

clutter control

Most houses have them: hot spots where the family dumps everything from homework and bike helmets to sneakers and cell phones. We offer fast fixes for organizing the messiest, my-home-is-out-of-control spaces. BY MICHELLE ROBERTS





BEHOLD THE PICTURE-PERFECT HOME: Appliances sparkle, plates and utensils gleam, pillows are forever fluffed, the floors are so clean you can eat off them. Oh please! While the time-honored deep-cleaning ritual that spring used to bring sounds lovely, it just doesn't fit on our iCals anymore. We've learned to survive with scuffed floorboards and the fur Fido leaves behind. What we really need is a battle plan to win the war on clutter. Dust bunnies we can live with; it's the disorder that drives us nuts. By organizing the dumping grounds—spots like the entryway, dining room table, kitchen or playroom where clutter seemingly clings—we can bring much-needed order to our homes. It may not be the company-is-coming sort of clean our mothers strived for each spring, but it can help lighten heavy-duty chores and allow us to feel like everything is where it should be. Here, experts' timesaving techniques and simple shortcuts that will make spring cleaning a breeze.

ENTRYWAY

This is first spot you see when you walk in the door after a long day, and it's the last thing you look at in the morning as you run for the train. (It's also where guests get their first impression of your home, but we're not even going there.) And talk about a feng shui nightmare: This is the space where jackets lie displayed on the floor, where sports equipment threatens to topple, car keys vanish and household bills disappear ("What do you mean they're shutting down our cable?"). For such a small area, a lot seems to accumulate here—mostly unintentionally. But with a few simple steps, you can gain control and get the chi flowing.

Place a pretty drop box at the door (check out PepperKids storage crates, \$29, thepepperkids.com). Toss in keys, mail, wallets, the kinds of things that often seem to have evaporated into thin air when you're searching for them. As long

as these oft-lost items have a regular spot they can land every day, you're all set.

Hang an over-the-door organizer (try the Natural Canvas Over the Door Organizer with Mirror by Richards Home-ware, \$26, organize.com) near the front door or in the coat closet, low enough for kids to reach the bottom pockets. This is the perfect spot for sunglasses, gloves, hats, small sporting equipment and more.

Give all family members their own drop spot if you have the luxury of space. Label them to prevent sibling squabbles. It could be a colorful stack of cubbies or plastic bins with lids. Be logical and supply storage that suits what the kids are dropping—backpacks obviously require something bigger. One option is placing a slim floor-to-ceiling bookshelf in the entryway and giving each family member a shelf to place things on when coming or going. One with adjustable shelves is best so you can customize the space according to each person's needs. Attach coat hooks to one side for everyday jackets.

Make good on your goal to be green by keeping reusable canvas grocery shopping bags by the door. To make sure you don't forget them, hang them on the door-knob. If you still find yourself leaving them behind, place your car keys or even your purse in the bag.

Plug in a power strip at the entryway and use it to charge everyday electronics—like iPods, PDAs and the digital camera. It's a clever way to avoid the "oh no!" of a dead BlackBerry or cell phone as you race out the door.

DINING ROOM

Remember when you bought the dining room table? Visions of clever family banter and home-cooked feasts danced in your head. Now it's a magnet for piles of papers, a spot where homework and office work are done. (Meanwhile, you and the kids eat microwaved meals—in shifts—in front of the TV.) It's time to reclaim this space for its original purpose. Here's how:



Create space on a side table for a file holder with slots labeled Read Me, Respond to Me, Pay Me, etc. (help match them to your decor with travel or faux bois file folders, \$18 and \$9, roomservicehome.com). Then take action as time permits. Presto! Paper piles disappear. Additionally, you want to have a decorative wastepaper bin (or a paper recycling bin) in that room so you can immediately throw out anything you don't need.

Dig out those beaded napkin rings you bought specifically to make your table beautiful—and use them, along with all your other pretty tableware. Keeping your dining room table set breaks the habit of dumping stuff on an otherwise empty horizontal surface.

Do away with stray napkins and the ketchup bottle from last night's dinner by keeping items needed for mealtime in a picnic tote. Store salt and pepper shakers, condiments and extra napkins in here for quick and easy cleanup.

Buy a small rolling cart and fill it with supplies (find one for \$130 at ergoindemand.com). That way when your dining table must double as a home office or project/craft area, just roll the cart up when needed, then out of sight when you're done.

THE KITCHEN

On the rare occasion when the gang's all there, the kitchen is where everyone gathers. Which means there's always a mess. But you can control the chaos by separating the kitchen into zones for the functions you perform there. Once you know

what area will serve what task, reorganize and store the tools you need nearby. **Group and store like items together.** Instead of opening four cabinets to make a cup of coffee in the morning, place your travel mug, sugar, spoon, etc., on the cabinet shelf nearest the coffeepot and sink.

