

The Parenting ToolKit

Ten Extraordinary Inventions
Guaranteed to Solve Real,
Everyday Problems



Karen Skinulis

The Toy Vacuum™

It's clean up time!

Hannah! Harrison! How many times do I have to repeat myself? I said pick up these toys – Nowwww! No, not in five minutes – right now! Aunt Jenny and Uncle Ralph will be here any minute and this place looks like a cyclone hit it. Actually it looks like a toy bomb exploded over our living room. It's as if somebody went to the toy store, bought every single toy in the whole place, dumped all of it right here, and then blew it up.

Why do we have so many toys anyway? When I was your age I didn't have half as much as you kids do – and we certainly wouldn't dream of leaving them lying all over the floor. My father would have... oh never mind. I can't even walk in here. Ouch! What in the world did I just step on? Oh no. Look at the time. They'll be here any minute! They are going to think we are slobs, that we live like pigs. Is that what you want our guests to think? Are either of you listening to what I'm saying? No, I don't think so. It's time to turn that TV off and start helping me clean up this mess. Okay, you two, if I don't get some cooperation this very minute, I'm going to put all these toys in the garbage and then you won't have anything to play with! Do you want me to do that? See, I'm going into the kitchen to get a garbage bag right now. Here I go... I mean it.

No matter how many times Mother lectures, yells, pleads, and threatens, Hannah and Harrison pay no attention to taking care of their toys. The handy bins and shelves that Mother installed to keep it all organized are empty, and the floor is always a sea of coloured plastic strewn everywhere; puzzle pieces, Lego bricks, Barbie dolls, and a million little odds and ends from play sets and games. For the kids it's all fun, but for mother it's nothing but work. Perhaps it is a little overwhelming for the two young children. Mother certainly feels a headache coming on when she has to tackle one of their big messes, so how must they feel? She knows that the kids can't do it by themselves when it's at its worst, but it isn't right that she should be putting their things away for them either. They need to realize their toys are their responsibility and that living with the mess is not fair to the rest of the family.

Most troubling however is that Mother senses the children really don't appreciate all the wonderful toys they have. Just last week, Harrison stepped on his new Transformer, broke it in half and didn't bat an eye – there was plenty more where that came from.

How can Mother get them to care about their things?

The **All New Toy Vacuum™** is the perfect solution to this family's problem. Mess and disorder will soon be a thing of the past. Best of all, this handy appliance will help your child learn to appreciate all they have. Wall hook included. Available in stores everywhere for just \$74.99.

Day 1

"It's clean up time!" Mom calls out.

Hannah is puttering away in her play kitchen, serving realistic-looking plastic waffles to the three teddy bears seated around the play table. She pours imaginary syrup over the plates.

"Here Buddy Bear, eat your breakfast."

Harrison is in the other corner busily constructing a roadway for his miniature cars. He is putting the finishing touches on the bridge. The TV is turned to the family station and the theme music for Dora the Explorer is gaily playing in the background. It is 5:30 and dinner will be ready in ten minutes.

"Hannah, Harrison, it's time to put your toys away. Dora is over." Mother walks over to the TV set and turns it off.

"Aw, I wanted to watch some more," Hannah whines.

"Let's start tidying up by picking up these puzzle pieces on the rug. Where is the tray?"

Mother is standing next to the shelves and plastic bins where the toys belong.

"Vrrrmmm, vrrrmmm." Harrison picks up his miniature red corvette and his toy monster truck and pretends to crash them over the bridge. He doesn't look up at all. Hannah takes off her ruffled apron and puts Buddy Bear in his doll stroller. "Okay

Mommy, I just have to take Buddy Bear to the doctor first. He's very sick today."

"I see some puzzles and a lot of other toys that need to be cleaned up. All of them have to be put away in the bins before we eat," says Mother, in a firm, friendly voice.

"Okay Mommy," Hannah replies but continues playing.

Harrison is still engrossed in his trucks. Mother wonders for the third time this week if she should make an appointment to have his hearing tested. She waits for a minute or two, but the children don't seem to be paying any attention to her. She is careful not to repeat her directions again. The Toy Vacuum Cleaner she just bought came with clearly written instructions; it cautioned that repeating directions to children more than two times will interfere with the vacuum cleaners efficacy. The oven timer suddenly starts beeping, so she turns and goes back to the kitchen.

