

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

Our fourteen-year-old daughter, Holly, is generally a good kid and makes excellent grades. She has always done what we've asked, but in the last year she has become a major slob and her room is a pigsty. My husband screams at her daily and we seem to always be in an uproar about this. Do you have any suggestions (besides my moving to a neighboring state)?

-- Peacemaker Mother

Dear Peacemaker Mom,

I wouldn't recommend the move to a neighboring state (unless it is sunny and beautiful most of the year – just kidding). If I had a nickel for every family raising teenagers who see room cleaning as a point of contention, *I* could retire and retreat to the nearest sunny state.

One of the most important developmental challenges of the teenage years is to rebel against family authority. This is why teenagers adopt their peer group's clothing, hairstyles (purple and spiked?), music preferences, and language ("Like, what is so, like, great, about a clean room?"). The changes you see in your daughter are not necessarily easy for anyone, but they are a critical part of Holly's development as she seeks to assert her independence and establish her own identity. And every developmental change-- from a toddler's first steps to a child riding a two-wheeled bike—involves risk. It is your job to weigh those risks. Not cleaning her room may be extremely aggravating, but it is not dangerous, to you or to her. Acting out sexually or with drugs (including alcohol), are far more serious behaviors and they must be addressed with love, discipline, and attention.

Your husband's approach of yelling to make Holly clean her room isn't working. In fact, your hubby's response may have an effect opposite to the one he desires: It gives Holly all of the power in this situation.

Reinforce your values by what you choose to fight for: decent grades, being a good person, staying away from drugs and alcohol; and balance that by reinforcing Holly's good behavior. Make sure she gets lots of praise for her accomplishments. Let her know that she is loved even when she fails to live up to your expectations. Remember that, despite her developmental drive to rebel, your daughter still cares deeply about your opinion of her, and love for her. Talk openly with her about sex and drugs. Help her to understand your family's values, and make it clear that you are always there to listen.

Make certain there are contingencies (rewards and punishments) for meeting, or failing to meet, your expectations. I advise reward over punishment whenever possible, because it enhances self-esteem. Offer Holly an allowance or other reward for keeping her room clean. For example, if she keeps it relatively neat all week, she may earn some extra money, have an extended curfew when out with friends, or get to select a special family dinner or video rental as a reward for her responsible behavior. Ask her what she would consider to be rewarding. Just as a messy room is not worth turning the

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household into a battleground, a clean room is not worth \$100 a week. Keep the reward within reason, and the criteria for what constitutes “clean” clear. Be specific. A clean room may mean making her bed, putting clothes in a hamper, and returning dirty glasses and plates to the dishwasher, and not necessarily white-glove perfectionism.

Unfortunately, many parents feel like rewarding appropriate behavior is akin to “bribing” their kid. But the truth is that all of us work to attain rewards and avoid punishment. If you choose to go the allowance route, make sure that Holly doesn’t automatically get everything she wants without it.

Lots of teenagers today don’t value earning their own money because they already get everything without earning it. Note that I’m talking about withholding some special things (buying a new outfit or CDs), not the basic necessities of life. (In other words, don’t say, “Holly, we aren’t going to feed you unless that *&*\$*^% room is cleaned up!”) Even if you offer an allowance, it is desirable that Holly (like everyone in the family) has some chores that she does simply as a contributing member of the family.

Once the contingencies are in place, there is no reason to yell any longer. But you must stick with what you’ve said you will do. If the room is not clean – no allowance this week. Simple. No yelling. No stress. No sweating the small stuff. Your home will be a more peaceful place, and you won’t have to run off to Florida.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) www.fullpotentialliving.com