A week before Christmas 2011, Ruth Soukup, a thirty-three-year-old stay-at-home mom of two girls in Punta Gorda, Florida, was throwing toys into a bin. An avid shopper who started a blog (http://www.livingwellspendingless.com/) about spending less, Soukup had the art of buying on a budget down to a science. She referred to herself as “a Mommy who is a pro at finding great deals.” But, on this afternoon, she wasn’t seeking to amass things for her children. She was getting rid of stuff that her kids already had.

Hold those sleigh bells, Santa: A growing number of Americans are rethinking the urge to pamper their kids with playthings. But should this minimalist approach become the next big trend in parenting?
Soukup had a few eye-opening experiences in the weeks leading up to this moment. First, while on vacation in early December, Soukup and her family were bombarded by children selling bracelets and trinkets on the shores of Roatan, Honduras. She took the opportunity to explain to her daughters that "those kids are selling stuff just so they and their families will be able to eat." A few days later, there was a charity drive in her church. A tree was strung with names of children whose parents needed financial help buying gifts; churchgoers "adopted" babies. Soukup’s "When%20Mommy%20and%20Daddy%20Took%20the%20Toys%20Away"//narrative.ly/ was one of the Soukup’s favorite Christmas traditions — Soukup’s "normally angelic" five-year-old daughter, Maggie, threw a fit when she was asked to pick a name and donate accordingly. With the remaining paper angels with names on them — they were all kids who would not get gifts that year. Then, when Soukup tried to spread Christmas cheer within the family, she was met with resistance. Soukup’s four-year-old daughter, Maggie, became an "overly tired evil twin in full spoiled brat mode," as Soukup wrote on her blog. Maggie threw a temper tantrum when she was asked to wear a blanket on the boat. When Soukup and her husband tried to explain that Christmas was a time to put others first, their lesson fell on deaf ears.

Amidst songs and slogans of joy and giving, Soukup felt far from spirited. It wasn’t until she took her daughters to see Santa the week before Christmas that she realized the root of her uneasiness was in her very own home. She watched while her two-year-old, Annie, who was perched on Santa’s lap, couldn’t think of a single thing to request. When Annie finally started to speak, she asked for a Rapunzel doll, something she already had. Maggie asked for Band-Aids.

"When Mommy and Daddy Took the Toys Away"//narrative.ly/
It dawned on Soukup that her discontent might be connected to her daughter's abundance of toys. "I am starting to get nervous about all the STUFF that is about to enter my home," Soukup wrote in a blog post after the visit. "I love my kids more than anything, and I want their Christmas to be filled with wonder and joy, but I have to admit that I am worried about the message that this influx of things will send to two girls who already have more than enough."

As she worried, her sister-in-law, who was notorious for buying the girls loads of gifts, was on her way to Soukup's house, no doubt with a sleigh full of presents in tow.

Soukup was compelled to take action. She went on a cleaning spree. She filled four giant bins with toys to give away and was thrilled — if not surprised — that her kids barely complained about the absence of the toys. Even with the four bins gone, they still had ample dolls, puzzles, pretend kitchen materials, battery-operated mechanisms that sang, hooted, hollered and lit up.

Whatever the hottest toy was, they had it “in every size and every color,” Soukup says. On one Christmas alone, Soukup's daughter Maggie received so many...
presents for they ended up opening gifts from seven a.m. to seven p.m.

They had so much stuff it was insane,” Soukup recalled in a phone interview. Soukup is tall and slender, and the voice on her blog is self-assured. Over the phone, though, her actual voice sounds tiny and she laughs at herself openly. It would be easy to mistake her for someone younger than she actually is, but her words are tinged with a rigidity that reminds the listener she is a parent, and not a lackadaisical one. She doesn’t just appreciate a clean house. Soukup is an organizing mogul.

Exporting some of the toys out of her home made Soukup feel better in the moment, but it wasn’t long before she became overwhelmed by the enormous amount of stuff once again. Later on, she would conduct a much bigger overhaul, but, until then, Soukup continued to get stuff, grow frustrated with it, organize it, get rid of it, and then get more stuff.

She isn’t the only parent in America who is frustrated with the overwhelming number of toys in her home. Others have taken steps to put a dent into what feels like a runaway, life-sized — not toy-sized — tank of a problem.

B

ill Ciari is a webmaster, firearms instructor, small business owner and a dad. He has two daughters who are four and seven years old.

While sitting on their couch one weekend evening in 2011, Ciari and his wife realized that the volume of stuff in their house was not enhancing their quality of life, but inhibiting it. Until that moment, they’d had a similar approach to Soukup: They wanted to give their daughters the world, and with that came toys aplenty.

