

When Toyland is not Joyland

Any parent who has ever felt the pain of stepping on a small toy brick (you know, the interlocking kind) knows how difficult it is to keep children's playthings organized and in their correct storage containers. Toys are, of course, meant to be taken out and played with, but it's important to have a system for storing them when it's time to put them away. Here are eight tips:

1. **Get the kids involved:** In a perfect world, children should learn early to put away their things, and do it without complaint (because the storage boxes are so brightly colored and clearly labeled). But it's not a perfect world, so you'll probably have to help. And you may be using cardboard boxes, not bright plastic ones, because of budget constraints. Either way, if cars go with cars and stuffed toys with stuffed toys, in well-labeled containers of your choice, it will make life easier for you when you're helping the kids clean up.
2. **Target the system to the child's age:** Don't keep a four-year-old's books on a tall bookshelf. Line up books of similar size in boxes or bins so they can flip through them, and easily replace them when they're finished with them. They need to see the cover to decide what they are interested in.
3. **Go classic:** Use big, lidded ice-cream containers or vintage cookie tins for crayons, markers and pencils. Don't forget to label them.
4. **Space issues:** If your child has a playroom, great. Most of the toys can be stored there. But if the child's bedroom doubles as a playroom, your options are more limited. Don't forget the storage space under the bed; put the bed on risers if it's too tight a fit.
5. **Hanging around:** Over-the-door shoe organizers work well to store small toys — and even shoes.
6. **Birthday blues:** Birthdays are great fun, but they also mean an influx of new toys, books and clothes — and those toys, books and clothes need to find a home. Before the birthday, schedule an afternoon to clear out as many playthings and books as possible. If an item is broken and isn't worth repairing, toss it. If it's in good shape, but your child doesn't play with it, read it or wear it anymore, pass it along to a younger child. Do the same before Christmas, too.

7. **School daze:** It's hard to let go of the art and schoolwork of your little genius, but if you don't, your home will be overrun with squiggly art projects and Grade 2 spelling tests. As things come home, give them a place of honour on the fridge for a week or two (or until the next projects come home), then toss or recycle. Save two or three examples of your child's best work that displays extra effort or has the most sentimental value. Save the items in scrapbooks or bins.
8. **Go pro:** Consider hiring a professional organizer to help pinpoint problem areas and work up a strategy to conquer them. A professional will know the best tools for the job, and will help you deal with the emotional component to clearing your child's belongings.

Toys are meant to be fun and they are meant to be played with, but lost, damaged and forgotten toys aren't either. Taking just a few minutes to organize each day can stop the toy invasion from taking over your house. Use these simple tips and soon it will be Joyland again for everyone.

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