bins for their toys and games. When the kids grow up, most of the bins can be removed and the shelves can be used for a TV, books and other things.

"When kids get older, they are often not fond of sharing the space with siblings," she says. "The blame game starts about who didn't put what away. Name tags, color coding or distinct cabinets separate the space for accountability."

Browne says it's good to start teaching young children to put their toys away.

"Younger children like to see their name on something and they like to have it painted their favorite color," she says.

Joys of recycling

Lowell agrees that children need designated areas like they have in preschool classrooms.

"Designers today are everything from a designer to an efficiency expert," he says. "We can't design until we get the crap out of the room. I say take what the kids have, cut it in half and store the rest. A lot of times parents are feeding the kids' boredom instead of removing and recycling."

But you can't reorganize toys unless there is a place to organize them. And, yes, you can do it in a small room. Lowell suggests building shelves wall to wall and floor to ceiling. Fill them with bins. Or you can float the bed and surround it with bookcases.

One good example of how to organize a room with limited space comes from *Christopher Lowell's Seven Layers of Organization* (Clarkson Potter, \$19.95). The featured project was a room shared by two toddlers. Lowell says children need to feel equal and need common, well-defined study and play areas.

The beds, which extended into the room, ate up space so he repositioned them against the wall. The bookshelves, which were too high to reach, were replaced with lower, more accessible shelves, and storage was added under the beds. Lowell and his team selected Legos as the theme and used a palette of bold, primary colors. The "dots" on the Legos were made with 1-inch slices of a Styrofoam tube.

To give the boys privacy, bookcases separated their beds, which are resting on Ikea's Lack shelving units that were laid on their sides.

All the experts say it's important to teach children organizational skills early because messy kids become messy adults. But be realistic.

"Don't expect to have that fabulous home for the first few years of parenting," Lowell says. "But it doesn't mean the house has to look out of control. You can have hampers, bins and toy boxes. You don't want them to destroy the house and end up with kids toys in every room."

Next week: Stowing the electronic gear.

solutions

Psychologist

Dr. Jeff M. Bauman says:

Laundry all over the house? Don't pick it up and don't wash it. When your child runs out of clean clothes, he will learn the lesson. Try putting a basketball hoop over the laundry basket.

Shoes everywhere? Place a crate or open container near the front door or where they usually take off their shoes.

Too much stuff? Have a clean out party and get rid of the unused toys. Pack them up and go with your child to a charity such as Kids in Distress, where he or she can see the good the gift did.

Can't find things for summer camp or school? Pack the backpack the night before and put it near the door. Put the next day's clothing out the night before.

Interior designer

Lorrie Browne says:

Where are Rebecca's shoes? Wherever your kids enter the house — the laundry room or back door — place a locker for each child so they can hang up a jacket, a backpack and stow shoes.

Whose stuff is this? Each child should have bins or boxes either color-coded or with name tags.

What about the toys all over the family room? Don't be in denial about where you need storage. If they play in the family room, place containers on wheels so they can put away their toys and wheel them out of sight.

Mom, where is my toy? Make sure storage is kid friendly — not too high so they can reach it and stored in clear or open containers.

TV personality

Christopher Lowell says:

Too many toys? Take what your kids have, cut it in half and store the rest on shelves near the ceiling. Rotate their toys. The stored toys will look new to them. Parents say this works like a charm.

Do the kids get tired of their toys? Online services, such as babyplays.com, rent you toys for a few months. The toys are cleaned before they go out to the next customer.

What if the child's room is small? Build shelves wall to wall and floor to ceiling. Use great-looking decorative containers that are labeled so the child knows where to put away the toys and games.

Don't use the dining room much? Turn the table into a study/game table. Buy an armoire for one end of the room for storage. Add waist-high bookcases with wicker or other nice-looking bins that the kids can reach.

Do the kids leave toys all over the backyard? Add built-in areas or chests and teach the children to store the toys before they come back into the house.

Where to shop

The first step in organization is getting the right system. Here are some good sources:

Container Store: containerstore.com; 7200 N. Kendall Drive, Miami, 305-670-8181

Ikea: ikea.com; Ikea Sunrise, 151 NW 136th Ave., 954-838-9292

Land of Nod: landofnod.com

Pottery Barn Kids: potterybarnkids.com

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