



the
new
you

By Kim Kovel

Bone up on family organization, health and parenting skills
– without losing your resolve



To the casual observer, Vicki Caddy is a pretty “together” mom.

A basic planner helps her keep tabs on PTA meetings and her two kids’ activities for the week. She and her husband Gary round up the troops for a family dinner almost every night. And she can *always* find the house and car keys hanging on neat hooks in the kitchen.

But Caddy has a vision for

Separation anxiety



2007. It includes taming the plastic laundry baskets that float through her Novi house – catch-alls for everything from videos to LEGOs – and finding time to cook up healthier meals.

“Really, when you make a resolution, it’s like changing a habit,” Caddy says. But, “When one day’s busier than another, you tend to fall back on your old habits. Life seems to get in the way.”

Cleaning the house, ship-shaping family health and getting along better with the kids: What parent *doesn’t* aspire to these noble goals? When calendars flip to January, a tiny burst of determination seems to ignite in even the wariest moms and dads – only to fizzle into forgotten meal plans, heaps of junk mail and action figures, and other old ruts in a few months. Or days.

Hectic family life may be fueling a revolt against the New Year’s resolution. Only 45 percent of Americans made them last year. That’s down from as many as 88 percent in the past, according to a poll by GoalFree.com and the Opinion Research Corp. And OneMillionResolutions.com, a site launched last October with hopes of attaining its title, has scarcely made a dent.

But that doesn’t mean the traditions have outlived their usefulness.

“When you set a goal, you re-clarify,” explains Susan Dooley, a performance coach with the Dale Carnegie branch in Livonia. “Really become certain on what you want and *why* you want it. Once you go through that process, it automatically creates energy within ourselves to get motivated and focused.”

Metro Parent tapped local experts for manageable ways to reassess and tidy up your clutter, health and parenting skills that, with a dash of dedication, should see you to January 2008 and beyond.

Sprucing the roost

The parents who turn to *Simply Organized Life in Dexter* are usually grappling with chaotic kitchens, messy play areas and unruly basements.

But founder and professional organizer Carolyn Anderson-Fermann finds they’re also swamped in something stranger: unwieldy storage containers.

“This is the biggest mistake most people do,” she says. “They go to the

It takes some bartering to get kids to tidy up – and the magic of “clean-up songs” dulls fast. But what if your child simply can’t bid old stuff adieu?

“It’s almost like a betrayal to what used to be good friends,” says Novi mom Vicki Caddy of her 12-year-old son and, to a degree, her daughter, 13. “I think it’s real hard. They may be young, but those are *their* possessions. They remember having fun with them.”

Redford therapist Giawanna Peterson-Rochon agrees that showing respect for kids’ toys is crucial. A sneak purge can do more harm than good. But, although she says that a little hoarding is normal, parents also should reinforce limits.

“If it’s something that they’re collecting, explain to them that there’s got to be some organization,” Peterson-Rochon says. “Give kids an amount of things that they can have.”

Tap into kids’ altruism, too. And whether a donated toy earns you a tax write-off or goes directly to kids in a shelter, explain to your child how it helps. For instance, proceeds from Salvation Army thrift store sales support addiction recovery programs.

nearest big box store and they buy a bunch of bins and boxes. ... If you don’t really know what you have, buying products at the beginning of the project really isn’t appropriate.”

In fact, she says that once her clients take stock, 90 percent don’t need to buy anything extra at all. It’s really the first step of getting organized: Assessing what you’ve got – and being realistic about it.

In her new book *Amy Knapp’s Family Organizing Handbook* (2006), the Kalamazoo author and mom applauds the “art of imperfection.”

“We’ve created organizing into this monster, when really it’s not,” Knapp says. “I believe the first thing you have to do is stop comparing yourself to everyone else. There is no right or wrong way to organize.”

Forget the spotless rooms in Pottery Barn catalogues and HGTV’s *Mission: Organization*. If it sounds too difficult, impractical, anxiety producing or downright overwhelming, Knapp writes,

Better still, the National Association of Professional Organizers suggests, take kids along to the donation center. “This helps them learn to part with things,” its Web site notes.

Caddy’s also honed a few commonsense techniques. She puts neglected toys in a plastic bag, writes the contents and date on the outside, and then stores them away. If no one’s asked for them about a year later, they’re tossed.

When it comes to the really beat-up Barbie cars and army guys she knows the kids won’t miss, Caddy weeds out a few items every garbage day. But at the end of the day, she takes it in stride.

“They’re little for such a short time,” Caddy says. “Someday, I’m going to be wishing there were LEGOs all over my living room floor.

“In a way, enjoy the clutter.”

– Kim Kovelie

it’s likely going to flop.

