

## Messy Rooms

*"One of the advantages of being disorderly is that one is constantly making exciting discoveries."*

—A. A. Milne



I wonder what A. A. Milne had in mind when he made the above statement. Perhaps it was a vision of Winnie-the-Pooh prancing happily through a less than orderly hundred-acre wood. But surely he could not have been thinking about what he might find while exploring the disaster area in a child's room. Then again, parents

do make some exciting discoveries while sifting through the daily debris that children leave. (Some parents say that they don't mind finding the unexpected in their children's rooms—just so long as it isn't alive.)

By having their rooms the way they want them, children assert their independence. One of the reasons why they might like a messy room is because the rest of the house is neat, and the disorder makes their room special. Some children might even take a request to clean up their room as a personal affront and respond, "How dare you tell me how to live my life?"

Dealing with messy rooms is one of the most common complaints of parents. It could be that parents fear that if they are not cured of their messy habits, children will take them with them into the real world. This is a legitimate concern, so long as it does not become obsessive.

I am reminded of the story of the boss who entered an employee's office. On noticing the disarray of books, papers, and trash on his desk, he remarked, "Better clean that up. You know what they say: Messy desk means a messy mind." The employee replied, "Yes, but then what do they say about an empty desk?"

Creating clutter is what children do. It is their job. They have very short attention spans, so one particular object is going to be interesting to them for only a short period of time. Then it is time to find something new. It is not time to put away what they were just playing with; it is time to find something new. The problem is how to teach children the value of neatness while not hindering their natural inquisitiveness.

When you analyze basic needs in young children, you find that their needs are not tied to any long-term goals. For children, everything is short-term. If their need for fun is the strongest, they want to play now. If their need for love and belonging is the strongest, they want to be held now. Therefore, when children are playing, they are not going to want to interrupt that need-fulfilling activity to put away toys as they tire of them.

Cleaning up is better left to the end of the play period or the end of the day when you can get the child to focus on the subject of cleaning up.

Let's look at a specific problem.

### 1. The Problem

Vickie and Terri share a room. They like their room; it is their special place. Each week they put a new warning on the door. This week the sign reads "Don't Enter". Attack Cats on Duty. The problem is that they refuse to clean up their room. Occasionally, they'll agree to try, but the dirty clothes are put under the bed instead of in hampers; toys are thrown into the closet instead of being replaced on shelves; and spoiled food goes into drawers instead of wastebaskets. No matter how much their parents complain, plead, and bargain, they never seem to make any progress.

### 2.

#### Rules and Outcomes

The rule in place is that Vickie and Terri need to clean up their room when asked to do so. If it is not cleaned up, they are confined to their room until the task is completed.

### 3.

#### Problem Analysis

The rule and outcome seem reasonable enough. However, there could be some reason underlying their inability to clean up their room. It could be an act of defiance (satisfying a power need). It could be that they would rather play than clean (satisfying the need for fun). It could be they want the extra attention they get from their parents when refusing to comply (satisfying their need for love and belonging). It could be that they don't want to clean up their room at the moment they are asked to do so; they'd rather do it later (satisfying the need for freedom). The first step, therefore, is for the parents to determine the cause of the problem.

### 4.

#### Solutions

If the parents talk with the sisters, and the girls' position is "We did clean it up," then the problem is that they do not know what their parents mean by clean up. This problem is solved by the parents teaching the sisters exactly what is it that they want the girls to do. However, let's say that the parents discover another problem. When they ask about cleaning up the room, Vickie says, "It's not my fault. I clean up all my stuff. Terri's the one who makes the mess." And, of course, Terri says, "She always puts her toys on my side of the room. They're her toys, and I am not going to pick them up." The problem then is twofold: a messy room, and a sibling standoff. One solution would be to talk with the girls about the problem and ask for their suggestions about how to solve it. If they can't come up with a solution on their own, the parents might suggest something like, "How about this: You take turns cleaning up the room. There are seven days in the week. Terri will clean up three days, and Vickie will clean up three days. And I will clean up the last day so you both can have a day off." If the girls agree, the parents should suggest a trial period of one week and then get together again with the girls to see how it is working. The parents should also attach some positive outcome that the girls can enjoy at the end of a week's worth of cleaning up.

#### 5. Proactivity: Preventing Future Problems

The best way to ensure that children will take some interest in taking care of their room is to give them some ownership; really make them feel as though it is their room. Give them some say in how the room is arranged or decorated. Let them choose (with your guidance) the color of paint or wallpaper. Have a place in the room where they can display schoolwork or artwork. Let them choose one poster for the wall. Children do have their own taste for color and decor, and it is important that the room be theirs and not just yours.

As mentioned previously, make sure that there are ample boxes or other containers for storing toys. It is hard for children to comply with requests to clean up their room when they have a hard time finding a place to put their things.

With older children, it is best to have one day of the week designated as cleanup day. Older children seem to enjoy disarray, but asking them to clean up their room once a week is not too unreasonable. However, no matter how old the child, be specific in what you mean by cleaning up: dirty clothes in the hamper, clean clothes placed neatly in drawers, books stacked on book shelves, bed made, dirty dishes taken to the kitchen and put into the sink, and carpet vacuumed. The clearer you are in

communicating your expectations, the less chance you will be disappointed in the outcome.