



The Difference Between Cleaning and Organizing, According to a Professional Organizer

[Professional Services](#)

[Home & Garden](#)

By Janet Fishman, J.D.

Guest Writer November 09, 2020

www.hopeorganizers.com

California.com

Janet Fishman, J.D. is the president & CEO of [HOPE Organizers, Inc.](#) and is a member of the [California.com Recommended Business Program](#), which highlights only the best businesses in the Golden State. To be featured, each business must be highly regarded, have a unique California story, and make a positive impact in their community.

When parents say, “Clean your room,” to their children, they might not be clearly communicating the outcome they’re actually looking for. While it may seem like an argument of semantics, there really is a difference between cleaning and organizing. But do kids truly know how to clean their room or what their parents mean?

The Difference Between Cleaning and Organizing

When children watch their parents stomp with frustration and say, shout, or yell at them to clean their room, they don’t always understand what to do. Kids often think it means stuffing their

things under the bed or into the closet, which doesn't accomplish the goal parents are after. So, are parents giving their kids the wrong instructions?

Cleaning is defined as removing dirt, grime, and dust from surfaces—so when kids are told to clean their rooms, they're instantly confused by their parents' instruction. What the parent really means is to convey is: “*clear* your room,” “*tidy* your room,” or “*organize* your room.” Yet, at a young age, children don't know what it means to organize.

Parents must demonstrate organizational skills and get children involved in the process so they understand how to organize. Children need to be part of the decision-making process—choosing where items go, what can be donated, and what can be thrown out. During the process, parents should allow the kids to make their own decisions without trying to influence them; kids know what they want to get rid of. Undermining their decision-making capability by remarking, “Oh, but Aunt Mary gave you that toy; how can you give it away?” can make children feel guilty about what they want. This guilt stays with them, even though a moment earlier they were feeling very confident about their quick decision-making ability. This second-guessing can damage a very good skill and stunt their growth in this area, all while the child is still trying to fully grasp the concept.



Teaching organizational skills to your children will help them better understand how to properly clean their room.

Instead, parents can reinforce good judgment and talk through organizational concepts, such as the meaning behind “a place for everything and everything in its place” or placing similar items together. In addition to teaching these skills, parents should demonstrate proper organizational behaviors to their children. Showing them how to hang clothes on hangers, throw dirty socks in the hamper, place books on shelves, put toys in bins, and separate different items such as cars and Legos can have a dramatic impact on the child's understanding of what it means to get organized.

Once the behaviors are learned, they need to be reinforced. Together, you should select a place to store different items. Choose an area to store the supplies for arts and crafts; set up hooks for hats, sweaters, coats, and backpacks; and designate space in your home for the items they use. Similarly, if your child plays with a game, help them pick up all the pieces and place them back in the box so they understand the concept of cleaning up before they move on to the next game or project.

Organizing doesn't have to be boring—jazz it up and make your home even tidier with labels. If your child is too young to read labels, you can design pictures or stickers and place them on the bins or shelves so young children know where to put the items. If the child can read, let them help you make pretty labels that entice them to place items back in the proper places.

So, if you show kids how to organize and teach them the skill of tidying up, you might find that they take ownership of the process and really understand what you mean when you say, “Clean your room!” Teaching kids organizational skills is something that will serve them in all aspects of their lives, too.