



# conquering kids' clutter

By Adriane M. Weinberg

Let's play a game called "Pretend."

**Step 1:** Go to your child's bedroom. Open the closet door, dresser drawers and toy containers. Sit on the floor in the middle of the room. Pretend you are your child's age and try to see every single thing through your child's eyes. Look low and, more importantly, high.

For example, notice the height of

the clothing rod in the closet. Now that you have a different perspective compared to standing at adult height, isn't it really high? Are toys, games, books and clothes placed at a child friendly height?

**Step 2:** Compare the size of the toy box to your child's size. Then pretend you have a toy box in your bedroom, sized proportionately to your height, for all your important stuff. Things you use every day, your "toys," are in it and the box is full. Upon entering

the bedroom, mom would place items such as jewelry and hair accessories in her toy box, while dad would add keys, watch and wallet to his.

As things are added and retrieved, smaller items would snake their way to the bottom. Even using your nimble fingers, how much fun would you have trying to find hair accessories or keys? About as much as your child trying to find Lego® pieces!

**Step 3:** Pretend that you are your

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child. You are small with short arms and legs, and not very strong. Open and close everything in the room including dresser drawers, containers and closet doors. Are they easy or difficult to open? Next, find and reach everything that you, still acting as your child, would want. Are toys, games, books and clothes accessible? Are they arranged logically or haphazardly?

Pondering solutions to the first three steps moves you toward winning the game.

Parents have the best intentions when using trunks, chests, large plastic tubs and other huge containers to store children's toys along with their tiny parts, but children often consider these storage containers to be scary and don't want to use them. Kids realize they act like giant quicksand traps and get frustrated when they cannot find what they want. They pull out almost everything to find one toy. The room quickly becomes a disaster area. Then who gets frustrated?

Large containers are appropriate to store things such as large toys, stuffed animals, racecar track and accessories, train sets and sports gear. For smaller things, use small containers such as shoebox size bins for Hot Wheels® and Barbie® clothes and accessories.



Photo courtesy of Closets by Builders Prime.

is a great solution for kids' (or adults') closets.

To save time during the morning rush, hang a six- or eight-shelf sweater organizer from the closet rod.

## Because kids quickly outgrow their clothes, place a donation container in the closet to prevent clutter from building.

### CUSTOMIZE THE CLOSET

Modifying the bedroom closet for young children can help to prevent clutter buildup. A custom closet company can design it to grow with your child's needs.

Alternatively, there are inexpensive products designed to fit an existing closet. One is a closet rod doubler, typically a 30-inch wood or metal rod suspended by two 34-inch wood or metal poles that hook onto the existing rod. This product makes it easy for kids to reach hanging clothes. It adds 2 1/2 feet of vertical space, so it

Select complete outfits for the week and put each one on a separate shelf. Organizers designed for kids have bright colors, Monday through Friday printed on the shelves and a bottom compartment for shoes. To save a step, select the outfits and add them after the laundry is folded. When old enough, kids can choose the outfits, retrieve them and dress themselves.

For extra storage, use vertical space such as open shelves above furniture. Put frequently used items on low shelves and rarely used things on higher shelves. High shelves are a great place to display prized posses-

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## quick tips and tricks for storage

- For youngsters who cannot read, put picture stickers or magazine clippings on drawers, shelves and containers to help them identify what's inside. Let them select the pictures. When they learn to read, replace pictures with word labels.
- Use clear containers whenever possible. If your child can't see what is in them, most likely those things will be ignored. If non-clear containers are used, remember to use picture or word labels.
- Employ the single purpose method. Use containers to keep similar things together instead of mixing unrelated items. This will keep car, doll and Lego® collections organized.
- To maximize bedroom space, put out of season toys and sports gear into storage areas, such as the basement or garage, or use under the bed containers.





When organizing a child's closet, always consider the future. Design the closet at an adult's height so the shelves that currently store teddy bears and books will eventually hold sweaters, shoes and sports gear. Include an adjustable hanging bar low enough for the child to easily reach today, so that later it can be raised to accommodate larger clothing. Photo courtesy of Closet City Ltd.

sions, such as trophies, that are not used but are important to see. A bookcase should be short so small arms can reach favorite stories. Use

in/two toys out rule. For every new toy, have your child pick two (or more, depending on how much you want to pare) to donate or toss,

## Hang a six- or eight-shelf sweater organizer from the closet rod. Select complete outfits for the week and put each one on a separate shelf.

the wall space above it for additional shelves. They should be out of reach of young children who will pull off everything.

### RULES FOR COOPERATION

If your kid's things are strewn throughout the house, boundaries are an effective way to reduce clutter. Create rules such as the three-toy or three-book rule: A maximum of three may be out simultaneously. To play with a different toy or read another book, first the child must return one. Toys and books must be easy to access and put away or this will not work.

If your child has too many toys and you want to reduce the amount, create a rule such as the one toy

depending on condition. Another rule to lessen the overall amount, without the stipulation of a new toy, can be the one toy a week rule. Have your child pick one toy every week to donate or toss. This is not as harsh as it may sound. The toy can be one Matchbox car. At the end of the year, you will have eliminated 52 toys!

A different rule to prevent things from being on the wrong floor is the upstairs/downstairs rule. Toys, games and books stay upstairs or downstairs; they are not allowed to go up or down the stairs. Be flexible if your child wants things permanently switched to another floor but hold firm on the upstairs/downstairs part.

Be creative. Establish rules that will work well for your family. Decide

## quick tips and tricks for the closet

- For youngsters who are past the stage of pulling out everything, remove closet doors for easy access.
- Organizing products and systems must be age appropriate and support your child's ability, needs and personality.
- Over the door shoe organizers alternatively can be used for small stuffed animals, dolls and other collections.
- Because kids quickly outgrow their clothes, place a donation container in the closet to prevent clutter from building. When clothes in good condition no longer fit, drop them in. Have a separate container for unwanted toys. When containers are full, it's time to donate.

how to implement and apply them. Most importantly, rules should be positive, not punitive, to foster learning. When practical, involve your child in the process and ask for solutions. If included in the planning, you will likely get more cooperation. Your child may even surprise you and think of something clever that didn't occur to you.

Talk about the importance of donating things your child no longer wants—things that have become clutter. It's healthy for them to know there are less fortunate kids who have nice toys and clothes solely because they were donated.

Backsliding will happen, so be patient. Whether children or adults, it takes time to learn new habits. When your child forgets to put things away, gentle reminders may solve the problem. When your child demonstrates progress, praise is a great motivator. For extra special accomplishments, use rewards such as extending bedtime by 30 minutes, going out for ice cream or another treat, or doing something fun with mom and dad.

### ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS ARE THE KEY

Learning good organizing skills and habits at a young age will benefit chil-

dren throughout their lives. They will be far ahead of their disorganized peers in school and later in a career. It is worth the time and effort to teach them how to get and remain organized.

If you figured out how to better meet your child's needs and implemented the necessary changes, you win the game!



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