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IS YOUR KID'S MESSY ROOM DRIVING YOU CRAZY?

Kids' messy rooms drive many parents crazy. Your stomach may churn with distaste when you view the scene of destruction and chaos in your daughter's bedroom. You forgot what color the carpet was. The cat was last seen in there three weeks ago!

Unfortunately, kids are not naturally neat. Many—if not most—are more naturally messy. Conclusion? The youngsters will have to be *trained* to clean their rooms. You won't get the kids to complete this unpleasant chore by nagging or lecturing. Instead, you have several options.

OPTION 1: CLOSE THE DOOR AND DON'T LOOK

Having a clean room is not a life-or-death matter.

We know of no research which proves that kids who didn't keep their rooms neat grew up and had "issues". Besides, whose room is it? You don't have to live in it, so why not just ask the child to keep the door closed so you don't have to be aggravated.

Most parents don't like this idea, but before you dismiss the Close-the-Door-and-Don't-Look notion, ask yourself this: Do you have a child with a significant behavioral or emotional problem, such as ADHD, learning disability, anxiety or depression? If you have a child who's difficult to begin with, why add another set of troubles to your life? Imagine your son hates school, hates homework, has no friends, feels lousy most of the time and fights with his sister constantly. Should you also get after him about the junk on his bedroom floor? No. Straighten out your priorities; you have bigger fish to fry.

Option 1 is quite legitimate for some families, but it presents two problems: dirty dishes and dirty laundry. For these issues you can try other Start behavior tactics: a kitchen timer, charting or the 1-2-3 (if the dishes or clothes can be picked up in less than two minutes). Remember to praise compliance frequently.

Some parents whose kids are older simply tell them that any clothes that don't make it to the laundry or hamper simply don't get washed. Then the child has to wash them herself. This is an example of natural consequences. The Docking System can also be considered. You go and get the dirty clothes or dishes from the room, but you "charge" your son or daughter for your labor (you'll feel better about having to do the job). No lecturing and keep the fees reasonable. **Continued on page 2**



OPTION 2: THE WEEKLY CLEANUP ROUTINE

This procedure is a favorite with many moms and dads. With the Weekly Cleanup, the kids have to clean their rooms only once a week, but according to your specifications. You might explain that the following has to be done: pick up, put clothes in hamper, make bed, maybe vacuum. A specific day and time, such as Saturday morning, is chosen and the youngster is not allowed to play or do anything else until his room is done and you've checked him out.



Cleaning the room is a Start (positive) behavior, and you will be rewarding the child immediately after the room cleaning with both freedom as well as praise. If artificial (extra) reinforcers are necessary, these rewards can be tallied at checkout time.

Many parents have tried something like the Weekly Cleanup Routine, but the grownups often ruin the whole procedure by getting into an argument with the child at checkout. Never argue about what needs to be done; make the specifications clear to begin with.

OPTION 3: DAILY CHARTING

For parents who are very, very particular, the child's room can be charted daily using either a star or sticker system (for younger kids) or a 1-through-5 rating system (for older kids). Keep in mind that expecting a neat room every day is probably asking for a lot of trouble. So if you insist on this perverse procedure, be nice! Use a lot of praise if the job is done well, and don't expect perfection.

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HOMEWORK: TRY THIS FIRST

If you're having trouble with homework for the first time—say with a fourth grader—consider trying the natural consequences approach first. That means you do nothing: Keep quiet and see if the child and the teacher can work things out. Too many parents get too anxious way too soon about their children's schoolwork, with the result that the grownup prematurely takes charge and doesn't give the youngster a chance to learn— and exercise — true responsibility.

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