

Why Stuff-Management Matters

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 15 September, 2003 - 22:27

Alice Bachini

These days, we all have lots and lots more Stuff than we ever had before. One only has to flick through the IKEA catalogue to see just how many new and wonderful clever storage devices people are buying to protect and organise their incredibly vast shoe collections, diverse kitchen crockery and CD treasure-troves. Clever storage is a skill our parents had far less use for. Mine, for example, were small children during and after WWII: if you had more than one pair of shoes then, you were lucky. Whereas the crates of female shoes in my house now are rivalled only by the crates of male ones. Capitalism hadn't gone wild yet. The world wasn't overflowing with bargains. Good Stuff is good: it aids our creativity, it helps us pursue our ideas, it inspires and pleases us. Having lots of it is a rational preference, and one which smaller children in particular often seem have.

But Stuff needs caring for. Anyone ever tried to make a Lego plane out of miniature Lego pieces mixed with Playmobil pieces mixed with Connect Four chips mixed with breakfast cereal mixed with a packet of chocolate chip cookies? Attempted helping a child find their favourite purple shoe, which they want to wear to the party and only remembered the existence of five minutes before leaving, and the door won't even open on the room due to piled-up belongings everywhere? Have you ever attempted living in the middle of a whole house that was never tidied, where things had no logical storage place that people respected, where to eat breakfast one had to rummage under a bed to find a bowl and spoon then wash off the mould before liberating them for personal use?

I'm exaggerating only slightly. And I don't mean to imply that everyone genuinely prefers the same degree of stuff-organisation. Some people actively enjoy hunting for colouring pencils underneath the sink, no doubt. Some people organise the things they love, keep their colouring pencils in an antique box on the mantelpiece, and disorganise the things they don't care about, never getting round to mending the stairs with the missing treads. Some people enjoy being surrounded by clutter, they prefer the aesthetic impact of that, find it enjoyable, comforting. Some people can find you a pin in the midst of what looks like clutter because actually, it is a carefully organised system that only looks like clutter. Other people's homes are flawlessly tidy, yet they don't know where they left the kettle.

However, I would like to point out that the cliché of teenagers and messy rooms may not always be what it seems: there are teenagers living in flea-pits who would actually really like some of the right kind of sensitive, kind, positive, enthusiastic, generous support in re-organising and re-decorating and re-beautifying their rooms. But they either don't trust their adults enough to want to go anywhere near them in such a project, or they can't see the point in asking: "She doesn't want to know," they think. "Otherwise, why doesn't she offer?" Shutting the door on these people's rooms might seem a good idea, while actually only adding insult to injury.

Do you prefer mess? Would you like never to lose things in your home again? Do you enjoy walking across a floor strewn with things that crack disconcertingly underneath your feet? Those parents with toddlers who need to be got to hundreds of times a day across floors and up stairs may well appreciate the amount of extra work created just by having to negotiate belongings strewn everywhere in the house every single time. Tidying is work. Picking your way rather than

striding across a floor is work. Putting things in boxes is work. Sorting out mixed-up toys so they can be played with easier is work. Inventing great storage systems is work. So is searching the whole house for a precious lost bunny-rabbit. The point is to find the most efficient kind of work out of the available choices: never to tidy creates work, as well as avoiding it. Well organised (in ways suited to the inhabitants unique problem-sets) houses are easier to live in, and this is good.

And tidiness helps with creativity, too. I feel more like cooking when there are work surfaces already freely available for doing it on. "Aha! The store cupboard is full, and there's sun in the kitchen! Cookies!" Whereas, if there's smelly washing-up everywhere, chances are I'll go sit in the garden instead. Nothing wrong with sitting in the garden: but my choices were reduced, my creativity squashed instead of opened up. Whereas, what we all need to be doing in the great TCS fight against creativity-compromise is finding ever more and better ways of surrounding ourselves with inspiration and quantities of inspiring enjoyable activities that genuinely appeal. And I'm not just talking about the children here: that applies to all of us!

The right kind of tidiness consists of nothing other than: caring for and organising our belongings, which we do and should value because they are one of the most important means by which we are creative. This knowledge is important and growing, and we can and should share it with our children without having to invade their privacy, coerce them or make them feel pressured or annoyed. As long as *they* are in control of any help we offer, and as long as all our tidying and organisation ideas are open to discussion and criticism, and as long as we help sensitively at times which suit them and without disrupting their space, and as long as we find ways of helping them care for their belongings which enable them *better to find and have access to and be inspired by* those belongings, then we are probably doing it right. Rather than shutting the door for fear of coercing, rather than waiting for the kids to ask for help, sometimes it's better to find new good ways of helping and offer them with generous enthusiasm.

to post comments

Comments

What teens think

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 16 September, 2003 - 18:04

Not having been inside any other (than my own once-) teenaged mind, I'm glad to now know what some teens think. ;)

There is something more complex to a teen's room than just a degree of mess or organization. It's their zone. Closing the door or not is really their own decision. Some might even like the idea that their room makes their parent uncomfortable to a degree, and it's through no fault of their own. They are just doing their thing, and the parent is doing theirs.

