

Conquering the clutter

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Ready to implement your own toy management system? Here are some suggestions from professional organizer Kate Varness of Peoria.

Getting started

- Gather up all the toys, sort them into different categories and work with your children to make choices as to what to keep or give away.

- Resort toys so you can work in short sessions (no more than 10 minutes). Be clear with expectations. Tell the child he can keep 10 stuffed animals, or ask, "Which firetruck is your favorite?"

- If you're feeling overwhelmed, start by working in short 15- or 30-minute sessions. It took Varness a couple of weeks, working about a half hour a day, to get the toys under control in her own home.

Clean closets

- Sort the toys and other items before going out to shop for shelves and containers to organize your closets. Measure the closets in advance as well, and take a tape measure with you to the store.

- Make sure the kids can reach containers easily to get them out and put them away.

- Label every bin, and let the children help with labeling. Involving them in the process makes them more likely to cooperate. "If kids are proud of the area, they will take care of it," Varness says.

Toys in adult spaces

The Varnesses keep a bookshelf in the living room with stylish wicker baskets to hold toys, so they don't distract from the decor of the room. Each child has his or her own set of baskets, with 2-year-old Samantha's on the lowest shelf.

Be sure to anchor shelves and cabinets that children use to the wall so there's no chance they will topple over on a child.

Make it easy

People tend to stay organized when their system is convenient. Rather than asking the children to put their coats away in a hall closet, Varness installed hooks on a door just inside the garage for coats and placed a rack with designated spots for each child's shoes and hats. The family stores games in a cabinet next to the table where they're played.



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Keep eliminating

Once, of course, isn't enough when it comes to purging toys.

"Before Christmas, they need to get rid of some toys because Santa is going to be bringing some new ones," Varness says.

And bins naturally limit the amount of toys, she wrote in her short story for "Chicken Soup for the Soul." "When the baskets overflow, it's time to relocate toys or give some away."

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