



LESLIE RENKEN/Journal Star Plastic bins in the children's playroom are neatly labeled, making it easier to find items and having the added benefit of teaching reading skills.

Toy trauma tactics

A Peoria professional organizer shares her secrets to defusing a 'toy explosion'

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Six-year-old Emma Varness loves making labels. Her closet is filled with small plastic tubs marked "puzzles," "dress up," "blankets," "treasures" and "artwork." Even her blue piggy bank has a label across its nose.

"I have labels on, like, everything," she says. As a result, she rarely has to clean her room "because I'm always keeping it clean."

Max Varness, 4, loves to collect. Two white bookshelves in his room hold his many action figures, books and other prized possessions. But the rule is: When the shelves fill up, he has to give something away to collect something new.

Samantha Varness, 2, has a magnetic chores board on the refrigerator, just like her older siblings, with two columns: "To Do" and "Done." Samantha is too little have a "laundry helper" or "dishes helper" magnet just yet, but she can move her own magnets around for fun to get used to the concept, and she knows how to help with recycling and pick up her toys.

Kate Varness, their mother, says it usually takes just five to 10 minutes for her family to clean up the playroom. The professional organizer implemented a toy management system in her Peoria home about a year ago that not only has kept her house in order, but also has introduced her children to important life lessons.

Varness shared her story with other mothers in "Chicken Soup for the Soul: Life Lessons for Busy Moms," which came out in January. She says "toy room cleanup trauma" usually results because today's children have too much stuff.

"I grew up with a box of toys - literally. We had very little. But I had my imagination," she says.

Toy explosion

Like many parents, Varness says she was surprised by the amount of "stuff" that accompanied the birth of her first child. "Then every Christmas there was this toy explosion," she says. The ensuing mess

created chaos. "I started feeling overwhelmed with all this stuff."

But Varness quickly realized the problem wasn't something she could blame on the kids.

"If I was overwhelmed, how could I say, 'Clean up your toys'? They don't know where to start because there's too much."

So Varness took action.

"I got every single stuffed animal and doll and piled it up. It was a mountain," she says. She told each child to pick 10 dolls or stuffed animals to keep. "I felt like 'mean Mommy.' But if you take 10 times three (children), that's 30 stuffed animals still in my home."

Varness did the same thing with every other toy category in the house. And the duplication became apparent.

She made Max, for example, choose which tool set he wanted to keep - and which he'd get rid of. The process proved to be more than an organizational one. Varness says it also helped her children build decision-making skills and come to realize how much is enough.

"It's teaching them who they are and what they value," she says. "We are not raising them to be consumers. . . . In the real world, there's a finite amount of space. Knowing what you like is a wonderful thing."

"Giving them everything they want isn't teaching them to be a good adult," she adds. "There's a feeling of satisfaction of knowing what you love. Having too much stuff, it creates mental clutter."

Max, then 3, had the most difficulty making eliminations, Varness says. "He wanted to keep everything." But when she gave him specific choices - Do you want to keep this or that? - he could do it.

And with that came yet another lesson - charity. When the family takes excess toys to Goodwill, Varness explains where the toys are going. At Christmas, they often sponsor a needy family.

"I think giving to others makes you realize how fortunate you are," Varness says.

Storage solutions

Once the toys were sorted and pared down, Varness began organizing them in a way that's conducive to quick, easy cleanup. Most toys are stored in the playroom, which has four large closets along one wall. Each closet was fitted with wire shelving from floor to ceiling, arranged to hold small plastic bins (with no lids) labeled with their contents: blocks, puzzles, Dora, ponies, Little People.

"By labeling, it makes sense to everyone, whether it be Dad or anyone else in the house," Varness says. "It takes the guesswork out of it."

When the children are finished with the puzzles, the pieces go back into the designated bin and onto the shelf. "It's very directive. It's not, 'Go clean up your room,'" Varness says.

The labeled bins - sometimes accompanied with stickers or cutouts from boxes to help children identify what should go inside - also help the children learn to read.

And the bins help manage the toy load, too. Take, for example, the bin of McDonald's toys. "When the bin gets full, we can't go back to McDonald's until we've gone through and thrown or given some away," Varness says.

The children picked up on the system right away, she says.

"It's like magic. If I notice there's a mess in the playroom, we take five minutes and it's done." The secret, she says, is not letting the mess pile up - and using a storage system that's efficient and manageable.

"It takes extra work, but the payoff is so good in the end - to have a calmer house.

"If I can get moms some help with getting started . . . it really can make a difference in their everyday life - and that's awesome."

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