

Ep #26: How To Get Your Kids To Clean up After Themselves for a Change



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Devon Clement

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Do you love your kids but hate the mess they make? Is it a constant battle to get them to tidy up after themselves? Do you find yourself resenting everything they do because you feel like the maid every minute of the day? Stay tuned for some strategies for how to get out of that pattern.

Welcome to *Parenthood Prep*, the only show that helps sleep-deprived parents and overwhelmed parents-to-be successfully navigate those all-important early years with their baby, toddler, and child. If you are ready to provide the best care for your newborn, manage those toddler tantrums, and grow with your child, you're in the right place. Now here's your host, baby and parenting expert, Devon Clement.

Welcome back to *Parenthood Prep*, the podcast that prepares you for parenthood, or helps you while you're already in parenthood, or just helps you move through the world in a slightly happier and more functional way. And today is going to be one of those episodes. I just sat here for a lovely 30 minutes and recorded a great episode for you guys, only to look back and realize that none of it had actually recorded. So here we go. Here's take two and hoping this time it actually takes.

We do not just talk about babies and newborns and pregnancy and birth on this show. There are so many things that start early and continue throughout your child's life, and even through your own life as an adult. I'm going to be talking today about some stuff that I learned as a grown-up that has helped me tremendously. That if I had known when I was a kid, or that my mom had known to teach me when I was a kid, would have made our lives so much more pleasant and peaceful.

I mean, don't get me wrong, my childhood was great. But a big thing that we butted heads and fought over and really struggled with was keeping things clean and organized and tidy. My mom is such a great organizer, tidier, neat person. My sister is the same way. They just come by it naturally. We have different brains. I have ADHD, and to me, as much as I love a clean, organized, and tidy space, I have a really hard time getting from point A to point B.

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And I think a lot of kids, regardless of whether they are diagnosed with anything or not, it's just a different way of thinking, and a different developmental way of processing.

So I've talked about this before, and I think that one of the best things you can do from the very beginning is have your kids be involved in the cleanup process; every task, every game, every activity. Cleaning up is part of the process. It's not a totally separate thing like, "Okay we're done with the board game. Go off and play, and I'll clean up all the pieces. I'll put the game away. It's like, "No, we're done playing the game. Now we're all going to work together to clean it up."

It's honestly something a lot of my adult friends could learn as well. But getting them involved from the start, even when they're tiny babies and saying, "Okay, it's time for you to go down for your nap. We're going to take your toys and we're going to put them in the toy bin." Even if the toys are just the little things that they were playing with on the floor, or a little rattle or whatever.

"Okay, we're all finished with your bottle. We're going to put the bottle in the dishwasher. We're going to clean the bottle and put it on the drying rack. You're done with your food so we're going to take your plate, we're going to rinse it out in the sink, and put it in the dishwasher." Just having them be present through that process, even though they're not necessarily helping that much at a super young age, they're seeing that it's part of the process.

Rather than seeing, "Oh my gosh, the place is a mess. I go up for my nap, I come back down, and everything is spotless because the magical fairies came while I was sleeping. I don't ever have to learn how to help with that or be part of that process because the magical fairies do it." Don't be the magical fairies. Let the kids see what's happening in the day-to-day of your life.

I am a huge fan of kids doing chores, helping with chores, partly because it makes it easier for you. And partly because they love it, especially if it's something really exciting like vacuuming. Ask a five-year-old if they want to vacuum, and they will absolutely do it. A friend of mine years ago had four boys, and she purposely got a lightweight vacuum that kids could use. And her boys took turns vacuuming every day because they loved it.

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They love to sweep. They love to wipe things down. They love spray bottles; spray cleaning products. Obviously, safe cleaning products. We're not getting kids spraying bleach at each other. But a few years ago, I was babysitting and the kids really wanted to spray Windex for some reason. At first, I was like, "Okay, I guess you can spray Windex on the television," or whatever.

