

ASK THE EXPERT: HOW CAN I KEEP MY HOUSE ORGANIZED DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR?

An NYC interior designer and mom offers smart do-it-yourself tips on how to de-clutter your home and keep your kids' stuff organized during the busy school year.

There's a natural mess that settles in right after the school year begins. With school projects, play dates, forms, and after-school activities, there's a lot more traffic in and out of the house that can cause some unwanted clutter in clean homes. We interviewed NYC-based interior designer, [Design Star](#)-finalist, and mom-of-one **Cathy Hobbs** for some helpful hints on how to keep your house clutter-free this fall and beyond.

Do you have any tips on how to keep playrooms and kids' rooms tidy?

When you talk about playrooms and kids' rooms, it's important to remember that kids have a lot of things—toys, clothes, movies, books. A great way to keep kids' rooms clean and organized is to use decorative bins. Toy boxes were a big thing when I was a kid, but they're bulky and not as trendy. Especially with electronics and delicate toys, using decorative bins is more practical. Canvas bags you can decorate yourself are an alternative way to keep things under control.

Organized storage is also really important—bookcases, shelves, drawers. Put stuff away beyond the quick fix of just throwing everything into bins or big canvas bags. Organized storage keeps everything in its place.

Any helpful hints on how to de-clutter your house?

I follow the '1 in, 1 out' rule. If you're buying something new to replace something you've worn in, make sure you toss out the old one so you don't end up with four of the same article of clothing.

I usually ask myself three questions when throwing things out: Is it overly soiled? Do we still use it? Does it need mending? Also, purge clothing that you haven't used in a year. If you have items or gadgets that haven't been touched in two years, donate them. Belongings obtained from baby

showers or wedding registries sometimes aren't as needed as we think they'll be and they end up just sitting around the house. Sometimes you just don't need that bottle warmer or extra serving platter.

Are there any commonly purged items that you wish you hadn't tossed?

I had this jacket I got during high school. It was this short, mustard-colored wool coat that I kept into my 30s and I still don't know what happened to it. I think I tossed it in the 'Do I really need it?' mindset. It was such a distinctive color. I don't think I'd go out and buy a mustard-yellow coat today, but there were enough opportunities where I thought 'Wow, that mustard coat would really go well with this.' Plus, it was a novelty vintage item.

Basically, if there's something you haven't worn in a while but you really like and it means something to you, why not keep it?

How do you get the whole family involved in keeping the house clean and organized?

My daughter is 2½ and attends nursery school. One of the beautiful things is that they have clean-up time at school at the same time every day. So when I say, "Alright, it's time to clean up," she knows what it is and puts her toys in her baskets.

For my husband and me, the best way to keep organized is to have a place for things to go. A lot of time when people have things all over the place, it's because they haven't figured out a place to put things. If things have a home, they usually find their way there.

What is the best way to keep closets and other typically object-heavy areas organized?

When it comes to closets, I find that it's imperative to implement multiple levels of storage. Areas to hang shirts and jackets that are shorter or longer, sections to add dresses and skirts. With closets for clothing, it's good to have huggable hangers. They're thin and they save a lot of space in comparison to traditional wooden hangers.

Also, remove duplicate items. If you see five or six boxes of Ziplock bags, consolidate your goods. Make sure you take seasonal inventory of what you have, too. If you know what you have from year to year that is just sitting collecting dust, you know what you need and what you don't need.

Are there any do-it-yourself crafts that help spruce up a room and keep it clean?

In a child's room, you can make fun, decorative wall hangings where you can tack on small toys and papers from school. My daughter brings home three to four art projects a week and it's cute to use them to decorate her room.

For my room, I find that making your own hamper can be fun. Using stiff cotton duck fabric and creating a simple stand to build up from, or decorating a plain hamper with embellishment, decorative petals, or painting it a different color or adding stripes to it.

Stacked boxes that you get at the craft store with sealable lids are good too. You can paint them, add decorative stones or ribbons, stencil them, or wrap them in decorative paper. I've gotten plain cardboard stackable boxes and painted or stenciled them for use in my home. They're customizable and versatile.

Cathy Hobbs graduated from The Fashion Institute of Technology with a degree in interior design and was a finalist on season 6 of HGTV's "Design Star." She founded [Cathy Hobbs Design Recipes](#), a design firm specializing in commercial and residential interior design, in 2003. Hobbs currently lives in New York City with her 2-year-old daughter and husband.