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Stop Tripping Over Toys: Downsize Your Children's Stuff – They'll Thank You For It!

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Admit it- you've been there, too. The kids are finally in bed and you're looking forward to a couple of hours of free time. Suddenly your ankle wobbles and you're skateboarding along on a Hot Wheels® car. After you kick the ridiculous little car to the wall you feel the laughing eyes of at least fifty stuffed animals. As you survey the carnage of puzzle pieces, blocks and parts of long lost toys, you feel a headache coming on. You decide to turn your back on the whole mess, retreating to another episode of Friends just to see a clean living room.

“There is so much pressure from society to buy the latest toy,” says Dr. Margo Napolitano, a clinical psychologist in San Diego. “Because of consumerism and normal developmental peer pressure, kids want what their best friends have. But there are reasons why it's best not to indulge in pressures to buy.

“Play activity is necessary to allow the brain to develop normal connections. But too much stimulation in the form of too many toys can cause the brain to be overwhelmed and over-stimulated. It's stressful for the child. That's one of the side effects of too many choices,” explains Napolitano, who specializes in play therapy.

Somewhere along the line, parents' living rooms turned into miniature toy stores. In a generous moment, we buy the toys because we love the initial squeals of delight as they feast their eyes on the coveted Rocket Rooter. But if we're overwhelmed and resentful, how can we expect our children to feel? We can bet that on some level, they feel the same way, except they don't have the maturity to cope with it even half as well.

Sharon Hayward, San Diego owner of The Organized Advantage, helps families climb out of the pit created by the habit of clutter. Hayward urges parents to adopt a philosophy of, “If it's good enough for school, it's good enough for home.” Specifically, the rule at school is generally that each child puts away whatever he has finished using.

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Hayward explains the nuts and bolts of a functional play space. “Children need to be able to understand and use the toy storage system in order for it to work. Use bins and shoebox-type organizers they can reach. Deep trunks don’t work well.” Hayward suggests rotating toys as a way to keep interest fresh. When a toy has become stale, put it in the rotation box. After a few months children may have a completely new use for it.

Another tip shared by Hayward is to establish separate “zones” for various activities. A special space for art, homework, games and a cozy reading nook are inviting for children of all ages. It is possible to create zones even in a fairly small space. The key is to keep it simple. A child can cope with ten items more easily than 20.

In [Simplify Your Life With Kids: 100 Ways to Make Family Life Easier and More Fun](#) (Andrews McMeel Publishing), Elaine St. James offers concrete ways to pare down children’s possessions and create a more satisfying play experience. She recommends limiting toy purchases to holidays and special occasions. Period. As far as gifts from family and friends, try asking for “experience gifts,” such as a day at Balboa Park. Ride the train, go to the Zoo or a museum. Fill your child’s heart with memories instead of cluttering up the playroom.

St. James has two straightforward approaches for downsizing your children’s things, “the Major Sweep” and “the Minor Sweep.” The Major Sweep involves ridding an entire room of all contents but heavy furniture. Then only the items that are currently used are put back. What doesn’t get thrown out is given away. The key is to deal with all the unwanted items immediately, so you don’t give in to the temptation to bring something back in. This project can take a whole day.

The Minor Sweep is perhaps more realistic for those of us who cannot commit an entire day to clearing out. “Put aside an hour or so every Saturday morning for the next few months. Pick a room. The first week, clean out the dresser; the next week, clean out the closet; and so on.” St. James encourages parents to include their children in the process, and make it fun. “They know what they play with and what part goes with what toy... But most importantly, these are their things, and they have to take charge of them. Teach your kids to take responsibility for keeping their own things in order, and make it easy for them to let go of what they no longer use.”

So, we know we have a lot to get rid of, but what toys should we keep? Dr. Napolitano is a fan of good old kitchen utensils; wooden spoons, pots and pans never lose their appeal. “The simple things can be the most fun for children. Toys don’t have to be expensive or have batteries.”

Leita Koontz, a San Diego family therapist, suggests some other classics. “Blocks, a doll house, a toy farm, play dough, a chalkboard, crayons, and markers are good toys for interactive, imaginative play.” But Koontz reminds parents, “The biggest complaint from children is not ‘I don’t have enough toys,’ but ‘I don’t have enough time with Mom and Dad.’ The most significant thing a parent can do is play with their child.

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With less clutter there is room for more imagination and playtime as a family. While making older children part of the clearing process is important, involving very young children can turn it into an endless task. If your sanity is demanding that you reclaim your living space, treat yourself to a few hours alone in the house to evict toy clutter. If at all possible, schedule an extra half hour before the crew is due back home to celebrate your newfound floor space. Crank up the stereo and dance, or do some quiet yoga, or read, or even play with toys.

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