

Teens, Messy Rooms and Parental Frustration

from the American Counseling Association

Somewhere, there might actually be a teenager who doesn't have a "messy room." Most parents would doubt that. A teen's messy room continues to be the source for ongoing parent-teen disagreements in many families.

While we can't make that messy room disappear, we can help you understand why it happens and perhaps reduce your stress and frustration level a little.

A first step is understanding why the condition of your child's room bothers you. After all, your child lives in the mess, not you. What frustrates us is what the mess says about us, our authority over our child and our effectiveness as a parent. Are we parental failures if our children can't see the mess and won't hear our requests to clean it up?

For your teen, however, privacy and autonomy, not a messy room, are the issues. That room is his or her domain, and keeping it as desired is one way of being independent.

Becoming more independent is a normal part of the developmental process and a messy room is an easy, safe way to declare that independence.

Arguing won't change that, but setting a few sensible family rules can make things easier.

The main rule is that you can live with messy, but not with health threatening. Old food wrappers and dirty dishes attract bugs and that's not acceptable. A closed door can hide the teen mess, but that won't stop bugs and mold.

Teens can accept sensible, fair rules for family use areas. While a clean bedroom might seem unreasonable, your teen can understand the need to clean up after oneself in the kitchen or not to leave shoes or that backpack in the middle of the hallway.

And no, cleaning up for your teen doesn't help. You'll just create an angry teen who has also learned that when it gets messy enough, you'll do the job.

Better is an offer to help. Many teens literally don't know where to start once the mess gets too big. Suggest ways to break that big task into smaller ones. Offer storage and sorting tips.

There certainly are things worth pushing hard for with your teen. A messy room is seldom one. Someday that room will get cleaned. New friends, missing treasures or the lack of clean clothes might be the motivation. Or not. Then that clean room will just have to wait until he or she moves out.

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