



From a Parent's Perspective

by Roslyn Duffy

Clutter 'R Us

– Situation –

"Our living room looks like a battle zone. If I am lucky enough to avoid being attacked by plastic superheroes, Disney characters, and this month's Happy Meal trinkets, I can count on detonating a Lego or two with my bare toe.

The alternative to this disaster scene is to create a scene of my own by yelling at everyone. When I do, we usually end up with just as much mess but with my four-year-old son and two-year-old daughter throwing tantrums while being held hostages in their rooms. I need a better battle plan."

Centers are granted permission to photocopy and distribute this column to parents.

– Solution –

The sight of a room-sized mess is formidable to everyone — children included. One single mom tried an experiment. For two days she gathered up and hid away all the toys lying on the floor at the end of each day. Guess what? The children did not even notice!

Children see a toy advertised on TV, in a magazine, or at the store, and they beg to have it. Mom picks up a new set of blocks at the mall, Grandma shows up with another teddy bear, and the morning cereal box offers irresistible deals. The toys swoop down like a river in flood stage. It may be time to bail out. Do you have too much stuff?

Simplify

- Give away items that are not being used.
- Discard broken toys, those that are incomplete or falling apart.
- Store unsuitable toys. That precious doll with spun gold hair, crystal eyes, and handmade lace clothing does not belong in a three year old's toy box.
- Pack up half of the toys that are worth keeping and put them in storage.

*What problems do you experience? Send a description, a short word "snapshot" of the situation, to **From a Parent's Perspective**. Each month, we will address your real-life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear. Elements of several problems may be combined for this column. Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.*

■ Switch toy supplies every month or two. Bundle up the current batch and replace them with the stored items. Children thrill to see the forgotten toys reappear.

■ Organize what is left. Use shelves, containers and labels to establish order.

Designate

Once the numbers are on your side, make some decisions. Where do toys belong? Discuss the problem with your children. Listen to their needs and express your own. Agree upon guidelines for your household.

(CAUTION: It helps if the household's adults are roughly in agreement. If your partner believes passionately in a policy

Where Do Toys Belong?

■ Decide in which rooms toys are allowed.

■ Agree upon boundaries. If toys are allowed anywhere in the house, have a clear plan for when, how, and what toys must be tidied away.

■ Define where in each room toys belong. Confine toys to the floor next to the sofa, the rug in front of the TV, or the space beside a special toy shelf.

■ Establish clear expectations. What does "picked up" look like? Do toys belong in separate containers? Is tumbling everything into a large basket, toy chest, or cardboard box acceptable?

Keep expectations realistic, reasonable, and suited to the needs of the whole family.

of *no toys in the living room* and you lean toward *creative disarray*, reconcile your own points of view beforehand. Listening counts here too!

Decide What YOU Will Do

Most of us spend our energy focusing on what to get the children to do. Instead, take charge of your own behavior. When your behavior changes, so will theirs. State what you have decided to do if toys are left out.

Here are some possibilities:

1. "I will ask only once for you to pick up your toys."
2. "I will help pick up toys each evening before bedtime. I will stop helping if there is complaining."
3. "I will pick up any toys left out each evening. Toys I pick up will go into a box in the garage." Follow this with how toys may be retrieved:

"I will return toys that are earned back. Toys may be earned back by keeping things picked up for two days."

"I will return toys I pick up after keeping them for one week" (or other time period).

Prepare to Be Tested

Once it is clear what YOU will do in the situation, prepare to be tested.

Can you live with your child's discomfort? When the whining, wailing, and wallowing begin, what will you do? The key is to remain calm and fight the urge to threaten, nag, or make exceptions. Simply do what you said you would do.

Here is what that might look like:

1
"I will ask only once for you to pick up your toys."

At 5:30, you ask your son to pick up the blocks in the playroom. At 5:45, you walk through the playroom, stepping over the crumbling block tower in the middle of the room. Your lips remain bonded together as if sealed with super glue. Your son watches and wonders.

2
"I will help pick up toys each evening before bedtime. I will stop helping if there is complaining."

It is late and you are gathering up the pieces to a wooden puzzle. Your daughter throws down the crayon box she was filling and stomps across the room announcing she "will not pick up any more stupid toys!"

You do not match her stomp for stomp. You remain serene. You place the unfinished puzzle on the floor and walk away, saying nothing as you leave the room. Silence fills the room. Your daughter ponders. (She will probably be tugging at your sleeve within a few moments to announce that she is ready for you to help again.)

3
"I will pick up any toys left on the floor each evening. Toys I pick up will go into a box in the garage."

Be brave. Lying half buried under your new novel is the silky, stuffed kitten you bought yesterday. You place it in the box, along with your novel (Egad! Your *toys* count too.). The poor kitten looks so forlorn, staring up at you with its sad glass eyes (they are glass, *not* sad!). Stiffening your shoulders, you do not falter as you carry the box out to the dark, dusty, and desolate garage. You console

and assure your children (if they notice) that you are confident they will soon earn these toys back.

Peace at Last

Following through with your own actions may be difficult at first, but a wonderful sense of empowerment will soon replace your previous feelings of helplessness and frustration.

Simplify. Designate. Decide what you will do. The battlefield clears. Your living room reappears. Peace banners flutter in the breeze as you sing a pick-up song, working side by side with your youngsters, gathering the blocks, books and blankies left behind from a busy day of play. The change will include more than just a reduction of clutter.

Roslyn Duffy is the co-author with Jane Nelsen and Cheryl Erwin of *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers* and *Positive Discipline: The First Three Years* (Prima Press) and co-author with Elizabeth Crary of *The Parent's Report Card* (Parenting Press). Roslyn is a 17-year veteran director of a child care program in Seattle, Washington, lectures and teaches classes for both parents and teachers, and is a counselor in private practice. She has four children of her own.