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Clean Your Room…or Else

When a Teen's Bedroom Is Incorrigibly Messy, It's Time for Extreme Parenting

Eighteen-year-old Kayla Perkins explains the organizational system she uses in her bedroom: "I throw something on the ground and I know right where it is."

Sue Shellenbarger joins Lunch Break to discuss strategies for keeping the kid's room from resembling a landfill. Photo: Brandon Thibodeaux for The Wall Street Journal.

Funny, her parents, Steve and Deborah Perkins of McKinney, Texas, haven't caught on. They see only mountains of clothing on the floor, empty snack bowls under the bed and soda cups littering the tabletops. Even Kayla acknowledges that, at its worst, her room is "a mess."

The Battle of the Bedroom: Many parents can relate to this picture. Most families at some point have at least one teen or pre-teen whose room resembles a landfill. The mess can disrupt the whole household. Dirty clothes pile up, triggering early morning crises when there is nothing to wear. Soiled dishes get lost in the mess, smell bad and attract critters. Homework is lost, and valuables are ruined.

Some parents let it go, reasoning that a bedroom is private space for children to manage as they wish. Others lecture their children, offer rewards for cleaning or impose consequences when they don't. What doesn't work, parenting experts say, is relentless nagging, hollow threats or getting very angry.

Mess is a stubborn problem for teens. They are old enough that parents expect them to exercise good hygiene habits and take responsibility for daily routines. But teens' brains are still developing some of the cognitive skills needed to stick to a clean-up routine, such as controlling impulsivity, seeing others' perspectives and understanding how current actions have future consequences.

Jim Fay, co-founder of the Love and Logic Institute, a Golden, Colo., provider of parenting training and resources, recommends that parents first ask kids "in a nice way" to clean up and agree on a reasonable time limit. Kids often behave better if you treat them like you would want to be treated by your boss at work, with respect and high expectations.

But when messes get out of hand, hardball tactics may be needed. If the child fails to meet a deadline to clean up, Mr. Fay recommends saying, "I'll take care of it." Then, get the job done in some way that satisfies you but "creates problems for the kid," Mr. Fay says. "Maybe you hire a neighbor kid to clean up."

Deborah Perkins says she tried everything over the years to prod Kayla to pick up. She posted chore charts with specified tasks. She offered to pay her for completing certain jobs. About four years ago, she and Kayla agreed on a four-day deadline—which came and went with no change.

So the parents took action: They picked up all the clothes on Kayla's floor, stuffed them in two garbage bags and hid them in the attic. When Kayla arrived home from school to a bare bedroom, "it was scorched earth," Ms. Perkins says. "There was screaming, there was shouting, 'How can I live without my clothes?' "

"I didn't handle it well," Kayla says. Ms. Perkins required Kayla to earn her clothes back by doing chores, such as polishing the silver or cleaning her dad's home office.

These days, she keeps her room picked up. When it does get messy, Kayla says, she takes clean-up requests more seriously.

Kayla says her mother sets reasonable expectations. She, for example, eases up on room-cleaning rules when Kayla, who acts in community and school musical-theater productions, has a heavy rehearsal schedule.



Brandon Thibodeaux for The Wall Street Journal

Kayla Perkins now takes clean-up requests from her mom, Deborah, more seriously.

Her parents gave her "a wake-up call, that 'Oh, I am under their roof. If they ask me to do something, I need to do it, or it will be gone,' " Kayla says.

Humor can help, too. One family sought help from Douglas Riley, a Newport News, Va., clinical psychologist, in getting their 14-year-old daughter to clean up her bedroom. Dr. Riley, who has worked with families for 30 years, suggested that since she wasn't bothered by the dirty clothes all over her floor, perhaps the whole family could start using her room as a laundry hamper.

Her attitude changed after her parents and younger brother started tossing dirty laundry into her room, including a few soaked and smelly T-shirts and socks worn by her 275-pound father after working outdoors on his construction job. By the time the teen gave in and cleaned up her room a few days later, even she was laughing, says Dr. Riley, author of "Dr. Riley's Box of Tricks," a new book on parenting.

"If you've tried reason, and talk and logic, and all the coercive stuff—the time outs, the punishments, the take-aways, the bribes and the screaming—if you've tried all of that and it's not working," then suggesting a solution so unusual or extreme that it's funny can startle teens into cooperating, Dr. Riley says. Such methods should be used only with healthy kids, not those who are anxious, depressed or defiant, Dr. Riley adds.

To get her 16-year-old daughter Jessica to clean up, says Kathleen Jerrils of Newport News, Va., "I tried asking her, 'What will your friends think when they see your room?' The friends didn't care." She offered to repaint Jessica's blue bedroom black, Jessica's preference. But Jessica was reluctant to move out long enough to get the painting done. Ms. Jerrils offered to buy Jessica the pet rat she wanted. That motivated Jessica to try to clean up, but she says the task was so overwhelming that she became distracted, thinking, "This is going to take forever." She still hasn't gotten the rat.

Jessica says the mess annoys her, too, especially when she is rushing to get ready for school and can only find one of the shoes she wants to wear. But she has other priorities. School often consumes 10 hours a day, followed by several hours of homework. She devotes hours more to extracurricular activities including academic, debate and speech competitions; school plays; and charity fund-raisers. After all that, "I don't rank cleaning my room as something that I really need to get done," she says.

Jessica read Dr. Riley's book, and one of his techniques—casting a messy teen as "a victim of capitalism" with too much stuff to manage—is starting to work, Ms. Jerrils says. She talked with Jessica about how living in an affluent society with a parent who "tries to give her not only what she needed, but everything she wanted, has overwhelmed her to the point" where she has too many belongings, Ms. Jerrils says.

Jessica agrees she has too much stuff and is working with her mom to clear out her room. She recently gave a half-dozen bags of clothes, books and games to charity. That's a purpose worth cleaning for, she says. "I always like to feel like I'm helping people."

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