

Order / Make a contract

FROM PAGE 3

food or anything. It's just the picking up and the putting away clothes."

The struggle with children and their bedrooms is one most parents can relate to, but Vicki Price, parent educator for Child Abuse Prevention Services, said parents should keep the struggle in perspective.

"Kids never put the same value on neatness as parents do," Price said. "You need to go into it knowing that. Their minds are full of, 'Who's going to ask me to prom,' and 'So-and-so got a new car,' and 'I've got a zit.' That's where their lives are."

"Parents have to kind of step back and try to remember. You know, we were teenagers once, and we need to remember what that feels like."

That said, if you're concerned about cleanliness, you should instill that in your children when they're young. Price suggests letting young children help with the dusting — as Reese did with her children — and help with other small chores.

"Then, it becomes not a big deal," Price said. "Nobody thinks of it as an extra thing" when you ask them to clean.

As children get older, Price said, if you let them decorate and arrange their own bedrooms, it helps them develop ownership. And if they feel ownership, they're more likely to keep things clean.

"Anything that is really important to us, we take good care of without people really telling us to," Price said.

Having a scheduled cleaning time — say, everyone cleans from 10 a.m. to noon on Saturday — also helps.

Parents also need to make their expectations clear to their children.

Price is big on contracts. She suggests sitting down with your children, individually, and talking about rules you both can agree on. If you're concerned about food left in rooms attracting bugs, you and your child might agree that food and dirty dishes can't be left in the bedroom overnight or even that food can't be taken into the bedroom. You might have a rule that sheets have to be washed every two weeks.

The rules should be written, and both

parties should sign the agreement.

It's important to talk respectfully to your child while working out the contract, Price said, and to listen to what the child says.

"If you really sit and listen, and are respectful of what they say, and they see that in your body language and hear it in your voice, then they're more likely to make this contract workable," Price said.

Along with rules, parents should negotiate consequences for when the rules are broken and stick to those consequences.

Some parents choose, instead of setting rules, to simply leave it up to their children to take care of their rooms after a certain age.

"They just kind of shut the door," Price said. "If there are bugs in the room, the kid has to deal with that."

Whatever course you take, Price said it's important not to nag.

If you and your child have decided that she'll be responsible for getting her laundry to you by a certain time, and the shirt she wants to wear missed that laundry deadline, don't start into the lecture about how if she'd have followed the rule and gotten the shirt to you it would be clean.

Instead, the parent can express sympathy and, in a kind way, ask if the child would like you to show her how to operate the washing machine.

"That way, the kid sees that you're always on her side, even if she's made a bad choice," Price said. "If you come back with a minilecture, she'll feel like she's a bad person."

If you respond in a positive way, it keeps your relationship with your child more positive.

"You want to keep your relationship as close and as good as possible," Price said. "You don't want to go to war over a room. That's very small in the scheme of your relationship with your child."

"You need to keep that big picture in mind, that what you're saying and doing now will influence your relationship with your kid."

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