Then I was like, "Wait a minute. It's a beautiful day. Let's go outside, spray the Windex on my car windows, and let's clean my car windows while we're here. You guys want to spray the Windex." They obviously didn't do an amazing job, but it kept them really busy. And then I was sort of forced to also be there with them getting my car windows cleaned rather than just sitting on the couch watching them spray Windex on the television.

Make it useful. Make it functional. Have them grab some cleaning wipes and wipe off their table after they play. Or wipe off the kitchen table after they eat. We used to do that when I taught preschool. Get them involved. There's just so many ways you can make it fun and interesting.

But that doesn't mean you always have to make it fun and interesting. You can just be like, "Listen guys, this is part of life and we've got to do it. Even if you don't like it." Something I want to say going into it, before we get into some of the tips, is if you remember the episode I did about treating your kid like a video game character? Because, obviously, all of you guys have listened to every single episode of this because you're just super fans.

Basically, just as an overview, I said to imagine your kid has a bar on top of their head that shows their level of "health". Like a video game character, when they're in the green zone they have full health. They're in a good mood. They're fed. They've slept. They will do anything you ask them to do without too much fuss.

When they get into the yellow zone, maybe they're a little hungry, a little tired, a little bored. They're going to start to be cranky. You're not going to want to make too many demands on them when they're in the yellow zone.

And when they're in the red zone... super tired, super hungry, super over it... that's not really a great time to be like, "Hey guys, you know what? Let's start

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cleaning up, which is something that I've never asked you to do before. But I'm going to start now.”

Yourself too, if you're in the red zone. You're trying to teach your kids a new skill or get them to do something and you're just cranky and grumpy and over it, maybe that's not the best time to start that. So start a lot earlier. If you've ever been around a little kid, you know things end up taking them so much longer. Anyway, if you have to leave to go somewhere in 30 minutes and they're playing, don't wait till five minutes before you have to leave, when everything is a frantic rush, to clean up, get shoes on, whatever.

Start at that 30-minute mark, and if all the cleanup gets done and their shoes are on and you're ready to go and they're still chill, read a book. Do something quiet and peaceful and that's not going to make another big mess. But you'll have extra time and it'll be fantastic.

You probably won't have extra time, because it will take them 30 minutes just to get all that stuff put away and to get their shoes on. But if you're worried about it, what are we going to do if they finish that? You can just leave a little early and stop for a coffee on the way. Who knows?

So start earlier, before they're tired of the activity, when they still are in that green zone, or maybe they're just getting into that yellow zone, and they have a little energy, a little motivation, and they're in a pretty good mood. “Now we're going to clean up the toys. Now we're going to clean up the project,” or the food or whatever, and it's going to be great.

A couple of ways that you can make it really developmentally appropriate and sort of teach your kids how to clean up. Because a big part of the problem for me is that I really didn't know. My mother would send me to my room and say, “Clean your room, and don't come out till it's done,” and I would somehow end up making it a bigger mess.

Again, some people's brains just don't work the same way. And I would say that your kids, when they are little, their brains are not focused on how to be tidy and organized. I mean, I think some kids do just come out of the womb knowing how to clean and be tidy, like my sister. But not all of them. And they need to learn.

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Especially if it's something that comes naturally and easily to you, and you don't understand why they can't do it, breaking it down into these strategies can be really, really helpful.

Again, making it fun. Making it a game. Play “What doesn't belong”. Let's look around the playroom. Let's look around the bathroom. Let's look around the bedroom. What doesn't belong here? Oh your shoes, your shoes are in the bathroom... Because you came in and you had to pee so you took your shoes off for whatever reason, and now your shoes are in the bathroom.

Let's take those shoes and put them where they belong. Oh, we're leaving. You came into my bedroom in the morning and we're leaving the bedroom now. Oh look, you left your sippy cup. What doesn't belong? Oh, you left your sippy cup behind. Why don't you go grab that?

Oh, you left your stuffy. Why don't you go grab that and put it back on your bed, so that you know where it is later tonight. Now you have your sippy cup to go throughout the day with you. Oh, it's dirty. Let's throw it in the sink. Oh You left your pajamas over by the dress-up box, because you took off your pajamas and changed into your firefighter outfit for the day. Let's go get those pajamas and put them in the laundry hamper.

