

Helping Kids Get Organized

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As a professional organizer, parents often ask me how to get their kids to keep their rooms tidy. Every child is different, but the following strategies will make this task a little easier.

When organizing any area, similar items should be grouped together. If you let your child have some input into what articles belong together, it will be easier for her to find things and, just as importantly, to put them away.

Sometimes it's hard for kids to keep their rooms neat because they just have too much stuff! These days, with smaller families, more money, and better quality toys, they often have lots of toys, and not enough space to store them. Encourage your child to get rid of toys he's outgrown, but don't just throw things away without his involvement, or he won't learn to make these decisions on his own. If he is reluctant to part with certain things, box them up and store them in the basement or garage. When he realizes he doesn't miss them, he may be more open to selling them in a garage sale or donating them to charity. If he still has a lot of toys even after removing those he's outgrown, consider packing some up in containers and rotating them every few months.

You will want to arrange the furniture so that it's easy for the child to pick up and keep it tidy. It's easier to make the bed when it's not up against a wall, and straightening a comforter or duvet is much less work than manipulating a heavy bedspread that is fitted to the shape of the bed.

Be sure to give your kid her own wastebasket and hamper so she doesn't have to take garbage and dirty clothes to another room (she probably won't!). They shouldn't have lids, as this will just "hamper" her motivation to use them!

Assigning homes for everything in your child's room will also make clean-up time easier, faster, and less of a chore, as will making sure that shelves and closet rods are low enough for him to reach. He will be more likely to hang up his bathrobe and jackets if you provide him with hooks or a coat tree than if he has to open the closet and get a hanger.

Use shelves and/or bulletin boards to display mementos and pictures. When they get full, it's time to take some down to make room for new ones. Older items can be stored in a "treasure box", or maybe you and your child can work on scrapbooks together.

Large toy boxes are popular, because a kid can just toss everything in them, but they have many drawbacks. Game and puzzle pieces get lost, toys get broken, and stuff gets buried and forgotten in the bottom – unless your child likes to dump the contents all over the floor! What works better is to store similar articles together in appropriately sized plastic bins, baskets, or covered shoeboxes. When buying containers, make sure they are both durable and easy for a child to handle. They should also appeal to your son or daughter and fit in with the room's décor. It might be helpful to use different coloured containers to represent different categories, such as blue for arts and crafts supplies, red for dolls and accessories, and green for cars and trucks.

Be sure to label containers, drawers, and shelves, so your child doesn't have to remember where everything belongs. For younger kids, picture labels will work best.

It will probably take several hours to get your child's room organized, so it's important to develop routines to keep it that way. Kids like to play and live in a tidy atmosphere, but need an adult to motivate them and teach them how to do it. A five-minute pickup at the same time every day, whether it's before dinner or before bedtime, is usually all that's needed, although a gentle reminder 10 minutes before will probably be needed. For younger kids, it may help to make a chart listing what needs to be done, using pictures for younger children. Give her a star for each completed task, and some kind of reward after she's earned a certain number of stars.

Some kids will be more likely to tidy their rooms if you make it into a game. Put on some music, and challenge them to finish before the song is over. Or have them pick up all the red things first, then blue, and so on.

It will be necessary to do a tune-up once or twice a year, to get rid of toys and clothing he's outgrown and make room for new stuff, and of course, to adapt to his changing needs as he grows up.

Although at times it may feel like it would be easier to do it yourself, there are many benefits to involving your kid in the organization of her room. By working together, she will eventually learn the skills she needs to do it on his own, which will ultimately take the burden off of you. It also gives you a chance to do something together when you're not rushing back and forth to an activity, and by seeing which things she wants to keep and which ones she is ready to get rid of, you will gain a better understanding of her current interests.

Keeping your kids organized can be an overwhelming task, but with your guidance and encouragement, it can be done, and you will be providing them with skills that will benefit them throughout their lives.