



**HOME RENAISSANCE FOUNDATION**  
RENEWING THE CULTURE OF THE HOME

# Home Renaissance Foundation

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Healthy Environment at Home

By Aggie MacKenzie

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# Healthy Environment at Home

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I do not think I know anybody who would honestly say that they do not want to live in a healthy environment at home. What I have seen, though, are a lot of homes that are definitely not healthy environments. I think that if people knew how important the home environment is for everyone in the household, then perhaps attitudes would change and everybody would get involved in running good, healthy homes. Through my work on the show *How Clean is Your House?*<sup>1</sup> and my recent involvement in Lord Best's housing panel<sup>2</sup>, I have been able to witness, time and again, how closely linked a person's home environment is to their well-being. During my six years co-presenting *How Clean is Your House?* both in the UK and America, the homes we dealt with were extremely filthy - beyond belief in many occasions. In this paper I would like to use some of my experiences from the show to illustrate the impact our overall health can have on our homes and vice-versa.

On the show I had the role of Dirt Detective, so I investigated the science behind the dirt, ranging from fecal matter to salmonella. Those things were pretty common and they were not a surprise to anyone. It was just usual grime. It was not unusual to go into a room and not be able to see the floor. In many places you could not even see furniture because there was so much clutter in the rooms.

Some of our contributors had permanent coughs or skin infections, but on the whole a person living in a dirty environment will actually build up immunity to the bacteria present. However, the same is not often the case for people visiting the house from outside. I remember one occasion when we were visiting a young man's house in Nottingham. He worked on a landfill site and he was also an amateur dramatics person. He saw everything at work as a potential prop, so he would just bring things home from the landfill site, including bits of rotting food. It made me very sad to see that because the junk and rubbish in his living room was halfway up the wall. You could not actually stand on the floor. We filmed in the summer time and it smelled as if there was a dust cart inside the house. We used to have a microbiologist on set for every episode and on this occasion he told us that the air quality was so poor in the house that nobody should go in without wearing a mask. Of course, you cannot really wear a mask and talk to a camera so we all ended up on antibiotics with really bad chest infections and sore throats.

The question is, how do people get into such a state? In most cases, the state of the volunteers' homes reflected something that was going on internally for them. There was never enough of an opportunity on the show to get to the back story of the contributors, but time and time again from talking to these people it was evident to me that many of them had been emotionally deprived in their childhood. They seemed to feel worthless and that they did not deserve anything better. In other cases people had gotten into debt or were suffering from other traumas or losses. Others were just generally depressed. Inside their heads they were experiencing this mess and chaos and that was clearly played out in the chaos and mess around them. This lack of

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<sup>1</sup> *How Clean Is Your House?* was a television series aired from 2003 to 2009 and starring Aggie MacKenzie as the 'Dirt Detective' and Kim Woodburn as the 'Clean Queen'.

<sup>2</sup> Housing our Ageing Population Panel for Innovation was an independent panel commissioned by the Department of Communities and Local Governments in 2009 and chaired by Lord Best.

self-respect was also being inevitably passed on to the children and other members of the household. It had reached a point where no matter how unhappy people were about the state they were living in, or rather the state they existed in, they seemed to be at a loss as to how to help themselves. It had got so bad that they were simply stuck and paralysed. For some people it almost became a comfort to have all this stuff around them and to be stuck in this static place. I got the impression that they thought that they were protecting themselves from the possibility of anything getting worse by allowing themselves to be stagnant in these environments. That just seemed like madness to me and there was, definitely, a sense of madness.

Nonetheless, we still had plenty of volunteers for our show. Even though it is really quite humiliating and shameful to stand up and say, 'I live in a filthy house,' the way the producers put the show together did make it very upbeat. We would come in as fairy godmothers in our chariots and with our magic wands (ie. our feather dusters), clean the place up and it ended with everybody living 'happily ever after'.

One thing that we were able to experience was the impact a clean and orderly home had on the people living in it – even people with deeper underlying problems. I remember one family in particular made up of a mum, dad and three boys. They lived in a hellish state but there was a real sense of love in that family. It was very clear to see that they were very close and there was a really nice collegiate feeling within the family. The house was hopeless, though. There was laundry all over the kitchen floor, in fact again, they had to trample over clothes to get to the filthy cooker that was just thick with grease. You could see that the parents had just lost the will to look after things. The mother spent most of her time outside the house – she was not working, the father was – doing charity work because she could not bear to face the chaos inside the house. It took us three days to just clear the house out and clean it up. When the family came back, you could see them coming alive and their eyes lighting up when they saw it. Their eyes brightened with possibilities. We went back eighteen months later and it was so lovely (this was the best bit of the job!). The house was in good shape, it was clean and they had not gone back to their old ways. The mum had joined a slimming club and had lost a lot of weight and she was also doing a college course. The kids were also doing really well at school. It was just really lovely to see them all. It was just an ideal outcome of the show.

People often think that this is a problem of the so-called 'lower classes' but I know for a fact, because I have seen it, that this problem cuts right across the classes. It is much more about what is in people's heads than what is in their bank accounts.