So make it like “Spot the differences”. What's wrong here? What doesn't belong? What can you find? If you have two kids, make it a competition. They love to compete. Playfully, obviously. But who can put more things away? I'll time you and see how fast you guys can work together to put away all the things that don't belong.

Another thing is to categorize. So if they have taken out all their stuff and it's all over the playroom, or the bedroom or the basement or the living room or wherever you are, you are just looking at this huge mess, so rather than saying, “Okay, clean the playroom,” let's start with very specific steps.

Get a couple of laundry baskets bins, containers of some sort... I love laundry baskets for this... and say, “This laundry basket, all the stuffed animals are going to go in. All the stuffed animals and the dolls are going to go in this

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laundry basket. And then, in this one, we're going to put all the books. So anytime you find a book, you're going to put it in this laundry basket.

Go around and gather up all the books, you gather up all the stuffed animals, and put them in these laundry baskets. And in this other one, we're going to put all the blocks. Get all the blocks and put them in this laundry basket. And then you're going to take that laundry basket full of stuffed animals and empty it out wherever the stuffed animals are supposed to go. The books, put it over by the bookshelf. Put the books back on the shelf... just depending.

But by giving them a specific task. Not saying, "Clean up the toys," because really, what does that even mean? Saying, "Get all the books together and put them in this container," that will go a long way towards cleaning. And it gives them a very specific, measurable task that they know how to do.

And here, I want to remind you, the parents, to make it simple for them. And make it things that they're capable of doing. For instance, if you like to have all the dress-up clothes hung on little hangers on a beautiful little clothes rack, that's nice. But kids are not going to be able to put clothes on hangers when they're super little. They just don't have the motor skills for that.

So what you're going to end up with is a mess. If you want to continue to hang the clothes on hangers, that's great, but at least have the kids put all the clothes in a basket or in a bin near the hangers, so that when it's your turn to step in and do your part of the job you're not going around the room gathering up all the discarded dress-up clothes. You're just taking them and hanging.

Also, something I say all the time is that I think parents have both very low expectations for their kids and very high expectations for what they're capable of. We tend to both over and underestimate what they can do. So people might not think that their two-year-old can sleep through the night because they never have. They're totally capable of sleeping through the night.

But then they might think that the two-year-old understands what you say when you say, "Take this car and go put it over there in the car bin," and they're looking at one of those racks with like 15 bins. They don't know which one is the

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“car bin”. They don't understand what that means. They don't know how to differentiate one from the other.

So saying, “Okay, we're going to put all the cars right here in this bin. See where these cars are,” and saying, “Put all the cars into here,” that's going to be much easier for them to do. If you're coming to a bottleneck and saying, “Well, I don't understand why they're not doing X-Y-Z,” figure out what they're struggling with in that activity. Why tell them to put all their toys away and then they just keep playing, because I left the room, and they didn't put their toys away?

Well, what was the issue? What was the bottleneck? And to the point of ‘there's so much stuff and it's strewn everywhere,’ I know this is such simplistic advice, but have less. Have less stuff. Have fewer toys. When I was a teacher, I taught preschool and kindergarten special education, so my classroom was just chock full of toys and puzzles and books and art supplies, play food in the kitchen, all that stuff. I got really fed up with it one day.

A lot of it was old; had been in the classroom and in the school for years. The play food was broken or gross or ratty, or didn't even look like what it was supposed to be. One day I just got fed up, and I just cleaned out the classroom. I threw out half the stuff that we had. Some of it I donated, if it was in good shape. But most of it was this ratty piece of rubber baloney that wasn't even pink anymore, it was gray. What even was it?

So I threw all that away, and lo and behold, instead of just dumping out the play food all over the place, the kids actually started playing with it because they were not overwhelmed. There was so much less for their little brains to take in. So if you find that your kids are just dumping stuff out, and not really playing with it and not knowing what to do, have less. Put half the stuff away, in the closet, and rotate it back in like it's brand-new.