So where should you start? That depends. Families tend to follow the 80-20 Rule: They use 20 percent of their possessions 80 percent of the time.

If this daily stuff – schoolbooks, keys, favorite toys – is constantly MIA, it’s time to create accountability. Anderson-Fermann suggests a “landing pad” in high traffic areas, typically near a back door. It could be an alcove, a drawer or even a box. The old “place for everything” adage can work well in these cases as long as you’re consistent and explain it clearly to your kids.

“It doesn’t have to be complicated,” Anderson-Fermann says. “Even a 3-year-old can understand the concept of, ‘This is where I put my stuff.’”

Whether surplus food, forgotten duds or seasonal decorations, the other 80 percent of stuff often ends up the looming task that’s shoved out of sight – or, in severe cases, into big white storage PODS parked in driveways.

Never approach your storage areas with an all-at-once mentality, warns Theresa Fiorini, the professional organizer behind AnitaPlann in Lake Orion.

“Start small,” she says. “Know it would make a good weekend project, but it’s ongoing. You really want to know what’s in there and how to determine what you’re going to store what you’re going to keep.”

When you finally need a few containers, Fiorini says, general styles are always better. Units with lots of compartments and drawers can quickly outlive their usefulness. Ditto for expensive, wall-to-wall, kid-themed systems. Go for clear varieties so you can see what’s inside, since bins often get stacked. And, for that reason, avoid them all together in areas where lots of stuff is accessed, like bedrooms and kitchens.

Embracing your family’s quirks is just as important as shrugging off impossible standards. Knapp recalls a whirlwind cleaning campaign to whip the garage closet into shape. It was spotless. A week later, it was a wreck.

“The problem was, I set unrealistic expectations for my family,” she says. Her improved solution: Four laundry baskets

Continued on page 44 ▶

A cleaner, neater you

January is National Get Organized Month, according to the National Association of Professional Organizers. And the Chinese dub 2007 the year of the pig – which, contrary to stereotypes, is among the cleanest of animals. Why not take inspiration from both to straighten up your family “pen?” Find starters at www.napo.net.

the new YOU

Continued from page 41

for each person's mittens and shoes. "It wasn't pretty, but it worked." The lesson: Keep it simple.

Communication is always critical, even when clutter has taken hold. Last spring, Soo Kim sat down with her family to discuss the state of their Ann Arbor home. The disaster zone was the study room: a sea of junk mail, magazines, her son's college brochures and daughter's sheet music.

After calling Simply Organized Life, the Kims categorized and tossed the stuff they needed least. Today, they still have relatively neat "centers" for paperwork – and the kids no longer holler for the flute and tennis racquets.

"Before, when we were messy, we kind of blamed others: 'You didn't clean it up,' 'You shouldn't have moved it,'" Kim recalls. "Now, everybody knows what is where. We encourage (each other) to keep things that way."

Establishing a few simple habits also helps transform hunts for buried bills and lost toys into quality family time. Anderson-Fermann's rules of thumb: If a task takes less than three minutes to

complete – say, emptying the dishwasher – do it now. And if you bring something new into the house, try to get rid of one old thing.

A home is only as organized as regular maintenance. But that doesn't mean it has to be a drudge. Entitle yourself to a sense of accomplishment.

"It's almost like a celebratory time," Knapp says. "It's like, 'Yeah, I did it.' The reward is getting the job done."

choices and *enjoy* exercise in 12 sessions.

But especially with adults, Miller says, barely half follow through to the long-term maintenance support program. Even though it's free.

"It does have to be at the top of their priority list, however busy that family is," says Miller, who directs the hospital's weight loss center. "Leading a healthy lifestyle does take effort and it takes pre-planning and monitoring – setting small goals and looking to progress, not perfection."

That means taking a good look at your family's health habits. While alarm over the obesity epidemic is well-founded, pediatricians like Resham Batra say that having a "normal" body mass index doesn't mean you're scot-free.

"If the child is watching six hours

of TV a day, that's not necessarily the best thing either," says Batra, who sees kids from birth to age 18 at the Oakwood Healthcare Center-Canton. "(Parents) may think, 'Oh, they only need to exercise if they're having weight problems.' It's *always* better to be active than not."

The biggest pitfall is setting goals that are too vast and vague. Harried parents reprioritize and kids lose motivation. At the Beverly Hills Club, personal fitness trainer Kevin Wilson says the January resolution crew tends to fall by the wayside within six or eight weeks.

"I think people get busy with their lives," says

Wilson, who's been in the industry since 1990.

Fast and healthy eats

Home-cooked meals help parents control serving sizes and nutritional variety. Balanced snacks are just as vital. But who has time? Mine these sites for tips on incorporating healthy food into your family's busy schedule.

