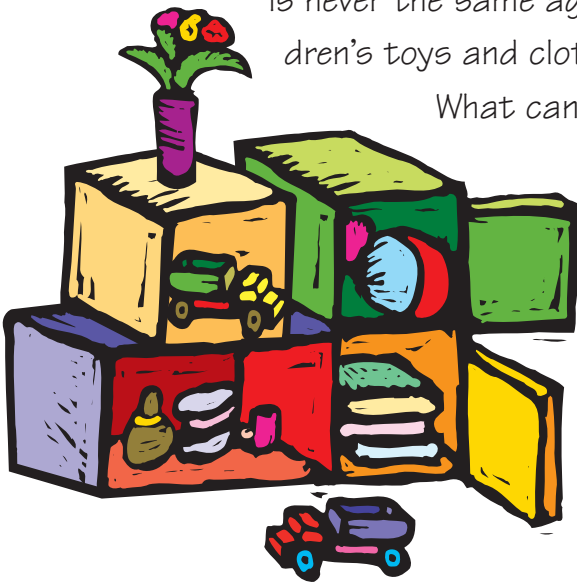




Once you have children in your life, your house or apartment is never the same again. It seems as if children's toys and clothes take over the place.



What can you do to tame the messes that children bring to your life? This issue of Parents Count will explore ways that you can get and stay organized with kids around.

### A Place for Everything

Help children learn to put their own toys away by making a place for each toy. A basket, box, or place on a shelf can be used. As long as you are consistent it doesn't matter which method you choose. Show your children where the toys belong. You can even save the picture from the box if it is a new toy and tape it with clear tape to the shelf where the toy belongs, or take a picture of the toy with your camera. This is worth the time because it helps kids take better care of their toys and be genuinely helpful when they are cleaning up their toys.

### Children Need Chores

Do your children have chores? Research has shown that when children start chores early (around the age of four), they do better in their early adulthood than children who did not have chores or started later.

Young children can do many things to help around the house: put clothes in a hamper, clear the dishes from the table to the sink, help match socks, put folded laundry away, water plants, tear and wash lettuce for salad.

Most young children like being involved in chores. Try to figure out what your child likes doing the most and offer chances to do those chores. Do you have a child who likes to help in the garden or fold the laundry? Jeannie discovered that her two children, Tyler and Madison, liked different types of chores. Tyler enjoys gardening and outside work, and Madison loves to wash anything. Get to know what your child enjoys the most and give her jobs that use her interests and strengths. This will make chores more fun and enjoyable and will build your child's growing abilities at the same time.

### Make Chores Fun

Most people don't love housekeeping chores, but you can make chores fun for everyone in the family by turning them into a game. Turn on some lively music and dance while you clean. Have your family race against the timer to do a job. It works best not to have the children race each other since this can create competition, but it can be fun to work together to get a job done fast. Make a chores spinner: write your daily chores on a paper plate and cut out a spinner in the shape of an arrow. Use a brad-fastener to connect the spinner to the plate. Give your creation a few test spins; then let the children pick their chore of the day the same way they might play a game. Create a treasure hunt: put pennies where you want your child to learn to dust and let them go to work (they get to keep the pennies). Use your creativity to come up with other ways to make chores more enjoyable.

### Laundry Tricks

When you've got children it can feel like your laundry is never done. Here's a good laundry trick to help you get on top of the mountain of laundry in your life. Get lingerie bags — small mesh bags with zippers — one for each family member. Ask them to put their socks and underwear in the bag. Wash the bag and the contents together. This way you can just give the bag back and the laundry is sorted for you.

# TOYS WITH PLAY VALUE

Has your child ever come to you and said “I’m bored”? With all the toys that children have today, it seems impossible for any child to be bored, but even with a closet full of toys, you can still have bored children on hand. Knowing what children really need can help you choose toys that have the most *play value*. If you buy the most worthwhile toys, you will need less storage, save money, and give your children what they really need for playing.

Toys with battery power are soon forgotten; they don’t have lasting play, so don’t waste your money on them. Classic toys such as blocks don’t seem as exciting as the flashing, beeping high-tech toys advertised on TV, but classic toys that make children use their imaginations have much more staying power because they can do whatever your child imagines.

## Babies

For babies from birth to six months, the best toys are very simple. Look for unbreakable crib mirrors, one or two washable dolls or stuffed animals, and a mobile. Also get a variety of hand/mouth toys like rattles and bells that babies can bat, kick, mouth, or grasp. The best type of rattle is made of clear plastic so that your child can see what is making the noise.

For babies seven to twelve months, add these toys to the ones you already have. Look for a small set of lightweight blocks (safe to mouth), a

variety of grasping toys, nesting and stacking toys, boxes and containers to be filled and emptied, push toys like cars and animals, a few balls of different types, and a pop-up surprise toy. Remember to take down the mobile hanging over the crib or raise it higher once children can reach it, mobiles are not safe for children to handle.

## Toddlers

The toddler years are the beginnings of make-believe play, so toys that encourage this type of play are important. They also love to fill and dump and begin to build. Keep on hand a few washable dolls, blankets, a pretend baby bottle, small wood or sturdy plastic people and animal figures, simple dress-up items, lightweight cars and trucks, containers to fill and dump, and push-and-pull toys.

From about eighteen months, you can add new toys such as sand and water toys, large stringing beads (used with close supervision), a beginning set of plastic press-together bricks, simple musical instruments, large paper, and large, nontoxic crayons. Add simple dramatic play toys like dishes and play food, then add more housekeeping play items like a baby carriage or a shopping cart and tools.

## Preschoolers

The preschool child is ready for wonderful make-believe play. If you provide simple toys that encourage this type of play, preschool children will be hap-

pily entertained for hours. Three-year-olds still love house play. By age four, children start expanding their interest to heroes. Encourage your child to play wholesome hero roles, such as fire fighting, astronauts, and veterinarians. Provide a few simple toys to help the children play these roles.

Remember, you don’t need much; the children will find a way to use what they have, and doing this builds imagination. As children become preschoolers they also like building materials such as blocks, which can be used to build any number of imaginative places: zoos, hospitals, and houses. You can find blocks made of cardboard, plastic, or wood. Combine this with little figures of people, animals, and vehicles, and children can create their own miniature world. This will really keep them entertained. When you pick toys carefully to meet the needs of your children as they grow and give them what they need for play *and no more*, this helps them grow into independent players who can make their own interesting activities.

As your children grow you can ask them to donate toys they are not using to a charity. Since toys can feel like a good old friend, sometimes children are reluctant to give them away. Some families have a rule that when a new toy comes into the house an old toy must be given away. This helps children learn to part with toys they don’t use very much.

Source: “The Right Stuff for Children Birth to 8: Selecting Play Materials to Support Development” by Martha B. Bronson, National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1995.

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