

# Spring Cleaning as Brain Food

P. Donohue Shortridge

The holidays have come and gone and spring is just around the corner. This might be a fine time to consider sorting through your children's possessions. If you take a close look at the sheer volume of your child's books and toys, you may determine that just like adults he uses only a small percentage of them.

Thinning the herd, so to speak, offers much to recommend it: It's a lot easier to find things if there are fewer things to find.

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A place for everything and everything in its place is a cliché based on sound thinking. Our brains seek order, harmony and beauty in the world, your child's brain seeks it out too.

Additionally, there's an essential developmental incentive to clear the clutter out of your child's life. Providing external order for your child allows him to organize his thinking. He's already taken in so many impressions of the world and now he is categorizing, sorting, grading and matching all these impressions. (Cognitively grasping *same* and *different* as well as *one-to-one correspondence* are pre-math and pre-reading skills.) It's confusing, harder to make sense of everything when, right here in his room the crayons are randomly hanging out with the dolly blanket and Tonka truck wheel, if you will.

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So here are some strategies you might consider:

- Go through the books. If he has long since cared about *Pat the Bunny*, it's time to remove it from his shelf. Likewise anything that is torn, tattered and colored on. What should remain are only those

that he is now reading or is about to advance into. House the books on shelves just like in the library rather than piled one on top of the other or randomly scattered among other phylum such as toys and stuffed animals.

- The impediment to finding a toy when one wants it is the toy box. No matter how cute, inexpensive, convenient or cherished, the large universal receptacle does not lend itself to everything having a place. Shelving is best. Categorize the toys by type; each toy deserves a lidded box, then shelved.
- Discard or repair anything that is broken or missing a part. Wash the comfort-blankets and stuffed animals, otherwise discard them.

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- Four puzzles will be used more often than fifteen. Likewise dolls, toy cars, stuffed animals, Lego sets, board games and coloring books. You get the idea. Young children can easily get overwhelmed with too many choices.
- If your mom sent something that you may have determined is inappropriate, give yourself permission to remove it. You are the final arbiter of what is appropriate for your child.
- If you are having a harder time than your child letting go of some of his possessions, that's ok. You get to cry about it, but certainly not in front of your child. . . and pare them down anyway.
- Create a place in the garage for your child's outdoor equipment such as balls, scooters and anything else you'd rather not have your child using indoors.

Here are a few more considerations:

Your child wants to, and for his optimal development needs to become responsible for his own possessions. Make sure that he can put every toy away where it belongs. Don't make the tub for the blocks so heavy he can't move it into place himself. Is there a home for his trains? Bags, totes and backpacks all deserve wall hooks hung low enough for your child to hang up by himself.

You probably already have a child-size table and chairs. A child-sized rocker and/or a reading chair might be nice. How about an easel for chalking, painting and drawing? Generally, the younger the child, the more he wants to make large sweeping circular arm motions. You might even consider getting some butcher-block paper for large mural creation.

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*Every activity has a beginning,  
middle and end.*

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Sibling fights can be minimized if each person in the family, no matter the age has personal property rights. If your five year old doesn't want to share some of his toys with your toddler, I suggest that that is his right. However, you might work with your five year old to go through some of his possessions and

together determine which toys he might be willing to share. Further, many of his no-longer-used toys can be ceremoniously bequeathed to his younger sibling. His most prized possessions, however, should have a place in his room.

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Every activity (just like life) has a beginning, middle and end. Teach your child how to get something out, use it in the place designated for its use and then put it away. If he moves on to the next thing before putting the last activity away, you can say, "In our house, we always put our belongings away."

And finally, the most effective way to gain his cooperation is to model what you teach. Maybe it's time for some spring-cleaning of your own.

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*fostering the authentic life of children and their families in the American culture*