“We started out like normal parents where we
wanted to spoil our kids and give them everything we didn't have,” Ciari says. His wife and he realized they needed to streamline their life. “We just really wanted to de-clutter, not just our personal possessions, but our house and our lifestyle,” he says.

Ciari researched a minimalist approach online that centered around scaling down one’s possessions “back to the basics.” Ciari and his wife had an open dialogue about how to cut back.

They started slowly, gathering toys that their kids no longer used and taking them to Goodwill or the Salvation Army. On Christmases and birthdays, their girls began discarding the same number of toys they received, such that the number of playthings in their home never increased. “If they got four gifts, they would get rid of four old toys to kind of keep things one-to-one,” Ciari says.

The downsizing continued through the years, and now they can count — on two hands — the total number of toys each child has, which includes two stuffed animals and two dolls, while they share a play kitchen and outdoor area with toy buckets.

Ciari is a follower — at least on Twitter — of Joshua Becker, thirty-nine, the founder and editor of BecomingMinimalist.com (http://www.becomingminimalist.com/). Becker and his family are not just self-proclaimed minimalists, but they've made an enterprise from their decision to own less. Becker blogs on the subject, and he’s written four books about it, including “Clutterfree with Kids.” His family’s story has been seen on the CBS Evening News and NPR and in the pages of The...
Unlike Ciari, Becker’s decision to scale down didn’t come from within his home, but instead from a neighbor.

It was a Saturday morning of Memorial Day weekend 2008 and Becker, who lives in Arizona, was making little headway on cleaning out the garage. His then-five-year-old son, Salem, kept asking him to play, and, confronted with a mess, he refused. Witnessing Becker’s growing frustration at having to spend time in the garage rather than with his son, Becker’s next-door neighbor, June, engaged him in conversation.

“Imp, it great owning a home?” she said aptly.

“Yeah, the more stuff you own, the more it owns you,” Becker replied.

The next statement, as he puts it, struck a chord with Becker’s soul.

“That’s why my daughter’s a minimalist,” June answered. “You don’t have to own all this stuff.”

For Becker, it was an epiphany.

“I had the realization that not only were my possessions not making me happy, they were distracting me from the things that do bring me purpose,” Becker says.

He shared his newfound knowledge with his wife, Kim, who was cleaning inside while their two-year-old daughter Alexa played alone nearby. Kim was immediately on board with scaling down their possessions. They soon began selling and donating things, starting with their personal belongings first. They boxed and bagged “the excess” in almost every area of their home: clothes, dishes, cooking utensils, linens, bed sheets, toys, tools, furniture, decorations. They went room by room and discarded things in each (http://www.becomingminimalist.com/101-...
Next, they got their son involved.

Salem Becker, who is now twelve, loves basketball and football. He also plays as a defender on his soccer team. Math is his favorite subject and he’s happiest when he’s playing with his friends. As for all those toys he had before his parents minimized, he says he doesn’t miss them at all.

“We had kind of a lot of toys, and they were kind of just spread out everywhere all around the house,” Salem says.

As they began to purge, Joshua and Kim Becker explained to Salem that there were a lot of kids who didn’t have any toys at all, and they suggested that he donate some of his own to them.

Salem took surprisingly well to the idea. “I could see what they were doing,” he says. “It seemed like a good idea to me, too. My dad had a lot of stuff that he didn’t really use a lot. He just got rid of it.”

By 2011 the Becker family had donated or discarded over seventy percent of their belongings. Salem now owns a scooter, a soccer ball, a football, a basketball and a foam basketball hoop. Alexa Becker, who is eight years old, has twelve Barbies, fifteen to twenty Polly Pocket figures with accompanying wardrobes and an arts-and-crafts drawer.

While Joshua Becker says it took him thirty-three years to learn the importance of getting rid of things and owning less, his kids already seem to understand the value of having little. When in stores, his kids never make loud scenes or beg for items they see. When they do want something, they save their money to buy it.
“Just yesterday, I was in the grocery store and there was a seven- or eight-year-old kid who was begging his mom to buy a discounted DVD,” Becker recalls. “I thought to myself, ‘I don’t remember my kids ever making a type of scene like that.’ I don’t think my daughter would ever stop at the bin of DVDs because she knows that I don’t buy DVDs. She knows that we don’t go down the toy aisle because I don’t just buy new toys like that.”

