

Joyful Family: Cleaning with Kids

January 25, 2011 by [Brenda](#)

First of all, there is no “Joyful Housework” topic on this blog because I think housework is a soul-sucking exercise in futility. It’s like building a sand castle on the beach at low tide. It may look pretty for a moment, but then all your hard work gets washed away. However, cleaning is a necessary evil (I’m pretty sure it was in God’s curse somewhere at the Fall of Adam). If you’ve been to my house, you know that I tend to keep it fairly clean. I won’t win any housekeeping awards, but that is intentional. The tabs on this blog represent my priorities: God, family, good stewardship of our resources, and eating healthy (which for us, means gluten free). So while I recognize that it’s important to keep a home running smoothly and teach our kids how to clean, it is way below the other priorities in my life. Our attitudes and approach to cleaning have also changed as our kids have gone through different stages of development.

That Little Bundle of Joy Comes with a Lot of Stuff

If you are a mother who’s expecting a grandchild soon, you have a special gift you can give to your daughter or daughter-in-law. When you come to visit during those first few weeks, don’t just offer to sit and hold the baby – your daughter needs to do that in order to bond with the baby and cope with the loss of sleep. Instead, offer to clean and help prepare meals. By doing this, you can send her the message that **her most important job is to love her child, not cook and clean**. We all need to be more understanding and relieve new moms from the burden of cleaning for us, because each child magically adds about 2 tons of furniture, toys, safety devices, kitchen utensils, clothing/dirty laundry, and waste products to a home. Adjusting to life with a baby is hard enough, without trying to keep up with cleaning. Dust bunnies can wait, babies can’t. So when I’m bringing a meal or visiting a mother of young children, I try to call ahead and beg her NOT to clean for me. Wouldn’t it be awesome if we moms all gave this gift to each other?

Life With Toddlers – a.k.a. “The Cyclone Years”

When a child takes those first few steps, it is a thrilling milestone. Unfortunately, we soon discover that those steps allow the child to take a toy from one place and deposit it in another, like the VCR. For me, this was the most exhausting stage in my children’s development. So when our kids were babies and toddlers, **we tackled housework with the “zone defense.”** Since it is practically impossible to keep a home picked up – much less actually clean – with toddlers, my husband and I decided which zones in our home needed to stay clean in order for us to keep our sanity. Everything else would be dealt with when we had time (i.e. when our kids go to college). We decided that the living room and our bedroom needed to be places of tranquility, so those were the zones we focused on keeping regularly clean. I trained myself to make my bed as soon as I got out of it, which goes a long way toward feeling like my house is clean. We kept toy baskets out of the living room, and tried to train the kids to play elsewhere (they don’t always cooperate), which cut down on the amount of mess to be cleaned up. Even now, these two areas are always picked up at the end of the day because they are where I start each day. Since I have my Bible reading time in the living room, it’s important to me that this

room is picked up so I'm not distracted by a mess while I'm trying to focus on God. Make sure that the room in which you do your devotions is one of your cleaning zones. If your time with God is while your children are napping in the middle of the day, don't try to clean beforehand, just move a chair to face out a window with a pretty view and turn your back on the mess. God comes before cleaning. When we honor him, he returns the favor by giving us the energy and patience we need to wrangle our little mess-makers.

Preschool – Boot Camp for The Training Years

When my oldest was in preschool (and my youngest was a toddler), we decided it was time to train them to clean up after themselves. We did this not only because we were tired of cleaning up after them, but because we recognized that this is an important part of their development. One way we teach our children responsibility is by giving them opportunities to help out around the house and take care of themselves. We also do this as a future gift to their college roommate and spouse. We want our kids to be a joy to live with, so we are training them to pick up after themselves and contribute to the household. This is not easy. **It involves training yourself not to pick up after your child, as much as it involves the actual training of the child.** Beginning when my son was in preschool, I had to consciously stop myself from picking up something he'd left out and instead, tell him to come and put it where it belonged. The other important part of training, is making sure your child knows where things belong and helping him learn how to clean. So when I would call my son to come and pick up something, I'd show him where it goes and often help him get started. If the mess was huge, I'd break it down into smaller tasks to do one at a time (i.e. put cars away first, then stuffed animals, then books). He needed lots of encouragement, so I typically needed to stay close by while he worked and prompt him to the next step. We continued this process for – I'm sorry to say – 3 years, but it has paid off. My kids now know that whatever they get out, they are expected to put away. They (most of the time) clean up their messes without whining because they know it's their responsibility.

