



## Positive Parenting of Preschoolers

# Tidying Up

**Preschool children need to learn how to put away toys and tidy up after they have finished playing. However, parents need to find the right balance between encouraging children to be tidy and being overly fussy about tidiness. Teaching your child to look after their things will take time. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you teach your preschooler to tidy up.**

Up until preschool age, children need a lot of help to tidy up. By three or four years, most children have the ability to do some tidying up by themselves. Start by getting your child to tidy up after themselves in family living areas rather than their bedroom. Messes in shared areas are unpleasant for everyone, not just your child.

## Why Are Children Messy?

Having toys and activities scattered all over the place is often part of children's play and is to be expected while they are playing.

When its time to tidy up preschoolers can find the task difficult or boring. Also, if children know that someone always tidies up after them, they will not learn to tidy up after themselves. Children also learn from watching others. If other family members are messy, children are less likely to learn to tidy up.

## When Should Children Tidy Up?

Try to wait for natural breaks in your child's play before asking them to tidy up. Interrupting play to make the house neat and tidy disrupts children and can cause a loss of interest in what they are doing. Breaks can occur when children do the following things:

- Move locations (such as from indoor to outdoor play).
- Go from one activity to a new activity (such as from dressing up to painting).
- Have a meal break.
- Get ready to go out.

Two or three quick tidy up times are better than one big tidy up at the end of the day. Preschoolers are more likely to tidy up when the job is not too big or hard. Also, accidents can occur if toys are left scattered on the floor.

## How To Teach Your Child To Tidy Up

### Set a Good Example

Show your child how to take care of their belongings by setting a good example. Let your child watch you tidy up after yourself. Explain what you are doing.



### Store Toys So They Are Easy To Get To

Where possible, use low, open shelves rather than boxes which open from the top. Since it is hard to find toys in boxes, everything may get tipped out on the floor. This means more work later.

### Let Your Child Know They Will Need To Tidy Up Soon

Tell your child that they will have to finish their activity and tidy away in a few minutes. Motivate your child by saying what they can look forward to—*When you've put your blocks away, you can have some morning tea.*

### Calmly Tell Your Child To Begin

When it is time to tidy up, calmly tell your child you want them to start putting away the game or toys. Be specific. Say something like—*Angela, put your pens and pencils back in your pencil case please*—rather than—*Tidy up this mess please.*

### Pause Then Prompt Your Child To Begin

Wait five to 10 seconds to see if your child starts to tidy up. If they do not, go over and tell them how to start—*First of all, put the lids on your pens so they don't dry out. Show me how you can do it.* If your child does as you ask, praise them—*Nicely done Angie, all your pens have their lids on.* This way you help your child get started by breaking the task into smaller parts. You can give less help as your child learns to tidy up.

### Praise Tidying Up

If your child cooperates, praise them for being a good helper—*Jason, you picked up all your books and put them away neatly today. Thank you.*

## ***Make Tidying Up Fun***

Where possible, make a game out of tidy up time. One idea is a 'beat the buzzer' game. Set a timer and see if everything can be tidied away before the buzzer goes off. Another idea is to sing songs while you tidy up together.

## ***Gradually Decrease Your Help***

Gradually give less help to get your child started. Let them choose what to do first—*What do you want to pick up first?* Over time, get your child to pick up several things before you praise them. Then get your child to pick up everything before praising them.

## **How To Manage Refusal To Tidy Up**

### ***Tell Your Child What To Do***

If your child whines, complains or does not start tidying up, tell them what you want them to stop doing—*Ruth, stop complaining right now*—and what to do instead—*I want you to pick up all the puzzle pieces and put them in the box.*

### ***Guide Your Child Through the Steps***

Remain calm if your child does not do as you ask. Stay beside your child and say something like—*If you can't tidy up by yourself I'll have to help you.* Ignore complaints. Put your hand over your child's hand and gently guide them through the first steps of picking up their toys. Let go of your child's hand once they start to tidy up. Praise their efforts.

### ***Use Quiet Time and Time-Out***

If your child struggles or resists you guiding their hand, use quiet time or time-out. Say something like—*Travis, you are not tidying up, now go to quiet time.* Quiet time involves removing your attention from your child and having them sit quietly nearby for a short time. Sit your child on a chair away from others. Tell your child that they must be quiet for two minutes before they can come out of quiet time.

If your child does not sit quietly, say something like—*You're not being quiet in quiet time, now you must go to time-out.* Time-out involves taking your child away from the situation where a problem has occurred and having them be quiet for a short time. Take your child to an uninteresting but safe room or space. Tell your child they must be quiet for two minutes before they can come out of time-out. Give this reminder even though your child might be upset or angry.

## ***Return Your Child to Tidying Up***

Once your child has been quiet for two minutes in quiet time or time-out, return them to where the mess was left. Tell them to start tidying up. Praise your child for doing as you asked. If your child does not do as you ask, return them to quiet time. You may need to repeat quiet time or time-out a number of times before your child tidies up their mess.

## ***Use a Logical Consequence***

If your child refuses to tidy up and you do not want to guide your child's hand, use a consequence that fits the situation. For example, tell your child that they did not tidy up the toys properly and that as a consequence you will put the toys out of reach for the rest of the day. The disadvantage is that you—not your child—are picking up the toys and it may take longer for your child to learn to tidy up.

## **Points To Remember**

Sometimes you may not have time to use the suggestions described above, like when you need to go to an appointment or leave a friend's home in a hurry. At these times you can use delayed time-out. When you return to your home, say something like—*You did not tidy up when you were asked at the doctor's office today, now you must go to time-out.* Use time-out as described above.

### **Key Steps**

- Store toys so they are easy to get out and put away.
- Wait for natural breaks in your child's play before getting them to tidy up.
- Let your child know when it is nearly time to tidy up.
- Tell your child what you want them to do at tidy up time.
- Help your child get started if necessary.
- Make tidying up fun.
- Praise your child for tidying up.
- If your child refuses to tidy up, gently guide them.
- Use quiet time or time-out for problem behaviour.
- Return your child to tidy up their mess.
- Use a logical consequence if you prefer.

***See the booklet 'Positive Parenting' for more information. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the centre where you were given this tip sheet.***



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