

# Hecht: Parenting little piggies

Pam J. Hecht , Special to WNC Parent Published 6:35 a.m. ET Jan. 28, 2019



When kids are little, cleaning up is a novelty. By elementary school, kids realize cleaning is no fun. (Photo: Fuse, Getty Images/Fuse)

If messiness is a sign of genius, as some studies say, then nearly every child I meet must be one.

Left to their own devices, these little roving mess makers will leave in their wake a disturbing disarray of childhood effects, with absolutely no remorse at all.

When they're little, cleaning up is a novelty. Toy vacuum cleaners, preschool-sized brooms and cleanup songs? Absolutely useless. Playing up the idea that being a neatnik is a thrill clearly has no real staying power. After the age of 5 or 6, kids wise up and see straightening up for what it really is: time-sapping drudgery.

In fact, these hellions will stop at nothing to avoid the inevitable task of tidying up. Here are some typical examples:

"I'm going to play with that later." (The Procrastinator)

"I don't see any mess there." (The Deny-er)

"I didn't put that there." (The Forgetful Fibber)

"It's my room and it doesn't materially affect you." (The Budding Lawyer)

"I don't have time to clean up ... I need to do my homework." (The Fake Scholar)

"I need help." Or, "I really don't feel well enough." (The Whiner)

And the winner for Most Impudent Messer Upper is: "I can't pick up my clothes. I likely have an exceptionally high IQ and unfortunately, my mind is on myriad other, more important things." Clearly, this is a child who got wind of some questionable research results.

A simple response to all of that nonsense (delivered in a firm, heartless tone): "Cleanup. Now."

But it's not their fault. They're children, after all. They live in the moment. They're also self-centered sneaks who shove everything under the sun, under the bed.

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I tend toward cutting the little piggies a bit of slack. Particularly for older kids, a messy room may be emblematic of a growing need for independence and control.

But even I have my breaking point, particularly when navigating a path from a doorway to a bed resembles a six-hour jungle expedition requiring a machete and gas mask. Or when a certain smell travels from a child's bedroom all the way to a neighbor's house. Then it's time to break out the caution tape, conduct a health inspection and commence a stern lecture on fire hazards and welcome mats for spiders and other creepy crawlies.

After all, a neat and organized space can help promote feelings of calm and well-being. Taking kids to task by requiring a certain standard of neatness also tends to foster a sense of responsibility and respect for others that carries over into other areas.

Meanwhile, some kids are just born destined to thrive in disarray and their messes may even lead to increased learning and creativity. But even the sloppiest kids can be properly persuaded (i.e. required) to clean up their acts when necessary, at least temporarily (until you can get them off to college and out of the house.)

In any case, if your child has a tendency toward untidiness, take heart. Like the parents of notoriously smart slob Albert Einstein, Mark Twain and Sigmund Freud, maybe you, too, have a little genius cluttering up the house.

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