Same old, same old. If a kid wants help (cleaning, organizing, decorating),

help them. If they say 'I like it the way it is', well, a parent is supposed to believe what their close friend and child tells them explicitly, right?

One person's 'right kind of tidiness' is another person's "doing it wrong".

Happening upon a bit of stuff unexpectedly can be a terrific boon to creativity. Maybe a balance between organization and serendipity is best.

Maybe teenagers are in the best position to find out.

to post comments

Re: Messy Rooms

Submitted by Dan Frank on 16 September, 2003 - 23:24

Preface: Please excuse the use of the male pronoun "he", used here as a neuter. I refuse to use non-words such as "hir", and referring to a human as "it" seems disrespectful.

Alice, while much of what you say makes sense, I felt it necessary to comment on this:

However, I would like to point out that the cliché of teenagers and messy rooms may not always be what it seems: there are teenagers... ..who would actually really like some... ..support in re-organising and re-decorating and re-beautifying their rooms. But they... ..don't trust their adults enough to want to go anywhere near them in such a project... ..Shutting the door on these people's rooms might seem a good idea, while actually only adding insult to injury.

While it is true some people may desire this, and desire help in this endeavor, I think that the wording in this paragraph does more potential harm than good.

I would like to point out that it seems like the only people you're referring to are the children of conventional parents. I am reminded of the assortment of seemingly circular 'criticisms' of TCS, to which the answer truthfully is "A TCS child would believe his parents advice if it was true, thus negating the problem."

Why would a TCS child be so terrified of asking for parental assistance? He has, after all, been happily relying on said assistance for his entire life.

I think it's rather obvious that a child *not* raised TCS for most of his life requires a different approach than a TCS child, including frequently more aggressive questioning to make sure the child isn't feeling coerced in their situation. This, however, extends into most walks of life and is not specific to messy rooms.

I see no logical reason why a TCS child, dissatisfied with the cleanliness of their room, would not simply ask for some advice on the subject, if not outright physical assistance.

Ultimately, I think this paragraph will cause a lot of undue stress and worry on the part of TCS parents, which I don't think is productive or conducive to good parenting.

Regards, - **Dan Frank** - www.literary-masturbation.blogspot.com (<http://www.literary-masturbation.blogspot.com>)

to post comments

TCS children

Submitted by Alice Bachini on 19 September, 2003 - 15:24

Dan,

There is no such thing as a totally uncoerced child. All TCS parents may unintentionally coerce, including by passive neglect, in any area where their ideas are entrenched or wrong, and have no idea they are doing it. Nor can or should they rely on their children to let them know, because their children may have no ideas it's happening either. For this reason, we should all criticise our theories.

Say there was a widespread cultural idea that "teenagers are supposed to be depressed because they have hormone imbalances". A TCS parent with a depressed kid might tell them this, both might accept it as "their best theory" and therefore coercion (depression) continues without any help or criticism.

How do we know that a preference for a messy room isn't nearly always an irrational response to some coercion we're put on our kids *without realising it*? We don't. Especially not given how damaged our own ideas on the subject are, and how useless most of us therefore are at creative helping.

Hopefully, kids whose parents are into TCS ideas will identify and express their problems in all areas of their lives. TCS helps you get more rational: it doesn't make you perfect.

I find the idea that teens are supposed to be miserable social outcasts with no role in life who enjoy living in cess-pits absolutely disgustingly offensive and horrendously widespread. I'm not making a judgement on any individual family here, however (sometimes I enjoy untidiness myself! have you seen my home? *cough*). But we can't rely on the kids to ensure we got our parenting right- it's irresponsible.

to post comments

Wrong Extreme

Submitted by Dan Frank on 24 September, 2003 - 21:21

Dear Alice,

It seems like in your zeal debunk the

...teens are supposed to be miserable social outcasts with no role in life who enjoy living in cess-pits.

myth, you're leaping to an unhelpful extreme. I still stand by what I put forth above, but I now realize I failed to address an essential point. I apologize for being so careless.

One of the most basic tenets of TCS parenting is *helpful advice*. This is absolutely necessary to even remotely TCS parents. Without it, TCS parenting is almost unidentifiable from permissive, semi-neglectful parenting. I realize I completely ignored it above, even making it seem like I wasn't advocating it. With lines like...