Your kids do not actually know or care how much stuff they have. And if they are upset by it, one day tell them, “Great. We can put something else away and take out that thing that you want.” So having a lot less. I know it's hard, with grandparents and friends and people bringing in new toys and presents all the time, but just having less makes the cleanup process so much better and so much easier. And makes the playing so much more fun.

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Another thing that kind of goes back to “What doesn't belong”, have them, just as a habit when you're leaving a room look behind you and say, “Hey, did we forget anything? Did we leave anything? Is there anything where it's not supposed to be?” You ran right into the house to go pee, and you dropped your jacket on the floor of the bathroom. As you're leaving the bathroom, turn around and say, “Oh look, there's my jacket. Let me take that and put it away.”

I have to tell you, I'm embarrassed to tell you that I was probably 35 years old when I started doing that. And it was all because I went to a sleep training client. The way their bathroom was laid out, as I was about to get in the shower, I happened to turn and see that my clothes, or my pajamas or whatever, were just in a pile on the floor as if I had dematerialized out of them.

And I was like, “Interesting.” Because I think, in my mind, not consciously, if I don't look at the pile of clothes then it's not there, the magical fairies have taken it and put it away. So look behind you and say, “Did I leave the cabinet doors open?” My partner does this all the time. I love him dearly. But what? Just close the cabinet? So yeah, get in that habit of just looking behind you and saying, “Okay, what's the next step? What did we forget?”

In the bath, have the cleaning up the bath toys be part of the bath process. Don't just take them out of the tub and say, “Okay, go get your pajamas on with dad. I'm going to do all the cleanup here because I'm the magical fairy.” Finish the bath ten minutes earlier and make putting the bath toys away part of that process.

So we've got categorizing. We've got having less. We've got just keeping them company. Even if you are not cleaning with them, if they're older and they're doing it by themselves, do your own project in the room. Like, “Okay, guys. You know Dad's going to fold laundry in your bedroom while you guys put your toys away and get cleaned up,” and then you're kind of supervising them a little bit. You're keeping them company. You're keeping them from getting distracted. I know I get so much more done if I have a friend over, or even if I'm on the phone with somebody, because my brain is sort of occupied with talking to them and then my hands can be occupied with sweeping the floor or unloading the dishwasher or folding the laundry or wiping the counters.

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And if I didn't have that person there that I was talking to, I would be texting or I would be on the computer doing work or reading a book, or I would be doing something that did not allow me to also do chores at the same time. All the things that you do to make chores interesting for yourself. Listening to a podcast. You can put on an audiobook. You can put on music for your kids.

You can do something to make it more enjoyable for them when you want them to clean up. And something that a friend of mine, who is so brilliant... She's this brilliant parenting writer... said a bunch of years ago that really stuck with me, that is such a subtle shift but it makes such a huge difference, is don't say, "Hey kids, come help me clean up your toys. Come help me clean up this game." Don't say that. Say to them, "I'm going to help you clean up your toys. I'm going to help you clean up your game."

Because that shows them that you are not the maid, that they are deigning to do a favor and help. It shows that it is their responsibility. It is their toys and you are helping them. So it helps them to take responsibility and realize that this is not optional. "These are my toys. If I want to take them out, I have to put them away. So let me help you. Wouldn't that be nice?"

We have a lot more to say in the future too, about some subtle linguistic shifts that you can make, that makes such a huge difference in the way that you parent your kids. Especially as someone socialized as a female parent, a mom if you identify that way, there's so much socialized into us about what our role is in our kids' lives. And maid is one of them. Or a magical fairy that cleans up while you're sleeping.

Because, God forbid, my perfect, little sugar blossom has to experience one moment of displeasure while they're awake. "Let me clean all that for you, so that when you wake up you can just go right back to playing. Because that's what I've been socialized into thinking I'm supposed to be doing." No, kids can have some unpleasantness in their lives. They can have some responsibilities. They can have a lot of responsibilities, actually.

