

Getting Organized

By Arlene Miles

The holidays have come and gone. Your decorations are streaming out of the box where you threw them, the lights are in a tangled heap and even worse, you can't walk into your kids' rooms thanks to all the new toys and possessions they received.

What a hopeless mess! Wait a minute, it may not be as bad as you think. The New Year is the perfect time to put a little structure in the life of your family as January is Get Organized Month, sponsored by the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO). Chances are you have tried to organize your home before, rushed out to buy drawer dividers, storage bins and systems, and met with varying degrees of success. Yet the mess keeps on reappearing or is even getting worse.

One of the keys to successful household organization is getting everyone involved. We, as parents, have a tendency to want to clean up and organize everything for our children, but doing so can be the worst thing you can do when you want to organize your home.

"If you go and do it for them you are doing them a disservice because they don't get the benefit of learning the skills they will need to do this later in their lives," said Jane Carroo, certified professional organizer and owner of Cluttercoach www.cluttercoach.com in Palatine.

Kids get overwhelmed by clutter in much the same way that adults do. When people have too much of something, they often tend to cram or throw it into a drawer, closet, or container and the mess just gets bigger.

To declutter, one first needs to purge the area of unwanted items. Lest you fear that you children will not want to give up anything, don't fret. You may be surprised. Professional organizers always involve children in the process to get them to cooperate better. Once your child makes a decision to get rid of something, honor it.

"You wouldn't believe how many times parents will step in and say, 'No,'" said Linda Goldman of Altogether Organized www.altogetherorganized.org in Highland Park. "It's important for parents to validate those choices. Don't discourage your child when they're telling you what they want to get rid of because they need to build skills in purging."

Goldman suggests pre-sorting toys, books, clothes, and the like to make the job easier for your child. Start with a category in which they can easily make decisions and progress from there. Breaking down the job into manageable chunks will make it less overwhelming to kids and will elicit better cooperation. This same strategy works for teens as well as adults.

Once you've decided what to donate to dispose of or donate to charity, it's time to rearrange everything you want to keep. You don't need a lot of fancy bins or expect to spend thousands of dollars on gadgets to stay organized. Chances are, you already have something that will be more than adequate. This is another good time to get your kids involved.

"Have them (your kids) decorate what they already have," Carroo said. "Make it into an event where they're redoing their room."

Find a place for everything, i.e. a bin for Barbies, a specific place for crayons, pencils, play food, and the like. Most of all, keep it simple and remember that there is no single correct system.

"Find a system that works for you, that is flexible and expandable," Goldman said. "If it doesn't work, try something else."

But what about those endless stream of school papers and projects that come in continually throughout the year? The solution here is to periodically go through those backpacks and determine what you want to keep short- and long-term. Again, find something that works for you, whether it is

hanging folios, bins, or portable drawers. Remember that you don't have to keep everything.

"Think about what your kids' wishes will be when they grow up," Goldman said. "If something is unruly and falling apart, take a picture of it and throw it away."

The picture memento also works when you are purging toys that have outlived their usefulness. By taking a photo of a once-loved treasure, you still get to "keep" it, but without the mess.

Another problem area for families

is keeping myriads of schedules straight. Again, there is no single way that works best. Goldman likes big calendars which can be magnetic to place on refrigerators or wipe-off ones that can be easily changed. Carroo noted that these work for some, but also suggests a central "command center" with files for every family member with pertinent information.

When reorganizing, recognize that the initial

process will take some time and needs maintenance. Schedule periodic tidying times for all family members.

"After they do the work, kids usually have so much pride that they want to maintain what they have done," said Carroo.

Lastly, make the process fun and reward yourself with a family outing, special meal or similar treat. After all that hard work, give yourself a big pat on the back! ■

