



Life Actually

By Kari Kampakis

Can a messy house be progress?

Almost every mom I know wishes her home stayed cleaner. And although our definition of “clean” may vary, we all understand the positive effect of having our surroundings in order.

One, we know where to find things. Two, it helps us feel in control. Three, it brings a peace of mind.

All these things influence our psyche and help us be better moms. When the house is a disaster, we live in a state of unease, easily overreacting to additional emergencies. Handling spilled milk on the sofa—or mud on a kitchen floor—is not such a bug when other chores aren’t screaming for attention.

But as we all know, the quest for a clean house often conflicts with raising kids. I’ve struggled with this for a long time because disorder jumps out at me. I internalize it, in fact, tensing at the sight of an unmade bed or explosion of toys. These things used to make me fly off the handle, and while I still do sometimes, I’ve learned to bite my tongue.

Why? Because after my fourth child was born, I realized I had a choice. Either I could spend my life mad at the kids, constantly cleaning house and resentful they couldn’t live up to my standard, or I could learn to let a few things go.

I could let my house look lived in. Let it be loved every once in a while.

In a recent conversation with my friend Rebecca, this topic came up. Rebecca gets my struggle with a clean house because she’s the same way. We use each other as sounding boards and talk about how to walk the fine line of letting our kids enjoy our homes while preventing a pigsty.

“You’ll be so proud of me,” she said, “because last week before church, my kids made a fort of blankets, pillows, everything. They had the best time playing in it. I kept wanting to take it down, but I let it stay up for seven days. Seven days!”

Rebecca went on to share something her mom always says: “You have to let them be kids. You can have a perfect house when they’re gone.”

Pretty wise, huh?

What I’m advocating is not a life of squalor, or hoarding, or fraternity-style living, but keeping a home in moderation. Our kids’ rooms in particular should be their personal spaces, shrines to what they love, reflections of their personality. So

what if they want Pottery Barn Teen over custom bedding? Does it really matter if every knick-knack and stuffed animal color-coordinates? As much as their taste may irk me, I know deep down that my kids have the right to choose what makes them happy.

As a former perfectionist, I’ve grown in my realization that a perfect house is not a sign of a happy family. Maybe Mom is content, but I’d bet my bottom dollar no one else is. Like many moms, I’ve been on my fair share of crazed-eyed cleaning sprees. One that stands out occurred a few years ago, when I threw out a bag of rocks my daughter Ella had carefully selected to paint.

On a mission, I reasoned that rocks are easy to replace, and that she probably wouldn’t notice. Wrong. When Ella came to ask me a few weeks later where her rocks were, she asked if I threw them out. I admitted I did, and instantly her eyes filled with tears. In a tight, restrained, tactful voice that only sweet Ella could maintain, she said, “Sometimes I wish I had a mom who wasn’t so clean.”

Ouch.

I have to say, that day marked a turning point for me. While I still go on crazed-eyed cleaning sprees and strive to maintain order, I also try to remind myself that kids aren’t meant to live in museums. My home is their home, too, and things like handprints on the windows and 20 dolls on a bed are really worthy of celebration because they’re signs that I’m blessed with kids.

One day my house will be in inertia—motionless from morning to night—but for now it’s in action, constantly changing to the rhythm of my family. For people like Rebecca and me, a messy house is a sign of progress because we’ve grown to see our homes not through a woman’s eyes, but through a mother’s eyes. May mothers everywhere learn to cut each other some slack, and remember that impressing other moms with our tidiness is often counterproductive with what our children need.

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