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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

### **Helping Children Clean Up After Themselves**

Life with children is all about the small things - some of which can be quite frustrating for parents. In this article, we will describe some of the meanings of cleaning up to a child, and, based on this discussion, make a few suggestions to parents that might help.

**It's scary growing up:** Even as young as the toddler months, children begin grappling with a basic human dilemma: the conflict between becoming bigger and staying little. Parents are eager for children to control themselves and conform to certain rules. In other words, to be a "big boy" or a "big girl." Children want this, too. They're pleased when they're able to act like the "big people" they love and they're especially happy when they earn grown-up approval. Furthermore, children have an inner drive to master their body, impulses, and the world around them; they experience pleasure and greater self-esteem when they successfully exert self-control. These influences — to grow in autonomy and self-control - constitute a child's "progressive wishes."

At the same time, every increase in self-control and conformity involves giving up something. For example, giving up the pleasure of being able to do whatever you want and giving up the pleasure of letting someone else do all the work. These pleasures, and others, fuel a child's "regressive wishes" to stay small, dependent and without responsibility. All children experience some blend of progressive and regressive wishes. In successful development, the progressive forces gradually take over the territory initially occupied by the regressive forces. Steps forward are often followed by steps backward, because the balance of regressive and progressive forces varies every day and shifts dramatically at key points in childhood.

**Look for subtle signs of resistance:** Parents aren't the only ones who have to pick their battles. Children do, too, often expressing their regressive wishes in very subtle ways. For example, children who willingly eat whatever their parent puts in front of them, may be covertly refusing to exert their autonomy by obediently remaining in the position of the infant whose parents fully control their feeding. This type of obedience can be problematic if it takes an extreme form of a child, such as in the child who is always good, because this behavior may represent fearful compliance rather than confidence.

**Maintain expectations:** A child's struggle between regressive and progressive wishes is valuable. It should be welcomed even though it drives parents crazy sometimes. We encourage parents to do what they can to support the progressive forces. One way for parents to do that is to maintain consistent expectations of their children. Their steadfast insistence upon the importance of growing up will be a necessary support to their children's task of slowly shifting the balance in favor of their progressive wishes. In fact, children would be troubled if their parents didn't fulfill their role as the representative of their progressive forces. Even though children sometimes allow their regressive wishes to win out temporarily, they also want their parents to protect their valued progressive wishes by maintaining their expectations.

**Be a good role model:** Parents can also assist their children by providing effective modeling. The grown-ups in children's life should be sure to clean up after themselves — in the kitchen, in the bathroom, in the garage, in other people's homes. Effective modeling also includes the emotional quality surrounding parental actions. For example, constant tension between parents about who does the dishes will communicate that cleaning up is a matter of great conflict. That will make it harder, not easier, for children to become comfortable, confident "cleaner-upper."

**Assist with the task:** Children will benefit from advanced notice about cleaning up so they can prepare and feel like active participants. Requests for cleaning up should be clear, concrete and specifically rewarded with words, smiles and hugs — the most enduring and humanly meaningful reinforcements. Cleaning up is not fun, and although a song or a bit of a game can lighten it up, parents shouldn't be artificial and cover over the

reality that cleaning up is boring. Discounting the reality that children hate to clean up can undermine the character building that parents are trying to achieve. And finally, parents should remember that cleaning up is hard work because children have to overcome their regressive wishes. Even participating a little bit is a big step forward.

Although children's refusal to clean up may get under the skin of their parents, it is important to recognize that it is unlikely that they are refusing so that they can obtain negative attention - Why would they want to do that? More likely, they're trying to work out their conflict of progression vs. regression within an arena that matters in their family. That's the best way for them to work out this conflict. When parents stand for the progressive forces, and have as much patience as they can muster, their children will eventually provide them with a happy surprise - possibly in the form of a tidy bedroom or playroom.