I would like to point out that, contrary to popular belief, I am not actually a clean freak. My own cleaning knowledge is taken mostly from my mother and tips that I picked up from working at the Good Housekeeping Institute<sup>3</sup>. Cleaning to me is a bittersweet necessity: you have to put in the hard work to get the pleasure. If you want to live in an ordered environment, in a healthy environment, you have to put in the effort. Every obsessive cleaner I know does not have any

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<sup>3</sup> The Good Housekeeping Research Institute (GHRI) is the product-evaluation laboratory of the Good Housekeeping magazine, with a staff of scientists, engineers, nutritionists, and researchers dedicated to evaluating and testing numerous products.

children and I do not think there is any coincidence about that. As soon as you become a parent there is an endless round of thankless tasks to be done, many of which involve cleaning and clearing up after often ungrateful others. You get back to the ordered state only for the mayhem to recommence. I also think that in the past Spring cleaning was done once a year because we all had coal fires and there was a layer of coal dust that had to be removed. Washing was also always done on a Monday and once it was done then that was it finished. So certain tasks were done on certain days and it was all part of more of a routine. But now, who Spring cleans? We talk about it, but I do not think I know anyone who Spring cleans or washes on a Monday. It is more of a never-ending cycle because there is always stuff to be done. I think that sometimes you can become too enslaved. I think you need to be very careful about getting the balance right.

However, having said that, there is a study that was carried out in 2006 on household chaos and its links to parenting and child behaviour<sup>4</sup>. It was not a very big survey, it was only 180 families questioned (all children were under 10) but children from disorganised homes with a lack of routine are more likely to be rude or antisocial – no surprises there. Crowding, that is inadequate space in relation to family size, is linked to problem behaviour. However, what is interesting from the study is that chaos is not more common in poorer families but rather, it overlaps with the way parents relate to their children. From the responses given, it seems that carers of small children from chaotic homes are significantly less responsive when relating to their children. They are much less involved and less vocally stimulating. They use more physical punishment and are inconsistent with how they discipline their children. We know that this sort of behaviour has a lifelong negative effect on children. Again, in these chaotic homes there is less parental warmth and enjoyment and a lot more anger and hostility.

Positive parenting did not reduce the negative impact of chaos. Chaos clearly has an independent effect. As we all know, children need boundaries and a chaotic home not only makes a child feel insecure but it also isolates them from other children. They might get invited to sleepover at a friend's house but that can never be reciprocated because children feel ashamed and humiliated about living in some environment that is not normal and out of control. They can see how other people live and they know that the way they are living does not match up. They then carry around a sense of shame about being a part of that family and that is a bad start in life. It is obvious: small children need to be safe and loved and they need to have order.

I think that what is happening now is that there has been a cultural change that we have not quite come to terms with. In my mother's day looking after the house was her job. She was in charge of keeping it clean and putting food on the table. Partly because of women's emancipation (around 80% of women now have jobs outside the home), and the increase to the cost in housing people have a different sets of priorities. Children have so many activities after school these days and as adults we have our own commitments as well. There are only so many hours in the day and with jobs, family, social life, homework, getting food on the table and all the rest of it, something has to give and often that thing is housework.

I am always advocating to people, as I did in the show, that as parents we should teach our children, particularly our boys, how to clean and tidy up after themselves. Everyone in the home

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<sup>4</sup> Coldwell J, Pike A, Dunn J. "Household chaos--links with parenting and child behaviour." *J Child Psychol Psychiatry*. 2006 Nov;47(11):1116-22.

needs to be involved in looking after it and the next generation of parents, both male and female, need to be equipped to undertake daily household tasks. We have to start training our children when they are very young and teach them the benefits of being well-organised and having pride in a home that is clean and ordered. They should know that everybody needs to 'muck in'. It should become an expectation. Children need to see that this is part of everyday life: things get put away before something else gets pulled out. Children who do not tidy their toys often have too many and do not even know what they have. It is almost like the hoarding problem. There is too much to see. I think that if patterns are set very early on in childhood then they set. So the earlier you can set good patterns and good behaviour, the better. But parents have to be so rigorous about it. It is hard work but in the end it is worth it.

I have two boys and unfortunately I have not followed my own advice at all. I regret it, though. Like many working mothers I have a residual guilt about never having really been there enough at home. The cleaner comes home once a week and the last thing I want to do is nag the boys about doing stuff but I know it is not right. What we then do is sit on the cycle of children growing up not knowing anything about domestic skills, not knowing how to clean and not knowing the basics. At the end of the day, the truth about housework is that it is invisible and you do not know it has been done until somebody does not do it.

The question of why we clean and how we know what to clean is actually rarely addressed but the cleanliness or otherwise of homes is implicated in our health and comfort. Domestic dirt is little examined yet it is something that we all have to deal with on some level. Some people would simply say it is matter in the wrong place, which is a lovely way of looking at it. I think that ever since housework has been distinguished from other labour women have always been responsible for most of it. Even today, studies show that we are still the people who have to deal with it. We still carry out the vast majority of housework but fewer people would claim that that is our natural role and increasingly men and women say they believe that household tasks should be shared. Men contribute to the work of the home more now by taking on shopping and but they are still least likely to do cleaning. In this sense, things have not changed so much in the last few decades.

We need to think about what the right balance between a warm loving home and a tidy, organised one is. That is the crucial thing. On the one hand, according to the study mentioned above, it would seem that no amount of hugging is going to compensate if your house is a tip and the child has no idea when he is going to be getting supper or where the clean school uniform is. On the other, making your house a germ-free zone ruled by a military schedule is not the answer either. We have to strike a balance between what makes a home both healthy and happy. In short, I believe a house needs to be clean enough to be healthy and dirty enough to be happy.