- **The Six O'Clock Scramble** (www.thescramble.com): Sign up for weekly emails with five entrée ideas that usually don't top 30 minutes of prep and cook.
- **Meals Matter** (www.mealsmatter.com): Packed with recipes and snacks for kids, it also lets you customize a family meal planner and "cookbook."
- **CyberParent's Health on the Go!** (<http://cyberparent.com/eat>): Browse real parents' ideas, from prep-on-the-weekend cuisine to vegetarian and vegan fare.

"Everybody wants to start the year off great. There really isn't the real commitment to keep it going. It's hard work, but you don't want it to be a chore."

Getting the entire family onboard is key to keeping it fun. Whether in the gym or around the block, parents must walk the walk. It engages, and it builds support.

Sneak approaches have hidden value, too. Wilson's teen clients play a "speed ladder" agility drill involving hopscotch-like steps. With Wilson teasing them a bit, kids are spurred to master the "dance" – not

realizing it's exercise until it's too late.

Don't fear that "e" word, he adds, but ditch the phrase "weight loss."

"Kids are very impressionable," Wilson says. "We're already having this epidemic with these starlets on television looking like skeletons. I don't want to make that an issue when I'm working with a young girl – or a boy."

Set the pace, and be sure to offer your praise along the way to give self esteem a healthy boost.

Variety is another valuable tool for time-strapped families. Try occasional group walks or bike rides. Multi-task. Miller knows of one mom who started jogging laps during her kids' soccer games.

The formula is similar for nutrition. First, keep it practical. Nightly Norman Rockwell-style dinners aren't realistic. But you probably *can* set a lower limit of family meals each week. Plan ahead for simple, well-balanced platters and leftovers. Make it a priority.

Next, make it relevant. In the Healthy Kids program, children discover precisely what a "cup" of fruits or veggies *is* – and why they should eat about 4½ of them every

Continued on page 46 ►

Shaping up

This time of year, Wendy Miller prepares for an enrollment surge in Beaumont Hospital's Healthy Kids Program. Revved up families receive tons of tools and tips to make better cuisine

Checking up on health

Along with taking strolls and cooking a few nutritious meals, make sure that basic family health maintenance makes your to-do list for '07.

Kids should be getting yearly physical exams from ages 2 to 18. At the Oakwood Healthcare Center-Canton, pediatrician Resham Batra says that hearts, lungs and blood pressure are routinely checked.

"We recommend it because they're still growing," Batra says. "At any point, there are certain things that could go wrong that could affect their health."

Babies normally visit the doctor about nine times before their second birthdays – primarily for immunizations. Be knowledgeable about proper vaccines. From hepatitis A to chicken pox boosters, you'll find the latest guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov/nip. Don't forget yours: For instance, most adults need a tetanus-diphtheria shot every 10 years.

Since children who play sports are required to have physicals, that's a natural reminder to many parents. "There are a few that either forget or don't realize it's been more than a year," Batra says. Either way, make it a point to keep track.

General hygiene is just as important to avoiding some of winter's common visitors, like cough, colds, strep throat and croup. Remind kids to wash their hands and avoid sharing drinks and utensils at school. Batra says that hand sanitizers typically are safe to use at age 8. Model these good practices, too.

Finally, be sure you're getting your check-ups. Many adult diseases and conditions, especially cancer, can be prevented or controlled when caught early, according to the national Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Check out its "Pocket Guide to Good Health for Adults" at www.ahrq.gov/ppip/adguide.

"I think a lot of times if parents are well, their kids can be well," Batra adds.

— Kim Kovellev

the new you

Continued from page 44



day, per federal dietary guidelines.

"We empower the children," says Miller, who suggests starting the lessons around age 4 or 5. "The more they learn about it, the more interested they are in participating." Consider that kids develop habits from toddler on. "A lot of that has to do with what their repetitively served," she adds.

This means being mindful about feeding on demand, too. For her two young daughters, Miller schedules three daily main courses. In between, she makes sure they get two healthy snacks, like fruit with low-fat cheese or cashews.

When food habits have gone haywire, go gradual. Phase out soda over a few months instead of jumping in cold turkey. The Mayo Clinic says to "think small" – like turning off TV during supper – and remember it's not a race.

That's not to imply that you shouldn't tap the competitive family spirit.

"We do recommend that the parent give the child rewards for their progress – even just showing signs," Miller says. Of course, avoid junk food bonuses. Instead, take 20 minutes to do something they really enjoy, whether it's shooting hoops, crafting or, yes, even spending a bit of time together on the Xbox.

