

## Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

# *Activities That Promote Self-Sufficiency*

“We must give the child an environment that he can utilize by himself ...  
Free the child’s potential and it will transform the world.”

~ *Maria Montessori*

**C**HILDREN TODAY—even preschoolers—demonstrate a surprising new awareness of “caring for the earth.” They may be the first generation since Native Americans were the primary caretakers of this land to feel responsible for keeping the outdoors beautiful and clean. At this time of year, the cold and rain of winter can extend that love of maintaining a beautiful environment into the indoors. Holidays are often the occasion for bringing more material possessions into the home.

Teaching children to create order and handle things with care enhances their development and stimulates self-sufficiency. One of Dr. Maria Montessori’s most enduring messages is that children need to be empowered to care for their classrooms and home environments through simple organization systems and cleaning routines.

Here are some ideas for starting the year with a fresh sense of order:

**Visually label.** There’s a reason why restrooms provide pictures of a man and a woman rather than mere words. Pictures are easier for us to decode. In preschool, we color-code different types of shelves. Try cutting out photos or making drawings with your child of shirts, pants, socks, etc., and mounting them on drawers.

**Speak “animistically.”** The Maori people of New Zealand believe that everything has a soul. We can teach the care of objects by speaking of them as having needs. “These little toys need to live here so they don’t fall out on the floor.” Talk in terms of the object’s “home.” “Let’s put the Legos back in their home.”

**Patience, patience, patience.** Room 4 teacher Barbara Boyan says, “It takes a long time and lots of practice to learn to sweep. It involves many complicated steps.” We need to encourage children when the bed they made doesn’t look just right or dishes are on the wrong shelf. The intent to maintain their environments must be praised and nurtured.

**Clean-up before fun.** As a consultant to *Parents Magazine*, I worked with a family whose children did no clean-up. Mom spent hours every evening putting their things away. When she told them (as I had suggested) that they couldn’t go to the park unless they picked up their toys first, the children stared at her in astonishment.” However, within days they established a routine.

**Look for fun organizing ideas.** One site with numerous creative suggestions is [pinterest.com/smartspace/organize-kids/](http://pinterest.com/smartspace/organize-kids/). Reorganizing on a rainy day can be a fun family activity.

**Involve your child.** Set up systems that work for both you and your child, like putting balls in a large basket, or homework in a file. Getting your child’s ideas not only encourages her to follow through but to think in organizational terms in other situations, now and in the future.

*January 13, 2013*