



EasyPeasy Living

Solutions for everyday life

Parenting Tip: Raising De-Cluttered Kids

Most people are pack-rats by nature. We have a propensity to keep things "in case we need it someday" or as a reminder of special memories, people, or achievements. So often, we end up holding on simply because we aren't sure how, when or whether to let go. That kind of keeping by default eventually leads to clutter, which in turn leads to disorganization when the clutter becomes unmanageable. Learning how to make choices about your belongings with confidence is key to avoiding what I call "clutter creep."

Kids are notorious for wanting to keep everything under the sun because they haven't yet experienced the many overhead costs of clutter creep. The good news is that you can help them develop into purgers instead of pack-rats. With just a few simple strategies, they will begin forming the good habit of making thoughtful, intentional decisions about their stuff, rather than keeping things by default. Not only will this set them up for a lifetime of clutter-free living as adults, it will free *you* from grappling with *their* clutter creep in addition to your own. But wait! These strategies aren't just for kids. Putting adult-modified versions of these concepts into practice yourself will stop your own clutter creep in its tracks, as well as set a great example for your children to follow.

In my experience, the biggest challenge most kids have is in taming their keepsakes and parting with outgrown toys. There are two things to keep in mind about keepsakes: 1) Their main function is to trigger a positive memory; 2) Less really is more. Think about this for a minute: How is a huge stash of photos, old school papers, certificates, artwork, old birthday cards, etc. taking up room in your space helpful in preserving the memories they represent? In order to trigger the memories, you would have to go through that big pile, yet most of us are actively *avoiding* the big pile, right? It's overwhelming. It represents unmade decisions, uncertain outcomes and sometimes guilt as the pile continues to grow.

News flash: It feels that way to your kids too! Add to that the visual noise and inconvenience of having to live around it. At some point, that huge stash of what is supposed to be positive memories has become a big pile of negativity. So what to *do* with it?

Here are five strategies to try with your kids:

Strategy #1: The Transformation Challenge

Try this for three-dimensional keepsakes and trinkets...for example a large oyster shell collected during a beach vacation. Brainstorm ways this purely sentimental object can fulfill a functional need. Turn the shell upside down and voila! it becomes a dish for holding small items such as change, paper clips, tiny earrings, etc. The goal is to *replace* an everyday, mundane, purely functional object with something that is both functional and memory-evoking at the same time. In this case, by transforming the shell into a change-holder, you can ditch the boring plastic container that is currently holding change. Thus, you are still eliminating clutter without eliminating the memory. Plus, every time your child places change in the shell, it will evoke positive memories about his beach vacation. Win-Win! Challenge your kids to see what ideas they can come up with. You'll be amazed at their creativity, and they'll feel so proud of themselves for being so clever.

Strategy #2: The Keepsake Box

Two-dimensional keepsakes such as papers, photos, and old birthday cards are difficult to transform into a functional object. This is where the "less is more" concept becomes key. Consider this: Why do you go to museums to see old paintings and historical objects? Why are antiques so valuable? Answer: because they are *rare*. Keeping every school project, essay, drawing, handmade card, and certificate your kids ever received is not going to be valuable down the road. Would they rather look through the big, scary pile of papers on their desk to find and admire their old artwork, or use their desk for drawing something new? Would they rather spend the afternoon looking through a pile of old birthday cards from their best friend, or playing outside with that friend? Instead of keeping everything, limit the paper keepsakes to just what will fit inside a defined and manageable space such as a keepsake box. When the space gets full, it's time for your child to sit down, review everything in the box (and evoke some cool memories) and then eliminate items that are no longer as meaningful as they once were in order to make room for new ones. This weeding out process gives them an opportunity to practice making intentional decisions about what to keep and puts them in charge of their own stuff. Consider using a box that they themselves have decorated, thus making the box itself a functional keepsake. Defining the space ahead of time keeps the pile manageable. Decide in advance the rules for when a second box can be added (every five years? every ten?) and stick to it. This will depend on how much space you are willing to devote to paper keepsakes. Remember, less really is more!

Strategy #3: The Art Gallery

Artwork often represents a unique challenge for parents, especially if your child is a prolific artist. Again, less is more. You can save space in the keepsake box by displaying any drawings and paintings instead. Borrowing the concept of limited storage space from strategy #2 above, create a gallery space specifically for this purpose. It can be on a bulletin board, refrigerator, frames in a hallway or bedroom, or pages of a portfolio...whatever works best for your family. The key is to define the space ahead of time and do not exceed it. Have your child decide what gets displayed and for how long. When a new masterpiece comes along, leave it up to your child to decide what needs to go in order to make room for it. This not

only allows him/her to practice that crucial decision-making process again, it also alleviates any guilt you might feel about tossing your little Picasso's creations.

Strategy #4: The "Vacation" Rotation

So what about trinkets and toys that cannot be transformed into a functional objects and won't easily fit in a keepsake box, scrap book or gallery wall? Who *hasn't* had their kids beg to keep the toys they have long outgrown and forgotten about after they've "discovered" them during clear-out time? When saying goodbye forever is too much of a struggle, teach your kids to say "bon voyage" instead and place these items into temporary storage for 3-6 months. Make note of their scheduled return date. If your child hasn't mentioned them or asked for them by that date, extend the "vacation" a bit longer. If they still don't ask for them, this is a sign that they may be more ready to part with them than they thought. If they still insist on keeping them, negotiate a swap. Again, this allows them to practice making choices and keeps them in charge.

Strategy #5: The Photo Shoot/Book Tour

Sometimes saving the actual object is not required to trigger a memory. They say a picture paints a thousand words, so a photo or even a short story about an object may be a more practical and appropriate solution. Make it fun and creative! Set the mood with a fan and some mood music while you play pretend professional photographer and conduct a photo shoot of your child with all his/her stuffed animals, dolls, or dinosaurs. Invite friends or siblings to join in. Or encourage your child to write down the story of an object...where it came from, why it's special, what they hope/imagine becomes of it in its next "life" after donation. Allow him/her to share the story a la book tour.

Parting with stuff--for adults and kids alike--is often associated with negative emotions. That's because we fear forever losing the memories our stuff triggers. That worry feels *bad*. But having adequate space to live in and create new memories...feeling organized and in charge of our own environment...that feels really *good*. Teaching your kids these strategies and giving them opportunities to practice making intentional choices will empower them.

With a little patience and a few good strategies, even raising de-cluttered kids can be easy peasy.