The children are very happy when Mother leaves. Usually she just goes on and on about stupid old clean-up time. Sometimes she even sings that tidy-up song over and over again. *That can really be annoying!* But tonight, thankfully, she is working in the kitchen and they can keep on playing without all the nagging. Maybe she is finally realizing that they just don't want to take up so much of their precious play time with boring things like cleaning up.

"Time for dinner everyone." Hannah and Harrison look up to see the whole family arriving in the kitchen. Grandma, Dad, and Mother are all busy bringing food to the table. They see a platter of turkey burgers and oven-roasted sweet potato fries. They drop their toys where they are and head to the table too. They're hungry and the food smells delicious.

When dinner is over, it's time to check their knapsacks. Hanna is in kindergarten and has some alphabet homework to do. Harrison is in the second grade and learning subtraction with carrying. They spread their homework out on the cleared kitchen table and get to work. While the kids are busy, Mother walks over to the pantry and pulls out a strange looking vacuum cleaner that the children have never seen before. The part that sucks things up is a lot bigger than their other vacuum, plus it has a big stretchy bag at the end. Mother strolls over to the toy room and plugs it in. Harrison looks up.

"What's that thing Mom?"

"It's my new Toy Vacuum Cleaner."

"Oh. Neat."

Mother moves the vacuum over to the corner where all the puzzle pieces and toys are still strewn across the floor. She turns it on and a loud whirring sound fills the air.

The children instantly look up from their homework. She places the vacuum over the toys and *kerthunk, kerthunk*, they are sucked inside. The bag at the back begins to fill.

Then she heads over to the play kitchen set. All the toy food and utensils are still on the table. She lifts the vacuum hose up to the table and in they go.

“Hey Mom! Stop! What are you doing? That’s Buddy Bear’s breakfast. He hasn’t finished it yet,” Hannah wails.

“I can see that, but all the toys have to be put away before dinner.”

“But Mom! What is Buddy Bear going to eat if his breakfast is in there?” she cries, pointing to the vacuum.

“It looks like we’ll have to figure that out later.” Then Mother walks over to the other corner where all of Harrison’s matchbox cars and pieces of road are lying on the rug. There are many pieces and each one makes another loud *kerthunk* as it gets sucked into the vacuum.

“Hey, Mom!! That road is for my monster trucks!!! I need that stuff! *What are you doing?”*

“They’re all safe inside this bag here. See?”

She holds the mesh bag up so Harrison and Hannah can see it better.

“But I want my toys back! You can’t just *vacuum* them. I wasn’t finished playing with them!” He looks distressed.

“Don’t worry dear, they’re just fine. This vacuum is very, very gentle – it says so on the box. Toys just can’t be left lying on the floor like this. Someone could step on them and hurt their feet.”

“I know, you’ve told me that a gazillion times but I wasn’t finished playing with them.”

His voice is quavering. Even though Mommy doesn’t seem angry with him tonight, he is suddenly feeling very upset.

“Are you sure my toys aren’t broken?”

“Yes, I’m positive. They are perfectly fine.”

“But why are you vacuuming them up?”

“As I said, the mess in the toy room needs to be cleaned up. We can’t leave the toys on the floor anymore. After Daddy and I tuck you in at night we like to come down to the family room and relax, but with toys everywhere, we don’t have any room to walk or even sit on the couch.”

“Oh.”

“Now is your homework finished yet? Hurry up so we’ll have time for a story after your bath.”

“But where are my toys going?” Harrison has big tears welling up in his eyes and he wipes them away with his sleeve.

“Yeah, is Buddy Bear going to sleep inside the vacuum?” asks Hannah, with an equally worried face.

“No dear, I am going to hang this hook on the wall in the basement.”

Mother retrieves a large hook from her apron pocket.

“This will help us keep everything out of the way. See? This bag fits on the hook.”

Mom picks up the big bag of toys trailing behind the vacuum to show them how it works.

“I’ll make sure you and Hannah will be able to reach it so you can get your toys out if you want to play with them tomorrow.”

“So we can play with them tomorrow?”

“Sure you can, but they will be downstairs on the hook for the rest of the evening.”

“Ah. There. Doesn’t the room look nice?” Says Mother, as she surveys the tidy room.

“It sure does,” says Grandma.