Training Kids Not to Whine

One of the reasons why our kids don't dare whine about cleaning is that they know (from years of doing this) that our response will be, "Then I guess you have too much stuff to take care of. Here, let me help you get rid of some of it." This statement is followed by Mom or Dad getting a trash bag and cleaning out whatever is left on the floor. It then goes to the garage until the child has earned it back through other chores or demonstrating responsible behavior. This strategy is not punishment, but actually reflects our values - **if we can't take care of our stuff, then we have too much stuff.** Sometimes it is a relief to the kids when we purge their excess toys, and we all need to evaluate whether or not the stuff in our home is meeting a need or simply just taking up space. My favorite blog author from [Simple Mom](#) often makes this statement: Everything in your home should either be beautiful to you or serve a purpose. Likewise, if our kids have outgrown a toy or are not playing with it, it's time for that toy to find a new home.

To Pay or Not to Pay

We give our kids an allowance, but it is not directly tied to their chores. The purpose of their allowance is to give them an opportunity to learn how to manage money and live on a monthly

budget. They are expected to clean up after themselves because that is part of being a responsible person. In short, if I don't get paid for it, neither do they. If they make a mess, they are expected to clean it up. So regular responsibilities of my kids include:

- *Putting away their pajamas and dirty clothes.* To facilitate this, they each have a hamper in their room.
- *Clearing their dishes from the table.* They do this at home and when they are guests elsewhere.
- *Cleaning up any toys brought into the main living area* before watching TV (which is typically in late afternoon, when PBS has some great educational shows for kids their age). They each have a basket on the stairs to collect items to be returned to their rooms. When the basket is full, it goes upstairs.
- *Putting away their clean laundry* on laundry day.
- *Cleaning their room to a reasonable extent* before bed. We don't insist on a whole lot of picking up in their rooms, other than clothes, because we want this area to be their responsibility. My son has an enormous Lego collection, and has a dozen ongoing projects at any one time, so our compromise with him is that we need to be able to get to his closet and bed without stepping on loose Legos. To help define this boundary, we put a rug on his floor and ask him to confine loose Legos to the rug. We also put a shelf in his room so he can display his creations. Since my daughter's favorite activity is filling bags/purses with all manner of odds and ends (just like Mommy's purse), our focus with her is on identifying a place for everything and labeling it so she knows where to put things away.
- *Cleaning their bathroom* when company comes or when it's starting to get really dirty. I don't obsess about rings in the toilet or toothpaste on the counter, but bathrooms do need to be cleaned from time to time. Since the kids are the ones to make the mess, they clean it. One child cleans the toilet, and the other cleans the sink area. We're still in the process of training right now, so they don't do it entirely by themselves, yet. **In order for them to safely clean, we use only vinegar and baking soda, which makes for a fun science experiment when cleaning the toilet!** To clean the toilet, flush and use a toilet brush to lower the water level a little. Sprinkle baking soda around the inside, as close to the rim as possible (I filled an empty Parmesan cheese container with baking soda to facilitate easier sprinkling). Fill a spray bottle with vinegar and have the child spray the baking soda-covered toilet bowl with vinegar. If done correctly, it should bubble and fizz. Allow it to sit while you spray the rim and seat with vinegar, and wipe down with a wet rag or paper towel. Then use a toilet brush to scrub the inside of the toilet, and flush. For hard to remove stains, use a pumice stone (I do this part). To clean the sink and counter, spray with the vinegar spray bottle and wipe down with a wet sponge (be careful not to get the vinegar on any grout, since it will destroy the grout). The vinegar smell doesn't last long, if properly wiped off with enough water, but if you can't stand the smell you can add a couple drops of essential oil to mask the smell (which isn't any worse than the smell of most cleaning products, in my opinion). The best way to clean a mirror is to flick some water on it and use a clean hand towel to wipe it down. A little elbow grease actually works better than Windex – no streaks!

When it comes to other cleaning tasks that aren't a direct result of their actions – like dusting – they are expected to contribute from time to time. Some activities that help make my life easier, like pulling weeds and putting away dishes from the dishwasher, are used as opportunities for them to make extra money. I would rather pay them to pull weeds than do this myself, so when they get to make extra money by doing everyone's least favorite task, everybody wins!

We don't have an immaculate house, and that's intentional. Whenever possible, we keep it straightened up and reasonably clean. But if my husband and son are in the middle of a science project or there's a mess on the craft table because the kids are in the middle of creating, we don't fret over the mess because it is a reflection of where we are in our lives – an active, creative family. If we need to invite someone over and the house isn't as tidy as we'd like, we do it anyway – without freaking out over the mess – because **relationships are more important than my reputation as a housewife**. If we're all exhausted after a trip and the luggage is still unpacked, we sit down and relax together anyway because **it's more important to listen to our bodies' need for rest than be a slave to our home**. So while we continue to train our children to be responsible stewards of their stuff, we also hope to teach them how to balance work with rest, and place people as a priority over cleaning. When my children are grown, I want them to look back and say, "Mom taught us how to clean up after ourselves, but we always knew we were more important to her than taking care of our stuff." Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go play with my kids.