Parent repair

OK, mom and dad: What do you say when, for the 5 millionth time, your child has (a) tossed a backpack on the table, (b) forgotten to turn the lights off, or (c) strewn heaps of laundry just shy of the hamper?

If you've taken a parenting class with Su Porter at the Macomb County Michigan State University Extension, the answer is simple.

"All you need to do is use *one word*," such as "Clothes!," says Porter, who

directs family programs. "So often, we tend to go into a lecture. Kids don't even listen when we yell or scream. They just tune you out. Nobody wants to be hollered at, and nobody likes to hear it."

Just like housework and health, parenting skills can fall prey to bad habits. Stir in complications like dual-income households, mass marketing of grown-up lifestyles to "tweens," and everyday parent-child quibbles – and it's no wonder parents feel bewildered and isolated.

This state of affairs actually has spawned a new breed of expert called the parent coach. Royal Oak resident Emily McBean, who has nearly completed her training at the Washington-based Parent Coaching Institute, says the idea is to help families explore their unique circumstances and tailor solutions.

"The family isn't a refrigerator. It doesn't need to be 'fixed' and it will be fine," she says. "The family's a living system."

That in mind, her clients start not by isolating issues, but by "bringing everything out from under the stage," gritty and positive. They then figure out what their "ideal future" looks like and plot small changes to get there.

Ironically, parents struggle most with giving themselves credit – and proper "self care." For instance, staying calm during a child's temper tantrum is a positive building block, McBean explains. And allowing yourself to take a stroll or read a chapter of a book, even if it's just while the kids nap, is critical.

"It's your fuel," says McBean, who also has a 21-month old daughter. "When I get time for myself without guilt, without feeling like I should be some place else, I'm better able to meet my child's needs."

Discipline blowouts still can hit even the best-fueled parents, and setting boundaries tops the list of woes. Bingham Farms psychologist Gail Parker says reactive parenting commonly triggers power struggles. With her own son, now 25, Parker often called "time outs" when arguments escalated.

"That would slow him down, that would slow me down, and we approached whatever the issue was consciously," says Parker, who's been in practice for three decades. "I would realize, 'Oh, he's changed – and I haven't changed my parenting style.'"

Evolving often requires being aware of

Continued on page 49 ►

the new YOU

Continued from page 46

what you say in the heat of the moment. As a certified Imago therapist, Parker teaches families a system that works like this: First, listen without judging; then, explain to the other person why their viewpoint makes sense to you; and, ultimately, empathize.

"Whether you agree with it or not," Parker says, "the deep message you're communicating is, 'You're not crazy. I get you.'" That builds up trust and helps in negotiating anything from allowance to dating. When used between spouses, it also demonstrates to kids how to handle conflict. And apologize.

When it seems like you're butting your head against a wall, slow down and hone in. Giawanna Peterson-Rochon, a therapist at Angel Counseling, Inc.

Work blues reverse

Bad days on the job often follow parents home. But in recent studies, Remus Ilies of the Michigan State University Family Research Initiative has found that the opposite holds true, too.

"There can actually be positive effects between work and family – such as positive emotional spillover," says Ilies, an associate professor in the Eli Broad Graduate School of Management. "When you experience something positive at work, you're satisfied. That carries over at home." So amplify those good work vibes – but be careful not to overload yourself.

"We have found that high workload influences family life negatively," Ilies adds.

in Redford, sees many parents de-stress when they learn to delegate more tasks to their children. Then, once there are spare minutes, capitalize on them.

"Take time with the kids," Peterson-

Rochon says. "Try to communicate with them, connect with them, talk to them." Conversation card games often break down walls. For one family, even watching *American Idol* together did the trick. Why? Casual chatting opens families up. Children reveal their hopes, fears and lingo. And parents get a chance to share their experiences.

"Kids need to know about failures as well as successes," Peterson-Rochon adds. "I think that kids today are more hesitant to take risks simply because we live in a world that really stresses perfection. ... There needs to be some room for them to fall a little bit."


Above all, don't give up. Research has

long indicated that changing a bad habit – or instilling a new one – takes 21 solid, dedicated days.

Whatever your family's pickle, be sure everyone gets a chance to weigh in along the way. An informal family meeting once a month is typically plenty to provide checks and balances. Be sure to point out their improvements.

And, to that end, try focusing on what's already good. That's precisely what Dale Carnegie's Susan Dooley started doing after she recently gave birth to her first child.

"I keep a gratitude journal," Dooley explains. "Every single night, you write down things you are grateful for – even if you've had a bad day. It takes me less than five minutes.

"That's really an eye-opening experience." 

– Kim Kovelle is a staff writer for Metro Parent. Reach her at kkovelle@metroparent.com.

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