Moreover, Becker says that the value of minimalism comes with the lifelong lessons they are able to teach through it. When his children become envious of another child who has a lot of toys, Becker and his wife try to help them “deal with that emotion as opposed to thinking that they’ll overcome it by getting more stuff.”

“We don’t overcome envy in our lives by getting what another person has,” Becker says. “We overcome envy by being content with what we have and being grateful for what we have.”

That point has hit home with Salem. He still asks for toy deals or games for holidays and special occasions, and he usually gets one thing that he asks for. But for the rest, he’s encouraged to save up his money if it’s important to him, as he did for his Xbox One.

“I felt excited when I got it,” Salem says. “I felt like my work paid off.”

According to Kim John Payne, the author of “Simplicity Parenting” and a family counselor with an interest in neuropsychology, Salem exemplifies the many kids who do better with fewer toys. Payne, fifty-four, has worked with children for twenty-seven years. He says that simplifying a child’s environment is not just a tactic of parenting, it’s a necessity.
More and more parents around the world have got this gut instinct that something’s wrong,” Payne says. “Parents are saying that overloading our children is seriously not okay anymore. The body’s not keeping up with it. Neurology’s not keeping up with it. You can hardly pick up the Times or any serious periodical without coming across something about this: what’s now considered a ‘normal’ childhood has gotten out of whack.

As Payne writes on SimplicityParenting.com, the first step toward “reducing stress on children and their parents, and allowing room for connection, creativity, and relaxation is de-cluttering too much stuff at home.”

After working in Thai-Cambodian refugee camps and dealing with members of street gangs in Australia for four years, Payne became familiar with distressed children. He was surprised and intrigued, though, when he moved to London and saw the same stress in middle-to-upper-class kids who had never endured trauma.

In London, he saw children with Attention Deficit Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorder, just to name a few, but was puzzled when he couldn’t find the concrete causes.

Amidst his confusion, he realized that society was in the middle of what Payne calls “the undeclared War on Childhood, and too much stuff was right on the front lines.” By “stuff,” he doesn’t just mean tangible items. He counts expectations, activities, stimulation, even harsh cleaning fluids and lighting, as factors that can cause a child stress. “Too many playdates, too much scheduling, too much adult information, too many sports clubs, too many toys, books — it’s the too-much-ness that overwhelms kids and the body,” he says.

“It’s like stress has become so ubiquitous — too much, too soon; too sexy, too young — that is the...
new normal, only our brain doesn’t think so,” Payne adds. As a result, “we’ve got a generous number of kids that risk becoming adrenaline- and cortisol-dependent because that’s the body’s reaction to all of this.”

Payne’s Simplicity Parenting initiative now includes six hundred Simplicity Coaches around the world who encourage parents to schedule less, allow less screen time, and, yes, get rid of toys. Over time, he has become known among his clients as “Doctor Trash Bag.”

As part of his practice, Payne went into his clients’ homes from wakeup time to bedtime to observe each family. He spent much of this time keenly watching what worked for parents. A common solution, he found, was to discard toys.

“The average American kid has 150 toys,” Payne says. “If you have two to three kids, you’re now up to like 500 toys. It’s astonishing! I would say, ‘I have just the receptacle we need!’ And I would put all the stuff into trash bags.”

On July 26, 2012, Soukup took a similar approach. It had been only two days since Soukup had reorganized her daughters’ room, and there were still a few toys on the floor that her kids, then three and six years old, refused to pick up. “I would say to the girls, ‘If you can’t take care of your stuff, I’m going to have to take it all away,’” Soukup recalls. It was an empty threat, until that afternoon when Soukup realized she genuinely “wanted it all gone.”

Very calmly, Soukup started taking everything except for furniture out of their room and amassing their toys into a gigantic pile.

She took away all their dress-up clothes, baby dolls, Polly Pockets and stuffed animals, all of their Barbies, building blocks and toy trains, right down to the...
furniture from their dollhouse and play food from their kitchen. She even took the pink Pottery Barn Kids comforter from their bed. Her kids were surprised, too. She couldn’t believe how much stuff had amassed in her home, especially in lieu of her recent efforts to donate, de-clutter and organize.

"It was a shock, kind of," Soukup says. "I thought, ‘What are we doing with all this stuff? How could I let that much stuff come into my house?’"

Soukup had expected crying and wailing and protesting from her kids, but they were unfazed by the ordeal. They resolved to play without toys, saying, according to Soukup, "That’s okay, Mommy, we can just use our imaginations." Soon enough, the girls told their mother that, rather than having to clean up all the time, it was actually more fun to play the games they wanted to play without being surrounded by heaps of toys.

