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KIDS!

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## Put it away!

# Organize your life and home to curb the craziness

BY TRACI DUTTON LUDWIG

**K**ids bring exuberance to the everyday. But they also collect a lot of stuff to corral at any age — toddler toys, sippy cups, sports equipment, games, backpacks, papers, snack paraphernalia and endless socks under the couch. All of this clutter can quickly turn into chaos and suddenly even the most patient parents feel overwhelmed.

Soon, family life is marked by moments of sit-com drama: you can't find what you need; objects get misplaced; frustration sets in; time scurries; and you end up running late or purchasing unnecessary duplicates. However, more than just a humorous annoyance, enduring mess can affect your inner Zen. Stress overtakes calm, and life can feel out of control.

When this happens, it's time for change. The key to staying on top of a disorderly house and being able to efficiently find what you need is to develop a system of organization and stick with it.

Mary Russell Zipkin, owner of Knack of All Trades in Katonah, has been successfully helping clients get organized for the past six years. She ad-

vises parents to start with the home environment prior to focusing on kids' habits.

"Before we can start teaching our children to help with tidying up, we each have to get our act together," Zipkin said. "I recommend that parents survey their houses and begin by purging some of the extras that they have never loved or used. They will gain space that can be used, for example, for toy storage or a basket for diapers. This process will help people get ready for change."

Professional organizer Jocelyn Kenner, founder of See Your Way Clear in Scarsdale, helps clients overcome organizational challenges by teaching concepts, strategies and solutions for living and maintaining an organized life. She believes "good organization" means something different to each person.

"We have different thresholds and needs when it comes to organizing; so a client's goals and preferences should be used to customize an approach," Kenner said. "To explain it in another way, if you can find what you're looking for easily, if you don't experience negative consequences from disorganization, if you save money by being organized and if you love your spaces, then chances



are you are experiencing good organization."

Since organization is a more of a lifestyle than a task, the entire family should get on board. Zipkin and Kenner agree that two effective tools for children's participation are designing child-friendly systems and reinforcing consistent and clear expectations.

"Absolutely include children in the process," Zipkin said. "Involve them by letting them pick out baskets or storage bins in which they would like to store their Legos and Barbie dolls, puzzles, video games and even rattles. Make clean-up part of any activity. Allow kids to play and make a mess, but make sure that picking up toys and putting them away becomes the end part of the play."

"You can start early by having one of your baby games be taking rattles, socks or toys out of a basket and then putting them back in. If you can succeed in making it fun, kids will enjoy cleaning up, and it won't seem like a chore."

According to Kenner, "Enabling children to handle tasks autonomously saves time and

energy for parents." She advises storing plastic cups, plates and healthy snack options in low drawers or baskets so kids can help themselves, as well as using storage bins, labeled with clip art pictures or words, to make cleaning up easy. Rotating toys between available and out-of-sight storage, using a timer to play "beat the clock cleanup" and singing a special cleanup song are a few more of Kenner's tips.

To increase active family involvement, Kenner said, "You can even write a family constitution together that lists expectations and rules. Children can decorate this constitution and it can be hung in a shared space such as the kitchen. Some organizational rules to include in the constitution might be: One, you may have your afterschool snack when your lunchbox and all the day's papers from your backpack are on the counter. Two, when you come into the house, you are expected to hang up your coat."

Just be sure to have low, easy to reach hooks in order to help small children complete this

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designated task, Kenner noted.

Other strategies are geared to help children efficiently organize time. “Time management is certainly a part of organization. It would be crazy to say it’s not,” Zipkin said. “Being organized is more than just a tidy drawer.”

Teaching kids to organize their time often starts with developing a sense of pre-emptive preparation, such as helping to pack the backpack, lunch and snack the night before school, or choosing clothes for the next day as part of a bedtime ritual. These routines will save precious time in the morning and lessen the stress of getting everyone out the door.

“Young children have difficulty grasping the concept of time,” Kenner said. “I recommend using timers so they know how much time is left for playing or until bedtime, etc. I especially love a product called the Time Timer. It allows children to visualize time and see a physical representation of how much time is left.”

Kenner also recommends using a color-coded family calendar posted in a shared space to track the busy lives of each family member. “With all the soccer games, dance and music lessons, robotics labs, tutoring and more, this makes it easy to see, at a glance, who’s doing what and where at any given time,” she said.

Having a visual calendar will also help keep schedules in check and avoid unnecessary overload. “Just like you don’t overstuff a closet because it becomes impossible to find what you need in the chaos, you should not overstuff your calendar for the same reasons,”

Kenner said. “Physical clutter can rob you of serenity, as can too many demands on your time. Choose carefully what you put and keep in your home, and choose carefully how you spend your time.”

Sometimes, when we feel overloaded, it’s difficult to get out from under that feeling and get started with something new. People may shy away from developing an organizational system because the prospect seems too daunting. Zipkin and Kenner have experienced this scenario firsthand with clients, yet they have also seen the positive results of starting with manageable organizational projects and building on them.

“Where do I start?” is a common question that professional organizers hear from many exasperated clients.

Kenner responds by first helping the client to identify which parts of his or her life or environment feel well organized and which parts do not.

## Get organized and stay organized

Jocelyn Kenner shares her list of easy organizational favorites:

- I’m a big fan of clear plastic storage bins in various shapes and sizes. They protect items from dust and moisture and they provide the added benefit of seeing what’s inside.

