



NEAT FREAK NEWS: Fall 2008

I must admit that the world feels a little out of control right now. Financial markets are melting down, we've recently experienced gas shortages in the southeast due to hurricanes, and the national election is a total nail biter. When the world around you starts to feel chaotic, it's natural to want to hunker down and create your own little oasis of calm. Putting organizational systems into place can help you feel in control of your environment and provide you with a touch of predictability—even if you have to let go of it when you walk out the door.

This month I'm continuing my year-long series on organizing your home, top to bottom. You can buy books that will tell you how to do this, but hey...why not read it here for free! Check out my newsletter every other month, follow my advice (as much as you can stand), and by the end of 2008, I guarantee you'll be living with less and have more room to breathe. Enjoy.

PLAYROOM

Based on my own non-scientific study (thousands of blog hits on "Enough is Enough"), I can tell you that more people have questions about organizing their playroom than any other room in the house. Whether you have children or not, most people have some designated "play" space in their home that houses toys, arts and crafts, video games, TV and/or stereo equipment, movies, board games, or whatever you use to have fun.

Fall is a great time to clear out the playroom clutter as we prepare for the holidays and the tsunami of shiny new stuff. Here are a few of my favorite organizational tips for keeping up with all of the toys for the young...and the young at heart:

1. Keep your organizational systems simple. I love a label maker as much as the next neat freak, but I've found that my kids are unlikely to locate and open a plastic bin to put all of the Barbie shoes back in their labeled sanctuary every evening before bed. I try to keep all doll-like items and their accessories together in a big basket so it's simple enough for a two year old to put them away. Same goes for blocks, legos, cars, trains and fake food/kitchen goodies. For a low-cost tip in these economic times, shoeboxes are great for storing toys and if you really want to get all matchy-matchy, wrap them in cute giftwrap.
2. Toys that don't fit in a logical category (e.g. rubber monkeys—of which we have at least 3, key chains, old cell phones, golf balls, etc.) are simply divided into "Big Toys" and

“Little Toys” and they each have their own bin. This makes it easy for the kids to put them away independently.

3. Toy rotation is an important strategy in the war against boredom. If my kids tell me they're bored, I usually threaten to take all of their toys and give them away. That changes their tune. But I also like to take away a few things from time to time, hide them in my closet, then bring them out and pretend it's Christmas in July. They rarely miss a toy but are always pleased to get reacquainted.

4. Kids' artwork can take over your home in a matter of days. I have a little display area where I hang the good stuff for a week or a month, then I sneak it into the recycling and replace it with something new. I try to keep 4 or 5 masterpieces each year as memorabilia, but otherwise, I'm pretty tough-love when it comes to scribbles and stick figures. If you're feeling really clever, host a gallery night and hang your child's artwork around the house, serve cheese, crackers and grape juice and take pictures of their work. Then sneak it into the recycling the next day, or use it as gift wrap or cards for grandma and grandpa.

5. Teach your children from an early age (two is about right) that cleaning up their toys is their responsibility. We don't clean up our playroom every single night, because by 8:30am, it's often as bad, if not worse, than the night before. But at least 3-4 times per week, I like to be able to see the floor and get everything back where it belongs. My daughter now understands that if she puts toys back where she found them, she'll be able to find them again the next time she wants them. Don't we all need to remember that one!

6. Netflix and iTunes have done a lot to help cut down on video and music clutter. But many families are still holding on to their old VHS collection and continue to purchase movies and music as soon as they hit the stores. If you really watch your movies regularly and listen to your music often, then it's not clutter. But you can cut down on the space these items take up by ditching the cases and containerizing the CDs and DVDs in 3-ring binders with protective “sleeves.” Or, if you're ready to go completely digital, hire a service such as Riptopia (www.riptopia.com) to convert CDs and DVDs to digital files for your iPod or computer.

7. I somehow lack the gene that provides the fine motor skills necessary to play video games. But I do know that many homes are filled with Wii's, Xboxes and Playstations and their requisite joysticks, guitars, consoles, etc. Attempt to go wireless whenever you can, and make it a household rule to return pieces and parts to their proper home after playtime. Consider sharing games and extra goodies with friends—or better yet, just befriend someone cool who has all of the latest gaming toys and hang out at their house!

Perhaps one of the most important lessons when it comes to Playroom organization is to remember that this is a room for fun! You don't want to have to shovel up the floor just to

be able to spread out a game and play together as a family. Reduce the overall number of items you have, purchase quality over quantity, and create a “home” for the toys your family enjoys. And if you have your own suggestions for playroom sanity, visit my blog at <http://neatfreak.wordpress.com> and add them in the comments!

FREAKIE FREEBIES FOR FALL

A season change is always a good excuse for a little around the house spruce up. Here are a few of my favorite fall tips:

****Have a “fending” week.** Skip the regular trip to the grocery store and let everyone fend for themselves at mealtime. Dig deep into the pantry and get creative with your cooking. This allows you to clear out those canned veggies, soups and fruits that have been sitting there for a while (obviously, check expiration dates before diggin’ in!), and get a fresh start.

****Holiday catalogs will be filling your mailbox before the last mini-Snickers from Halloween is consumed.** As your kids start making their list and checking it twice, use this as an opportunity to clear out toys they no longer play with.

****Give your gift wrap collection a good once over.** Before you stock up for the year, clear out gift wrap, gift bags, and ribbons that have seen better days. You can always repurpose ribbons by tying them around sets of sheets or napkins to keep like with like.

****Fall is a great time to test the batteries in your smoke detectors and flashlights.** Remember, expired batteries shouldn’t go in the trash! Contact your local solid waste department or visit earth911.org to find a recycling location near you (I just found out my local RadioShack will take my batteries...awesome!).