Mother detaches the big bag of toys from the vacuum and slings it over her shoulder like Santa Claus on Christmas Eve. She takes it to the basement and the children can hear the whirr of her electric drill attaching the hook. A few minutes later she returns.

“Now, who’s ready for their bath?”

Day 2

“It’s clean up time.”

“In a minute Mommy, Barbie is swimming with the dolphins.”

Hannah has her three Barbie Dolls sitting in her Barbie Boat and Barbie convertible. “Let’s go to the beach!” She pretends to drive them to the beach and then peels off their outfits to change them into their swimsuits. This takes a while, as she can’t find bikinis for two of them. “Come on, let’s play with the dolphins.” The Barbie dolls dive into the pretend ocean and there are squeals of delight when a pod of babies show up.

Harrison is surrounded with his Harry Potter figurines. He has a big plastic

Hogwarts school complete with all the characters from the Harry Potter books, his favourite. He is even wearing his fake round glasses just like Harry Potter. When mother calls, he is putting Dumbledore and Hermione onto a dragon's back and flying through the air to rescue Ron. He looks up momentarily but is back to his game without answering her. Mother steps into the playroom and surveys the mess.

"I can see a lot of toys that need to be picked up and put away tonight. Harrison, all your Harry Potter figurines and these blocks over here have to go in their bins. Hannah, the Barbies and your paper dolls also need to be put away."

"Okay, in a minute I'll do it Mommy," Hannah replies.

"Harrison?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah,"

Mother leaves the room and ten minutes later dinner is served. The family eats, the children start their homework, and mother again goes to the pantry and pulls out the Toy Vacuum.

Harrison looks up. "Hey wait, stop! I don't *want* you to vacuum my toys up again tonight Mom! I'm going to clean them up after my homework is done. I've only got two more pages to finish"

Mother looks at the clock. "It's getting late. After your homework it will be time for your bath, Harrison. There won't be enough time for clean-up then."

To be continued...

Why the Toy Vacuum™ Works

Woe is the parent who has not taught their child to respect order, for without it, there can be little peace. In the crazy rush of our fast-paced world, we all yearn for homes that are respites from our busy lives. We need our ordered comfort. Having such a refuge allows us some serenity and calm, a place to relax. Order is pleasing to the eye and comfortable, but there are other reasons beyond that.

Order makes life easier. For one thing, we can easily find what we're looking for whenever we need it. Our path is clear, and space is kept for special uses. It eliminates frustration and inconvenience, and it reduces irritation between the people who live together.

Having a deep and abiding respect for order, and doing our best to preserve it, is one of the ways we show that we care about each other. If someone in your family neglects this principle, you can be sure that the rest of the family will feel disrespected – and this will lead to resentment and even anger. Imagine for a minute that someone in the family takes the hammer to hang a picture and doesn't put it back where it belongs when they are finished with it. The next person who wants it has no idea where it is. This means they have to look for it. How frustrating this is!

Or imagine coming into a cluttered entrance where the path is blocked by mounds of winter boots carelessly dropped wherever they were removed. Who wouldn't feel resentful at having to climb over an obstacle just to get in the front door?

All of our belongings need to have a place in our home. Toys should be stored in bins and on shelves, coats should be hung on hooks or hangers, tools hung on pegboards or stowed in toolboxes, and on and on. Order means each thing we use is returned to its place when we are finished with it.

Every child can learn to respect order, but it is something that has to be taught. As with most things, it is best to introduce this when your child is young so that it becomes a good habit– but it is never too late to teach this principle. In our example, Hannah and Harrison's parents hadn't figured out a way to stimulate respect for order until they bought the Toy Vacuum. The children needed to learn the importance of putting their toys away, to be considerate of the rest of the family, and to learn that order made things easier for them too.

The solution to a toy problem is twofold. The first step is to create an environment where your child can manage his toys independently. This should be considered carefully. Most children have so many toys it's impossible for them to manage them on their own. Parents who get a sinking feeling in their stomach when they look at the enormous mess that toys create can imagine how the small child feels. It's completely overwhelming for them.

Therefore, we suggest you start by editing your child's toys. Remove the things that are too babyish or advanced. If your child has too many things, make decisions about what he is most interested in at that point and store the rest. Only keep a manageable amount of toys out for him to play with. You can rotate toys every few months when interest in his current toys begins to fade.

