

Declutter Your Home & Life

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November 30, 2006

It happens to all of us. One day you wake up, look around and are shocked at how much *stuff* you have in your home.

When that day comes, professional organizers agree that it's a good time to do a clean sweep. The first step is to tell your family you need their help decluttering the house, said Barry Izsak, president of the National Association of Professional Organizers and owner of Arranging It All. He said everyone needs to participate and understand the value of what they are doing.

Some families may need to have a discussion about why there is a clutter problem to begin with, said professional organizer Laura Leist, owner of [Eliminate Chaos](#) and the author of "Eliminate Chaos: The 10-Step Process to Organize Your Home & Life." "I truly believe that it's not always about the stuff," Leist said. "Many times, family members are reluctant because they are so attached to their things that they are afraid of losing the control they have with their things."

If there is a family member who is unwilling to help, Izsak suggested using rewards, such as sharing in the proceeds of a garage sale or earning extra privileges. Next, it's important to set aside time for the project and that everyone honors the commitment, said Standolyn Robertson, a professional organizer and founder of Things In Place.

"A family might say, 'Saturday we'll get organized.' But not much gets accomplished if a soccer game and a friend's birthday party are scheduled for the same day," Robertson said. She advised to be realistic about the amount of time needed to declutter. Robertson's rule of thumb is to estimate how much time it will take and then multiply it by three.

While planning for the big day, stock up on large trash bags, boxes for donations, temporary labels for sorting and plenty of drinks and snacks for breaks, Robertson said. She suggested not buying permanent storage containers until the end of the project.

The next step is to map out a plan and decide what rooms are the most important to declutter first, Leist said. They should be the rooms that affect the most family members and have the biggest impact on daily life, such as the kitchen and the family room.

"Have family members participate in the rooms that they use. Everyone can take some ownership of that room and, in the end, help to maintain it," Leist said.

Declutter one area at a time, she said. If you find there are many items that belong in other parts of the house, use boxes or bins to temporarily store those items, rather than running them to the room in which they belong.

If the rooms are not large enough for the entire family to participate, Leist suggested breaking up into teams and working in several areas at a time, but each team should stay focused on their assigned room.

When it comes to getting rid of the items, Izsak said you can pick a favorite charity and donate items to them; give them away to friends and neighbors; sell the items on eBay or Craigslist.org, or list the items to be donated on Freecycle.org.

Izsak said garage sales are a good way to sell things and earn money, but they take a lot of preparation. He said often it is more efficient to donate the items to a charity.

After the project is finished, the biggest challenge may be maintaining your newly organized home. Robertson said parents should keep an eye on "hot spots" where clutter gathers, such as a pile of shoes by the front door or papers on the dining room table. She said often a family just needs a better system. For example, a parent can make a new rule that only one pair of shoes can be in the foyer; the rest go in the closet.

Teaching everyone to respect the common areas in a home is critical to keeping it organized, Robertson said.

"Help everyone to see that a clear dining room table, for example, brings a reward: allowing the family to sit down together and connect at mealtimes," Robertson said.

Leist likes the policy of a "declutter diet" -- taking one thing out for each new item brought into the home.

"It's no different than going on a diet and working each day to stay fit and keep the weight off. If you slack too much, the weight comes back, and so will the clutter," Leist said.

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