Soukup wrote a post on ProjectSimplify365.com explaining that her kids would have to earn back the toys. She also hinted that they might not be keen on doing so. "In all honesty," Soukup wrote, "since I took it all away, they have been happier and more content, fought less, read more, and been MUCH more helpful. Even more amazingly, beyond the two favorite stuffed animals they each earned back, they don’t really seem to want any of it back."

As the weeks went on, Soukup remained amazed at the state of her house. Her home stayed cleaner and her daughters played more and fought less than they had before. Moreover, they were never bored; they always seemed to find things to do.
Nearly two months later, Soukup was more affirm
ded in her decision than ever. On a family trip to Key West four weeks after Soukup’s clean sweep, she saw
a contrast to our last outing and for the first time ever, neither girl asked us to buy a single thing the entire weekend,” Soukup wrote on her blog. “Not a toy, not a cheese souvenir, not a light-up necklace from a passing street vendor. Nothing. We passed

hundreds of shops and they loved looking in the

window, but they were content just to be. What was most amazing to me was that we didn’t talk to them ahead of time. Not once did we have to tell them not to ask, or explain that being together was

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Kim John Payne says Soukup’s daughters’

reaction mirrors his own experience. He says he’s

accustomed to seeing kids become more relaxed,

more creative, more obedient, even quirkier and

“truer to themselves” when their environments are

scaled down. Payne says that deep, creative play,

which can happen with simpler, fewer toys, yields

better collaboration among children.

When you have fewer toys, and I’ve watched this
took-—away-and-a-thing to be one thing and another and

another,” Payne says. “When kids have to be creative

in their play, they include each other in the creativity.

Now you’ve got kids who are playing way better
together and they don’t need the television as a

babysitter.”

For families who are struggling with behavioral

problems or disorders, Payne says the process of

simplification leads to positive results.

“One of the first comments that we hear is how

much better the parents’ relationship with the child

is when they simplify, when they start to question

the too-much-ness,” Payne says. “People tell us, ‘I feel
Dr. Vicki Panaccione, a child psychologist at the Better Parenting Institute in Melbourne, Florida, disagrees with Payne’s line of thought. She contends that an environment without toys can bear negative effects, too. Known as The Parenting Professor with a twenty-five-year tenure as a child psychologist, Panaccione says that a variety of age-appropriate toys are absolutely necessary for child development. “I was pretty outraged at the whole idea of taking away a kid’s toys,” Panaccione says. “Toys are extremely important in the developmental process. Kids don’t need tons of toys, but just to take away all of them, especially when kids are young, really concerns me.”

Panaccione believes in toys so much that her office is filled with them. She has dollhouses, a play kitchen, a basketball hoop. Twister, “tons of board games,” army men, dinosaurs, building blocks, Legos, Lincoln Logs, Tinker Toys, dominos, play cars and more.

As she sees it, they’re all necessary for her job of working with kids. Panaccione says that they’re necessary for home life too. She argues that toys foster sensory input, spatial awareness, dexterity, frustration tolerance, problem solving and delaying gratification, and they help children learn to cope with impulse control and to master impulses, for starters. Without these toys as tools, Panaccione warns, children might have trouble developing.
"Kids need props," Panaccione says. "They need all sorts of stimuli to realize their interests developmentally and figure out how they’re going to function."

Panaccione does have some limits on which toys she prefers and which she thinks parents should buy. The toys in her office might be high in quantity, but they’re relatively simple in quality. For one, none of the items are electronic. Her army men are simple and her board games are older models. Her Battleship boards lack sound capability, as she prefers kids to invent noises on their own.

Additionally, most of the toys in Panaccione’s office are meant for two people so that Panaccione can use them to interact with children one-on-one. She says upholding similar standards can help parents use toys as a means of interaction rather than distraction.

"I would encourage parents to go back to basics," Panaccione says. "We’re losing opportunities to interact with our kids. Toys and games are a good way to get to know your kids. It’s easier to talk with kids while you’re playing with them than at the dinner table."

Panaccione thinks minimalism can be a healthy environment when done right. She encourages families who want to be more minimal to look into board games and card games, both of which allow parents to grow with kids. Panaccione says the best practice for parenting isn’t about finding a magical perfect number of toys, but about executing balance.

"Parenting is the eternal balancing act," she says. "We as parents are always juggling not too much, not too little. I think balancing [the number of] toys is just another factor."