- I never met a post-it note I didn’t like. I especially love Post-It Tape and Super Sticky Fluorescent Post-It Notes. Don’t buy the knock-off brands because they just don’t stick as well.

- Command Strips and Command Hooks are great.

- A portable timer, especially the Time Timer, will help kids visualize how much time is left for certain activities and tasks.

- A label Maker is a must. Brother or DYMO brands are both good. Don’t be lured into buying a model with lots of bells and whistles — they’re too complicated to use. A simple label maker is the way to go.

- Elfa shelving from the Container Store is amazing. It’s very customizable, stylish and offers excellent storage capabilities.

- Get a calendar you love and use it. It can be paper, digital or both. Also, colored erasable pens (such as Pilot FriXion) are tremendously helpful for using on paper calendars. Color is a powerful organizing tool because it’s an additional visual cue that supports a system (i.e. all work appointments are in green, and all personal appointments are in purple).

“Dig deeper to understand what is supporting your sense of organization and what is sabotaging it,” Kenner said. “Then choose a non-emotional area to organize first. For example, don’t start with family photos because those are fraught with emotion. Start with something neutral such as a closet or a kitchen cabinet. Choose the first few tasks wisely so they’re easy to conquer in a short amount of time. You will experience success right off the bat, and this is not only motivating, but it also provides hope that organization is possible to accomplish.”

Likewise, Zipkin recommends starting with a neutral area that will create an immediate and joyful sense of success. “Personally, when someone feels frazzled and disorganized, I suggest starting with the car. It may sound funny, but cleaning out your car and running it through the car wash is so beautiful. We are in our cars every day, and there

isn’t a person who doesn’t love the joy that comes from being in a clean car.

“From the car, I move to the kitchen. Start by cleaning off the counters. Remove all the mail and papers that are piling up, the vitamin bottles and the stockpile of oils and vinegars. You will suddenly find you have more workspace and a greater sense of calm. Get used to the feeling and maintain it by getting in the habit of putting things away immediately after you use them. It really takes only a few seconds. “Third, tackle your bedroom. Hang up all those clothes thrown over that cute chair that has become your closet. Put all your stuff away. Then, reward yourself by curling up in that cute chair with a cup of tea and a book. An organized environment creates spaces for relaxed moments.”

Zipkin describes two general types of clients: natural organizers and people who yearn to

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become organized. “If you’re a natural organizer, you seek out new ideas and strategies,” she said. “You find pleasure in creative storage solutions and you feel true happiness from an efficiently organized kitchen drawer. However, if you’re not ‘neat’ by nature and have a hard time closing cabinet drawers, we will work together to experience the joy that comes from organizing, such as creating a drawer where the keys can always be found. This means the client will not have to spend 30 minutes looking for her keys each time, in different places, again and again. We might also work together to experience joy in buying pretty baskets, placing them in the home and designating them as places for bills, homework and important papers, so that nothing gets lost or misses its deadline.”

While not exactly mantras, Kenner shares two guiding philosophies with her clients: “A place for everything, and everything in its place” and “Less is more.”

“We live in a consumer driven society,” she said. “The ease of next day delivery and endless reminders to shop, via email, social media, commercials, malls and shopping centers, make the act of acquiring effortless. In response, we need to be conscious of what is entering our home versus what is going out, either by donation, trash or simply being used. I often reference the Pareto Principle, or 80/20 rule. For example, we wear 20 percent of our clothes 80 percent of the time. Children play with 20 percent of their toys 80 percent of the time. We have our favorites and reach for them all the time



to the exclusion of everything else. The Pareto Principle supports that phenomenon.”

The Pareto Principle demonstrates that we all have too much, or at least more than we need.

“You don’t need to keep everything you have ever bought, been gifted, handed down or acquired,” Zipkin said. “Realizing this is one of the best organizational tools anyone can learn. Most paperwork is online, so

you don’t have to keep hard copies for seven years and be buried in paper. We all need to purge. When you purge, it feels good, and it makes it easier to find and use the things you really love or need, because your closets, dressers, bookshelves are no longer overcrowded. If you purge prior to organizing, you won’t need to take up precious space stashing things you don’t want or don’t need.”

Organization should enhance

a family’s overall sense of well-being. According to Kenner, “It’s not about perfection. It’s about creating an environment that feels comfortable, safe and well balanced.”

In practical terms, this simply means: “Your belongings have a home, and you can access what you need, when you need it, easily and quickly. You containerize and store like items together, so there’s no questioning where to find something or how much inventory you have left. Labeling enables all members of the family to help by putting things away... My home is not perfect, and it doesn’t look like it belongs in a magazine. However, it is well organized and it makes me feel calm and happy — except my basement, which is on my radar for a good purge and reorganization. Do I need to work at staying organized? Yes, I do, like everyone else, but once systems are in place, all that is required is a little maintenance now and then.”

Zipkin recommends, “Be realistic from the beginning, and be kind to yourself. Your house will not be neat all the time. Kids must play. Messes will occur. But even when it looks like Disneyland has exploded in your living room, if you commit energy to putting stuff away after it has been used, you can maintain a clean and organized house. Make ‘Put Stuff Away’ your family’s motto. I can assure you that if you teach your children to respect their toys and your home, they will do it — and please remember to quit picking up for your kids. Have them do it with you or by themselves. It is so important to make children accountable. By taking responsibility for themselves, they will become better children and better adults.”