

Triple P Tip Sheet

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 too 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 3 or 4 years of age, 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 it is 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 learn from watching others. If other family members are messy, children are less likely to tidy up.

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, store your child's toys on low, open shelves rather than in boxes that open from the top. Since it is hard to find toys in boxes, everything may be tipped out on the floor at play time. This means more to tidy up later.

▼ Decide When Your Child Should 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.

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

When it is nearly time to tidy up, 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 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.*

▼ Give One More Prompt if Necessary

Wait 5 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.* 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 Your Child for Tidying Up

If your child cooperates, praise them for tidying up — *Jason, you picked up all your books and put them away neatly today. Thank you* or *Nicely done Angie, all your pens have their lids on.*

▼ 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 fewer prompts to help your child get 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 tidy up, tell them what you want them to stop doing — *Ruth, stop complaining right now.* Tell them what to do instead — *Pick up 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.

▼ If Misbehaviour Occurs, Use Quiet Time or Time-Out

If your child struggles or resists you guiding their hand, use quiet time. Tell your child what they have done wrong and the consequence — *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 they must be quiet for 2 minutes before they can come out of quiet time.

If your child does not sit quietly, use time-out. 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 2 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

When your child has been quiet for 2 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, repeat quiet time or time-out (the same consequence as the last time). You may need to repeat quiet time or time-out a number of times before your child tidies up.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

Sometimes you may not have time to use the suggestions described above, such as 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.

FOR FURTHER HELP See the Positive Parenting booklet for more information on positive parenting strategies. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet.

Triple P is a parenting program developed by Professor Matthew R. Sanders and colleagues in the Parenting and Family Support Centre, School of Psychology at The University of Queensland with funding support from Queensland Health, Victorian Department of Human Services, Health Department of Western Australia, and National Health and Medical Research Council.

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If your child refuses to tidy up and you do not want to guide your child's hand and use the routine described above, another option is to use a logical consequence. Choose a consequence that fits the situation. Where possible, remove the activity or toy that is at the centre of the problem. Explain why you are doing it — *You did not tidy up the toys properly so now these toys are going away for the rest of the day.* Ignore protests or complaints. Do not debate or argue the point with your child. It is best not to mention the incident again that day, simply carry out the consequence. 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.

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.
- Make tidying up fun.
- Help your child get started if necessary.
- Praise your child for tidying up.
- If your child refuses to tidy up, gently guide them with your hand.
- Use quiet time or time-out for problem behaviour.
- Return your child to tidy up.
- Use a logical consequence if you prefer.