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Working with Families - Parent's guide to... tidying up

By Katy Morton

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Top tips for introducing tidying-up time to your child at home and the benefits that learning this skill can bring. By Katy Morton



Parents should explain to children why tidying up is necessary

Tidying up is something young children should do, for as well as reducing your workload at home, it also benefits your child's learning and development.

Learning to tidy teaches children valuable life skills they will take into adulthood, such as respecting their belongings, valuing their environment and being responsible. Importantly, it helps to develop self-regulation; that is, their ability to manage their thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

When it comes to tidying, that means staying on task and resisting the temptation to wander off to find something more interesting to do. With completion comes a sense of achievement, meaning tidying up can actually be a very rewarding task.

AT WHAT AGE CAN CHILDREN HELP?

The earlier the better. You can start introducing tidying up as soon as your child can hold something. However, when children are young, it will be more of a case of a child putting things away alongside an adult, or the adult passing an item or toy to the child to put away.

WHAT DO I DO?

Explain to your child why tidying up is necessary. It may be obvious to you, but not to your child. This is something parents often forget to do.

Don't expect perfection or that your child will meet your expectations. They might not always manage to put the toy in the box or might put something in the wrong place, but whatever happens, always praise them for trying.

You also need to consider what your child is physically capable of – for instance, they may struggle to carry a big or heavy toy. Children should be encouraged to carry only what they can manage and if need be make several trips – sometimes it can take time to tidy.

If your child has a certain toy that they can't bear to put away, then that is fine, just leave it out.

HOW CAN I SET A GOOD EXAMPLE?

Children often mirror adult behaviour and actions, so if they see you tidying, they are more likely to become interested in copying what you are doing and adopt your habits. It is similar to children becoming interested in cleaning, as they are imitating what they see at home.

It is good for children to see both their parents tidying so they recognise it is a team effort.

CASE STUDY

Sarah Williams has already taught her two-year-old how to tidy up.

'We started tidying up with Mia when she was little by saying goodbye to toys and putting them away,' she explains. 'That way she understood that they were going away. And, at that age, it was a case of out of sight, out of mind.'

'She used to like putting books away, sliding them into the bookcase. I used to help pick up the other toys.'

'When she was little, the toys were quite small and there weren't too many of them. Now we talk about making space to use toys by putting away others we aren't playing with any more. I explain to Mia that if we don't tidy toys away, we might trip over them or we might struggle to find them.'

'I try to make tidying up fun. I ask Mia how many pieces or toys she can fit in a box and challenge her to hop while tidying, for example, or drive in her toy car to the bookcase to put away books.'

'Some days, Mia even tidies up without me asking her.'

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