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Now five and eight years old, Ruth Soukup's
daughters do have a few toys, mostly Legos, with which they can play on weekends, and American Girl dolls, which are sentimental gifts from their grandfather. Additionally, Soukup says that they have plenty of board games, arts and craft supplies and books.

Although her girls encounter toys outside of the home, Soukup is bent on limiting the number of toys that enter it. She encourages family members to do something special with the children for holidays instead of buying them presents.

Bill Ciari and Joshua Becker, on the other hand, ask family members to keep any toys that are presents in their own homes for when the children visit. At birthday parties, Soukup puts a donation box outside for anyone who shows up with toys, though people have mostly stopped bringing them. Soukup even persuaded her present-prone sister-in-law to gift the children with clothes, art supplies or special experiences instead of toys.

After two-and-a-half years, having few toys has simply become the norm in the Soukup household. When the girls attend play dates in other homes, they comment that the extensive numbers of toys they encounter has them asking to minimize their own toy supply. “Several of my friends have followed suit because they have seen the effect of it on their families, too,” Soukup says.

Soukup says the decision to limit toys in her home helped her children and their visiting friends to be more creative and imaginative, and to focus on basic values.

Whereas Soukup once piled on the presents at Christmas, the holiday now centers around family activities. Her girls ring the Salvation Army bell, fill Operation Christmas Child boxes at church and go
"We try to be very intentional in our family about teaching our kids how to give back," Soukup says. "It's not about what we get, it's more about the cool things we can do together as a family.

Like the Ciaris and the Beckers, the Soukups' decision to own less isn't necessarily about spending less. For birthdays, Soukup's daughters get to choose between having a big party or taking a trip. This past year, one daughter wanted to visit family friends in Tennessee, so the whole family flew out. Of course, four plane tickets cost more than gifts would, but the focus is now on buying experiences rather than stuff, and developing gratitude for it all.

"We try to give them those experiences of reaching out to other people," Soukup says. "We want to teach our kids an attitude of gratitude. Instead of focusing on the things we don't have, we focus on what we do."

Similarly, Joshua Becker says his decision to minimize was grounded in a desire to teach his kids to appreciate the value of family itself. Rather than demonstrating that he and his wife are guided by consumerist pressures, he instead hopes to illustrate by example that family comes first.

"We're not living to get a bigger house or a nicer car..."
or more clothes, Becker says. “There are more important things that we’re chasing after and spending our time, money, and energy pursuing.”

“People know that we own too much stuff,” Becker of the general populace. “If you slow down with buying stuff, you’ll have more money to do stuff together. People believe it because we all know this to be true. ”

Even at his young age, Salem seems to have a solid grasp on what’s most meaningful to him. He says there is such a thing as too many toys, and that an excess amount can lead to an array of issues like forgetting you have them, too much cleaning up, and distraction from playing with friends.

“You don’t really need to have a whole lot of toys to be happy,” Salem says. “Just the ones that you really want.”

While Soukup’s decision to purge her home of toys certainly affected her daughters, and even their friends, the biggest effect was on Soukup herself. Upon reflection, Soukup reveals that the sweep not only changed the way she parented, it changed the fabric of who she is.

Before she took all her kids’ toys away, Soukup was an avid shopper. With two young kids and a fair share of boredom, Soukup spent a lot of time in local stores experiencing the rush of buying new things. She started her blog as a way to become more financially prudent.

“I shopped to fill my time,” Soukup confesses. “It ended up filling our house.”

Soukup now sees that her shopping habit sent a
Soukup constantly thought that if she bought more toys, her daughters would finally be entertained. In turn, she taught her daughters to think the same. By example, she was teaching them that acquiring stuff leads to fulfillment.

“I would go to Target and take them with me,” she says. “They would see all this stuff and they would want it. I would want it.” It was a vicious cycle. As soon as Soukup took away the stuff, the cycle was broken. Suddenly, her kids didn’t want toys anymore. Suddenly, Soukup didn’t act like they needed them.

A September 2012 post on Soukup’s blog begins: “Had I not experienced it with my own eyes, I would’ve never believed that an addiction to stuff could be broken that quickly.”

Soukup’s decision to minimize the amount of stuff in her home was more than just a bold parenting move; it was an opportunity to break her own compulsions. In getting rid of her kids’ toys, Soukup realized that her children need something other than toys.

“Kids just want to be loved,” Soukup says calmly.

When Soukup is asked what kinds of changes she’s seen in the times since she ridded her home of toys, she begins to talk about her children, but then stops to include herself.

“I would say that the biggest change is having my kids, my family, realize that our life does not have value based on what we have,” Soukup says. “Our life has value based on who we are.”
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