Get into the habit of using the "first in, first out" system. After shopping, you naturally put the new stuff in the front. Instead, get in the habit of leaving room in the back of your storage cabinets to store the new cans and boxes. This way, you'll see the older items first.

Stay on top of refrigerator madness. Instead of ignoring a disgusting fridge mess until you have to go in with a gas mask, take ten minutes once a week at the same time to dump old food and take an inventory of what's in there so you're not buying things at the grocery store that you already have.

Set up a family Lost and Found—a designated box, bin or drawer—like the one at school or at the gym. Whenever someone leaves out the iPod charger or Barbie's shoe, toss it in Lost and Found, where the owner can retrieve it himself.

Keep kids' odd-shaped plastic dishes in their own cabinet rather than trying to fit them in with everyday plates. Bonus tip: Move kid-friendly stuff to an "I'll get it myself" lower shelf so your children can help themselves.

Place a basket on the counter for grab-and-go items like breakfast bars and snacks. That way you don't have to search for them on your way out the door.

MOM TESTED

BEST VACUUMS

Having the right cleaning tools is half the battle. So our editors tried a slew of vacuums in real-life situations (think our own messy playrooms and kitchens). Following are our picks for the best products (according to various needs). They suck—really!



For quick cleanups

Electrolux Ergorapido, \$100, target.com **Why it left others in the dust** Perfect for chasing down stray Cheerios, this cordless two-in-one (the removable hand vac is built in) is the tool you will reach for again and again. Its charging station means it's always ready when you are.



For bare floors

Bissell Versus Bare Floor Vacuum Cleaner, \$80, bissell.com **Why it left others in the dust** Not a fan of carpeting? This one's for you. Its cool V-shape design captures all the tiny particles that tumble around your uncovered floors just as well as it picks up the big stuff—dried-up Play-Doh, flattened French fries. Works on low-pile area rugs, too.



For the planet

Eureka envirovac, \$73, walmart.com **Why it left others in the dust** This eco-upright was modeled with the three R's in mind: Reduce (it uses 33 percent less energy than the usual 12-amp vac); Recycle (its packaging is all 100 percent recycled); Reuse (its filter is washable to reduce waste). But it not only helps with the electric bill, it also packs a lot of power.



For homes with clutter

Dyson Upright DC 24, \$400, dyson.com **Why it left others in the dust** It's so light and powerful that it's a must-have for homes where people are not, um, minimalists. The promise "Turns on a dime. No loss of suction" is actually true. So you can completely clean under the dining room table without moving out all the chairs. Plus, the collapsible handle makes it so compact you can store it almost anywhere.



Prepare next-day school and office lunches while cooking dinner so you'll have just one cleanup. Keep thermoses, brown bags and ziplocks in one spot.

Make serving breakfast a snap by creating a breakfast bin. Load it up with all the items you usually need for breakfast: bowls, sugar, spoons and so on. To set up for that most important meal of the day, just bring the bin to the table.

Organize the junk drawer by placing all takeout menus in a single folder labeled Menus (try the Takeout Menu Organizer, \$20, uncommongoods.com). For a really inexpensive option, use a slim three-ring binder, slip in a few page protectors and slide one menu into each. Bonus tip: Create a duplicate binder of takeout menus and keep it in the car so you can call in an order on your way home.

Keep artwork from decorating every inch of your kitchen by setting up an art gallery. A wall in the playroom, a corner of the family room or an alcove in the child's room will work. Place the newest and best creations in the gallery. Older work can be added to the memory box (two pieces a month is a good rule), passed along to family members or used for backgrounds in photo albums or as gift wrap.

PLAYROOM

When you first moved in, you loved the playroom's hardwood floor. You had such grand plans for the airy openness of this bit of square footage, but now you can hardly remember what it looked like—it's been buried beneath a mountain of Elmos and Tonkas ever since.

Label several toy bins by category—dolls, action figures, dress-up clothes—so the kids know what goes where. For little ones who don't read yet, use pictures (Polaroids or digital printouts) for labels.

Use a basket or shelf space as a remote wrangler to contain all the DVD, TiVo, TV, stereo and Wii remotes so you don't lose your mind searching for them.

Stop nagging the kids to clean up. Instead, give each a personalized tote bag, (\$24, creativenamesigns.com). When you need them to pick up, hang it on the bedroom doorknob. They can grab the bag, fill it and put the toys where they belong.

Go through toys every six months and weed out the ones that are broken or that your child has outgrown. Make piles of "trash," "donate" and "sell" so the clutter of toddler toys doesn't linger until your kids are applying to colleges. ■

Our Experts: Alicia Rockmore, CEO of Buttoned Up Inc. and coauthor of *Everything (Almost) in Its Place*, and Jamie Novak, author of *The Get Organized Answer Book: Practical Solutions for 275 Questions on Conquering Clutter, Sorting Stuff, and Finding More Time and Energy*.

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