

# Tears, toys and blood on white carpet - the joys of taking a child to an open house

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(Photo: Mitsu Yasukawa/NorthJersey.com)

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Not long ago, house-hunters Natalie Starkman and her husband went to check out a colonial in Tenafly with their toddler son in tow.

They walked through the renovated kitchen and bathroom and admired the newly- added, sun-drenched family room before they got to the master bedroom suite, which was outfitted in wall-to-wall white carpet.

And then, the unthinkable happened. They got blood on the carpet.

“It wasn’t even a bad fall or anything, but my son was leaning on the edge of the bed and he must have had his tongue sticking out - he just fell into my leg and all of a sudden he’s crying hysterically and as soon as he opened his mouth, blood just was everywhere,” said Starkman. “He had almost bitten through his tongue.”

Her husband, Ari, and their Realtor, Joshua Baris, began frantically searching for towels. “In the end, there were only a few drops on the carpet because I pretty much caught most of it in my hands,” Starkman said.

Given that about 30 percent of households in Bergen and Passaic counties have children under age 18, it’s likely that when it comes to a real estate transaction there will be kids involved on one side – or both. And area real estate agents, who have quite a few horror stories involving kids to tell, have some suggestions about how to make the process as painless as possible.

As a parent himself, Baris knows how unpredictable children can be, and that – for the most part – people tend to be understanding about child-related mishaps when tots accompany buyers or live in the home being sold. In the case of three-year-old Eli and the bitten tongue, “everyone was just mostly worried about him. And about getting us out of the house, too, I guess,” he said with a laugh.

“The main thing to remember is that dealing with these real estate transactions, it’s just like life,” said Baris, an agent with Coldwell Banker in Fort Lee. “It can be stressful and confusing, but at the end, you just have to laugh.”



Photo of the Starkman family, Ari and Natalie, their children Alessandra (age 6) and Eli (age 3) with real estate agent Joshua Baris (L) of Coldwell Banker, photographed outside of their house in Demarest on May 15th, 2017. This is for selling or buying a home with kids. (Photo: Mitsu Yasukawa/NorthJersey.com)

The Starkmans did not buy that house, closing instead this month on a home in Demarest. (Eli, for the record, got stitches and has made a full recovery.) They had been renting in Englewood Cliffs, after moving from Westchester County to be closer to the catering business they own, The Elan in Lodi.

“Having your kids with you is not really ideal because you can’t really pay the best attention if you are busy watching your toddler, so maybe my advice is to not bring your kids unless you have to,” Starkman said. “Oh and bring a first aid kit.”

## Involve your children

When Barbara Ostroth works with sellers who have children, she give her clients – the small ones – a contract to sign so the house will be ready for a showing.

“It says things like ‘I promise to clean my Cheerios from the kitchen table and put away my toys, to make sure my bed is made every morning,’ ” said Ostroth, of Coldwell Banker in Alpine/Closter. “Depending on the age of the child you can be very direct with them. I tell them, ‘The more money your parents get for this house, the more money they can spend to get a nicer house and I need you to cooperate.’ ”

Along with standard decluttering suggestions – a bin for shoes at the door, a garage sale where kids get to keep the proceeds of their junk they let go – Ostroth says parents need to step up their parenting game as well as their selling one.

“You’re looking at short-term pain for long term gain,” she said. “If you’re not willing to set a limit and enforce rules about your children picking up after themselves, you’ll be doing everything.”

Besides, Ostroth said, kids take the process more seriously when you involve them in it. “Their lives are being upended but this helps them feel like they have some control,” she said.

Given that a potential buyer looking at that three-bedroom colonial has their own children – and their accompanying clutter at their own home – why are they so unable to overlook kid clutter in a home they are looking to purchase?

“You want to walk into a home and see what you dream of doing but don’t have the ability to enforce yourself,” said Ostroth. “You see someone who has all the kids’ toys picked up, and all the Container Store bins because you want to see what you aspire to.”

## Agents as sitters

Many agents say they wind up as babysitters during showings.

“It often happens that the parents are looking at the house and paying attention to the house, and if I see the kids wandering off, I’ll try to re-direct them,” said Maryanne Elsaesser, of Coldwell Banker in Wyckoff.

Angele Ekert of Keller Williams in Ridgewood reminds buyers to be direct with their kids.

“Believe it or not, sometimes kids don’t realize this but they look at a house and you have to tell them ‘Your stuff will all come with you,’ because they look at a room and they see some other kid’s stuff,” Ekert said. “You remind them that they can make their room their own, make it fun.”

Her kid-related real estate horror story involves the child of a seller who kept taking down the “For Sale” sign.

When it comes to taking children to listings, she advocates a less is more philosophy. “When we moved, we didn’t even tell our kids until we were under contract,” she said.

On the other hand, Will Alfaro, of Coldwell Banker in Clifton, tries to engage children in the process.

“I tell the kids, ‘Ok - so let’s go up and pick a room for yourself,’” said Alfaro, who tells clients to limit showings with kids so they don’t get tired, and tells buyers to cluster all their showings into one day, if possible, to minimize disruption.

For Cristina Vargas and her family, it ended up that the one time she brought her kids to see a listing that it was the house they purchased.

“Usually we arranged for babysitting,” said Vargas, who closed on a home in Rockaway this month. “But it was nice to have them with us because we really liked seeing how they interacted with the environment around them. I could really see my child living in this house, I could see raising my family there.”

Baris, the agent who worked with the Starkman family and the bloodied white rug, said that wasn’t the only time a kid caused havoc during a real estate transaction. One created quite a scene at a closing, he said.

“We were literally at the closing table with all the paperwork spread out in front of us and all of a sudden their son says ‘I don’t feel good,’ and then the next thing we know he pukes all over the table, all over all the documents.”

Everyone quickly recovered their composure, and, thankfully, the buyer had duplicate copies. Baris said the closing went more quickly than usual, in part because everyone wanted to keep questions to a minimum to get the child out of there. Worried that either party might feel that a, shall we say, sudden projectile of bodily fluids was a bad omen, Baris said he quickly made a joke.

“I said, ‘You know how they say that when a bird poops on you it’s good luck? It’s the same thing. This home has been blessed.’”

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