

Question: How can we help our toddler from turning our house into a disaster area and help with the clean up?

You can change clean up from a time you and your toddler don't like into a time where she or he is learning and having fun by promoting the life skill of Making Connections.

Making Connections is at the heart of learning—figuring out what's the same and what's different, and sorting these things into categories. Making unusual connections is at the core of creativity. In a world where people can Google for information, it is the people who can see connections who are able to go beyond knowing information to using this information well.

1

Turn clean up time into a game.

Here are some ideas:

- "I am going to pick up two toys, can you pick up one?"
- "I will look for red toys. Can you look for blue ones?" Even if your child doesn't know her colors or numbers, you can guide him or her.
- You can also play racing games. "Let's see how fast we can pick up the books."
- You can play a guessing game: "Guess what I am going to pick up next? It is round and red and bounces." If your child is too young to guess then say the answer, "It's a ball."
- Singing makes pick up time fun.

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University and Roberta Golinkoff of the University of Delaware have found that "learning takes place best when young children are engaged and enjoying themselves."

When you play these games regularly, you are not only getting things cleaned up, having fun, and teaching your child about words and what they mean, you are also promoting the skill of Making Connections among objects, words, numbers, time and colors. When children make these connections, they are learning that one thing can "stand for" something else, like the word "two" stands for two objects. This is referred to as symbolic representation, an important part of your child's development in building knowledge.

Judy Deloache of the University of Virginia says, "There's nothing that sets human beings apart from any other species on the planet more than our symbolic capacity. If you think about what you know about the world, a vast proportion of what you know comes through symbolic representation."

2

Create a helper and be a team.

When activities are presented positively as working on something together, many children enjoy being helpful and doing adult things. Toddlers are not grown up enough to fully help

with cleaning, but they can definitely participate and learn from the process of cleaning up after play. Invite your child to help you. Let her or him know you are a team, and that he or she is an important member. For example:

- During clean up time you can give your child a specific job as a helper. “You are in charge of cleaning up the blocks. I will be in charge of cleaning up the books.”
- You can let your child choose which job to do. “Would you like to be in charge of cleaning up the cars or the stuffed animals?”

In asking these questions, you are helping children see what things go together to form categories. Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley says, “Children are learning what categories things fit into ... what makes a cat a cat? Or what makes a dog a dog? And it turns out that that’s a very important thing to understand. If you can sort the world out into the right categories ... then you’ve got a big advance on understanding the world.”

3

Create doable tasks.

If you say, “Clean up your room,” that can feel overwhelming to a young child. Instead, give your toddler specific things to do, “Put your books in the basket of books.” In doing so, you are also helping your child make connections between one book and a basket of books.

4

Create clues that help your child know where things go.

- You can draw a picture of a shirt and tape it to the drawer where shirts go if your child is helping you put away her laundry.
- You can also put different colored dots with magic markers on the back of each piece of a puzzle—blue dots on one puzzle, red dots on a different puzzle so if you have a jumble of puzzle pieces, you can figure out which pieces go with which puzzles.

5

Mix things up as your child learns.

You can also help your toddler learn to make new or unusual connections by changing up how you group toys together. For example:

- On some weeks, toys can be sorted by category (e.g., stuffed animals together, books together, etc.) and on other weeks, toys can be sorted by color (e.g., red things together, blue things together, etc.).

These kinds of games help your child learn to think flexibly.