I see no logical reason why a TCS child, dissatisfied with the cleanliness of their room, would not simply ask for some advice on the subject, if not outright physical assistance.

I can understand why you took exception to my argument!

But once one (properly) adds helpful advice to the equation, I still feel that much of what you say is needlessly inflammatory. You start from that stance that disorder is bad, for one. In your comment you even go so far as to say you find the idea that teens are supposed to live in "cess-pits" (messy rooms?) "disgusting". You define the "right kind of tidiness" as "caring for and organizing our belongings". I postulate that caring for ones belongings can be done completely independent of organization, and that organization is often (*not* always!) just a waste of precious time that could be better used in other, creative, pursuits.

A good example of the sort of inflammatory speech I'm talking about in the original article would be, well, the paragraph I quoted before.

However, I would like to point out that the cliché of teenagers and messy rooms may not always be what it seems: there are teenagers... ..who would actually really like some... ..support in re-organising and re-decorating and re-beautifying their rooms. But they... ..don't trust their adults enough to want to go anywhere near them in such a project... ..Shutting the door on these people's rooms might seem a good idea, while actually only adding insult to injury.

Since I've been doing a lot of criticizing, I want to point out that I think your real message is actually a good one, namely:

...rather than waiting for the kids to ask for help, sometimes it's better to find new good ways of helping and offer them with generous enthusiasm.

I agree wholeheartedly with this (despite what I said in my first reply). However, it seems to me that this message is partially obscured by the extreme, almost angry view you take towards anyone who might presume to think that living in a mess is A-Okay (I have no idea if that is only an American expression. If it's confusing to you, take off the "A-", because it's completely superfluous anyway.)

And also, thank you for providing a wealth of insights and ideas pertaining to TCS. I read most articles you write, and I only comment when I disagree with things.

Regards, - Dan Frank - <http://www.literary-masturbation.blogspot.com> (http://www.literary-masturbation.blogspot.com)

to post comments

teens rooms

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 8 April, 2004 - 00:06

i just one thing to say..!! MY MOM AND ME LOVE SHOPPING AT IKEA!! and...she loves redecorating and helping me find cool stuff for my room..its kind of like a bonding thing....cuz seriously..i dont go anywhere with her these days...except IKEA. me and her think the same...we thnk that living in a cool organized place ROCKS! i mean she is KIND of old fashioned in her decorating style..but thats why she brings me so that i could help her

out in choosing more modern things...so the comment made upon...we dont liek asking our parents for money or help when it comes to our rooms...i think that depends on who your parents are.

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What about messy adults?

Submitted by mammal_mama on 30 January, 2007 - 14:56

What about those of us who aren't so great about keeping our space organized as adults?

We do periodically straighten up around here -- usually not more than one room at a time -- and finding books and toys that have been hidden for weeks is a lot of fun. Also it takes some creativity to figure out how to find that lost "favorite shoe" -- or to figure out some cool alternative if it stays lost.

I can't help thinking you're saying we're wrong if we're messy: after all, you're not suggesting the neat and tidy types learn to "mess it up" a bit.

That said, I do think kids have fun with new storage contraptions -- and they may be totally creative about how they use them: they may use the shoe-rack for artwork, for example.

Susan

[to post comments](#)

A Perfect Mess:

Submitted by canyonstar on 1 February, 2007 - 16:59

The Hidden Benefits of Disorder-- How Crammed Closets, Cluttered Offices, and On-the-Fly Planning Make the World a Better Place

It's a book by Eric Abrahamson and David H. Freedman

messy systems rock!

[to post comments](#)

I've got to get that book!

Submitted by mammal_mama on 1 February, 2007 - 18:56

Thanks, canyonstar! I'm going to go look for that book now.

Susan

[to post comments](#)

Help - child's closet

Submitted by Jen (not verified) on 24 October, 2007 - 15:29

I will go in and hang clothes on low-lying closets. I even set up a system right under it, so in a hurry the clothes can go in one of two boxes right underneath. ALL that has to be done is to PUT clean clothes in one. Yet, even though I do most of the putting away, clothes end up in the middle of the floor, and just left there from child going through a bunch of put-away clothes (both from hangers and boxes), throwing them on the floor, looking for just the right one to wear. Child does NOT clean this up. It makes it difficult for me to put clothes away. How should I handle this in a TCS way?

[to post comments](#)

Getting my stuff straight

Submitted by CK (not verified) on 4 February, 2008 - 00:25

I wish I could keep my place tidy. But being as my parents made me learn to keep house properly, it's an issue in my life and I can't get it tidy. I don't want to do the same to my kids. Any advice?

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