They can really work together with the family to make sure that things are getting done, and that you are not responsible for cleaning up their mess. And another thing, speaking to you now, parents that want to do all the cleanup for

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your kids. They're not going to be great at it at first, but they will learn. And I know it's easier for you to just wait till they go to sleep and then go around the house like a whirling dervish cleaning everything up.

But that is not going to teach them anything. And it's not going to help you in the long run, because someday you're going to reach a breaking point, when they're eight or nine or whatever, and say, "Oh, my God, you guys need to clean up your own stuff." And the kids literally have no idea what to do, because not only have they never done it, they've also never even seen it done.

So get them involved early, and let them be bad at it. Let them take a long time. Again, allow so much extra time, because it's going to take them a long time. If you want the playroom set up a certain way, if you want the books... I love an organized bookshelf. I organize my books by color. It's so beautiful.

But kids might not be able to do that. They might not be able to follow your system, but they can certainly take all those books and put them in a basket near the bookshelf, and then you show them how you put the books back on the bookshelf. But you're choosing to make that job more complicated, so you are then choosing to be the one to do that.

But that doesn't mean that the kids can't be involved at all just because they can't do it perfectly. So you have to let go a little bit of that expectation, that it's going to be done quickly or perfectly, and you have to let the kids help and be able to do it.

I'm trying to remember if there's anything that I said before, the one that got lost, that I haven't told you, but I think that's everything. If I think of anything else, I will shout it out in a future episode.

Just to recap what we talked about: Have fewer things. Get rid of a lot of toys that either they're not playing with, or they aren't playing with effectively or usefully, that they're just dumping out everywhere. They don't need that. If you have a set of a hundred blocks, and they're just dumping them out and making a mess, have 20 blocks. Wait till you're all in an okay mood to start anything new or ask them to do something that they don't want to do.

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Start with broad strokes. Categorize the things. Give them specific, measurable things to do. So don't say 'go clean the playroom,' say 'go get all the stuffed animals and put them in a basket. Go get all the play food in the kitchen and put it in this bin in the kitchen.' Things like that.

Play "What doesn't belong," what's here that isn't supposed to be here. "Oh, my gosh, that's so silly. Your shoes are on the bed. What? Go get it. Why is there an apple in the bathroom? Go get it and put it back in the kitchen. That's so silly." Keep them company. Do parallel "play". But it's really parallel work chores; where you're doing something at the same time as they're doing something. "You guys clear the table while I do the dishes." That kind of thing.

Even just being in the room with them. Even if you're working on work or looking at your phone, make the cleanup part of the activity so it's not something separate. "Part of the bath process is we put all your toys in at the end. Part of playing a board game is that we put all the pieces back in the box." Make it not negotiable. It's just, "We opened the game. We took the pieces out. We played the game. We put the pieces back."

Art projects, cleaning the brushes is a part of painting. You're just doing all these things and not saying, "Okay kids, you're done playing. Go have fun while I do all the chores for you." Don't be their maid. Let them know that they are responsible for their own stuff. If you do all of this, and you let them have a good time with it, and you have a good time with it, you guys are going to have such a more peaceful, enjoyable, happy time together. And that's all I really want for you.

Have a great day.

Alright, listen up, folks. We love to joke around but it's time to get real. And that real talk, it's all about giving your babies the roasting they deserve. Yep, you heard it right. We're calling for an epic Baby Roast.

We want you to drop a voice note on our website and call out your little ones for their adorable crimes. Did your baby spit up on your brand-new dress the second you put it on? Maybe they decided to scream through your sister's wedding vows? We want to hear all the juicy details.

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Head over to HappyFamilyAfter.com, or hit the link in the show notes. Every page on the site has a button on the side for you to record straight from your phone. Your story might just make it onto an episode of the *Parenthood Prep* podcast. We can't wait to hear.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of *Parenthood Prep*. If you want to learn more about the services Devon offers, as well as access her free monthly newborn care webinars, head on over to www.HappyFamilyAfter.com.