Then establish a special place for everything. Each set of blocks or Lego, each doll and craft supply should have a place where it belongs when it isn't being used. Shelves are preferable to toy boxes because your child can see what he has. Shallow bins also

make great storage.

Next, and this is very important, take time to teach your child how to put things away. Never assume your child will know how to do this because he has seen you do it – that may not be enough. Instead, ask him to watch you while you show him how to place a toy back on the shelf. Use slow exaggerated movements so he can see how you hold things and how you place them carefully in their place. Ask him to try it. Then explain that when he finishes playing with his toy it is his responsibility to put it back. He may require a little help at the beginning and a few gentle reminders but from that point on, whenever he uses the toy, expect it to be returned.

If the problem continues after all these steps have been taken, we suggest you use a logical consequence like the parent in our example did. It is never a good idea for you to put your child's toys away for him after you have made it his responsibility. If you do, he won't take the responsibility seriously and he will expect your help and service. Instead, your actions should help him learn what happens when his things aren't put away. A logical consequence is an excellent way to do this because it teaches your child why he needs to take care of his responsibility.

A logical consequence is exactly what its name implies – a consequence that is logically connected to the problem. Punishments, on the other hand are arbitrarily selected.

Many parents get a little stumped at this point. They may be used to working with punishments and aren't sure how to switch gears. However it's not hard to make the change, and with a little practice, it becomes second nature.

To shift to logical consequences, there are two simple steps to take. First of all, imagine what will happen if nothing is done about a problem. This step helps you think of all the logical outcomes of a particular problem and points you in the proper direction. For example, if nothing is done about toys being left everywhere, there are several different outcomes that would likely result.

One possible outcome is that your child will be inconvenienced if he has to look for toys that aren't where they belong. If, for example, he wants to play with his teddy bear but it isn't where it's supposed to be, he will have to look for it. Another outcome would be that his toys could get broken if someone accidentally steps on them. A third possibility is that the messiness of the room could create an embarrassing situation if his friends come to the house and see it. It is surprising how many children are keenly aware of what their friends think.

Embarrassment, broken toys, and inconvenience are the three most likely consequences related to this problem – however, there may be even more that we haven't thought of. Now, the next step is to create a situation which presents one of these related consequences to your child.

In our example, the Toy Vacuum removed the toys from where they were scattered throughout the family room and put them in a place that was less convenient for Hannah and Harrison. Take note of mother's demeanour throughout the process. It was done in a simple, matter of fact way. Mother remained friendly, avoided unnecessary discussion, and followed through consistently each time she encountered the problem. The Toy Vacuum created a consequence that fit in size and proportion to the problem at hand. Having to go down to the basement to retrieve toys from the vacuum bag (this can be replaced with a simple cardboard box) was just enough inconvenience to stimulate the desire to cooperate.

Hannah and Harrison responded to the logical consequence as most children do. They did not like the fact that it was taking place, and they wished that their mother would not remove their toys from the family room. Children should not be expected to enjoy logical consequences, but keep in mind the following: the parents did not need to use anger to stimulate change. They did not need to yell, lecture, or make threats. They did not need to put the toys away themselves. Nor did they need to give endless reminders and nag. They did not criticize, or label their children as "slobs" or "lazy." All of these negative approaches, that can actually harm your relationship with your child, were deftly avoided. The logical consequence was an action taken that actually made sense to the children and taught them to respect order in the house.

As you probably noted in our example, this solution did not produce immediate results. Few parenting strategies can achieve this. Instead, your child will probably live with the logical consequences for a time before they are ready to change their behaviour. One of the things we can't predict is how long this process will take. Some children respond quickly while others take longer. But even if it takes a while, at least your child is learning to expect that a consequence occurs when he doesn't keep up with his responsibilities – which is always true in life.

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The Parenting Toolkit brings the age-old task of raising children smartly up to date. Even though the tools described in this book are imaginary, you'll wonder how you ever managed without them and the parenting strategies they illustrate. The book's true-to-life dialogue and common sense advice cuts straight to the heart of child-rearing — leaving you informed, hopeful, and firmly on the path to a happier family.

The Toy Vacuum teaches the value of tidiness and order.

Perfecting Glasses give a boost to flagging self-esteem.

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The Kitchen Chair Seat Belt expands food horizons for fussy eaters.

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