

Clean Your Room – NOW!

from a parent's perspective

by Roslyn Duffy

– Situation –

“You’re always a meanie!” yells Marcel to Angela’s retreating back as she stomps from his room.

Surrounded by piles of dirty socks; stray copies of Dr. Seuss; and a rainbow of uncapped markers Marcel sits in his room, serving out this latest time-out sentence.

The only movement likely to occur here will be Marcel flinging himself on his bed to cry; aiming an angry kick at a hapless Cat in the Hat; or his mom, Angela, threatening time-out extensions.

Have you ever seen your neighbor go through this kind of struggle? (I say ‘your neighbor’ because this wouldn’t happen in your house, right?) Well, just in case both you and your neighbor could benefit from some new strategies, read on.

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– Solution –

What went wrong?

A command to “*clean your room – NOW!*” has a few things going against it. First, it contains the unspoken message of misery — that *clear or suffer* threat.

Or suffer sounds like this: *Clean your room or you won’t — “Get to go swimming”; “Visit your friend Alice”; “Watch cartoons tonight”* (or ever, if one is feeling really desperate). *Or suffer* can also sound like: *Unless this mess gets cleared up in the next ten minutes — “You will go right to bed after dinner”; “I’m taking away your new Princess doll”; “You won’t be allowed to use marking pens all week.”*

These threats, often whitewashed with names like *consequences* or *choices*, are usually last-ditch efforts to coerce at least the appearance of cooperation. More often they are power struggles — with both parent and child locked into a battle of wills — each feeling frustrated, miserable, and equally determined, while the mess remains as immovable as they do.

What do we mean?

What does “*clean your room*” mean to Angela, to Marcel, to your nattering neighbor (or even — to you)? Does Marcel think that shoving his smelly socks in the closet will get the job done, while Angela’s anticipated destination for those radioactive items is the family laundry basket? Will tossing assorted pens and miscellaneous caps into the art drawer cover the job or do the covers need to be in place before the task is considered done?

What problems do you experience? Send a description, a short word “snapshot” of the situation. Each issue, we will address your real-life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear. Elements of several problems may be combined for this column. Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.

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Fresh start

If the mess is *BIG* —
make each task *small*.

Try a different starting point.

■ “Marcel, please bring me any clothes laying on your bedroom floor.”

He can do that. You can point to missed t-shirts, pajama bottoms, or stray socks and help or accompany him to carry the pile into the laundry room. This is simple, direct — and it works.

On to the next step.

■ “There are books on the floor. Please put all of the books on the shelf.”

At this point your child may give you a suspicious look and ask, “Am I cleaning my room?” to which you can reply, “We’re just getting things put away, dear.”

technique is to set out three labeled containers. Each container describes what goes into it:

■ Put It Away (or set it aside to go to the laundry or another room)

■ Give It Away (this is a great way to encourage generosity, too)

■ Throw It Away (or recycle it)

All of these methods break tasks into manageable pieces, providing a clear direction out of the chaos — to order.

Companionship helps

Sometimes further resistance appears in the form of such comments as, “It’s too hard”; “I’m too tired”; “There is too much to do.” This is your clue to move ahead to the next strategy, without losing the nice flow of cooperation.

Most of us don’t like to work alone, especially if a task is not all that fun. Working together can make a job seem less daunting. Here are three ways to do this.

■ Offer Assistance

“I see some markers without caps. Please bring all the markers to me and I will help you match the caps to them.”

■ Offer to Work Together

“I’ll stack the books while you gather the markers.”

■ Offer to Stay Nearby

“Would you like me to stay with you while you gather your dirty clothes?” “I’ll sit here and make out our grocery list while you put your books away.”

■ Have Fun

Doing a task does not have to be a misery in and of itself, either. There

Do you expect neatly tucked sheets and a smooth surface or does getting the pillows and blankets off the floor suffice? You may think your child knows what you expect — but often her view of the big picture is not in sync with yours.

So BIG: Where to begin?

Even if your child does know what is expected — the task may feel overwhelming. Isn’t it more appealing to go out to the deck to ride one’s tricycle in peace than to face that room-size chaos? Wouldn’t you rather watch cartoon heroines battle evil than tackle that monstrous mess on your bedroom floor?

This leads to the next problem: *Where to begin?* which takes us back to the original communication problem — what does “*clean your room*” really mean?

Picture it

A variation of this step-by-step process is to work with your child and identify all the tasks that contribute to cleaning up a mess. Then make these visual by drawing images for each task or finding magazine pictures, then construct a simple chart of three to five tasks. You might have pictures of:

■ a washer or box of laundry detergent

■ a book or shelf of books

■ a set of marking pens or a sample of your child’s art

Use this visual list, asking your child what he needs to do first; then next; and so on, by referring to the images pictured.

Older children

As children grow older (five and beyond, including adults!) a similar

are ways to make it more fun for everyone. Here are a few of them.

- **Try a Challenge**

“Let’s see who can pick up the most books.” “I’ll bet I can gather all the towels from the bathroom and get them to the laundry room before you get your dirty clothes there.”

- **Offer to Celebrate Success**

“As soon as your books are back on the shelf, let’s snuggle up and read your new story.”

- **Set a Team Goal**

“If we can get your room finished with enough time to get the laundry put away before lunch, we can spend this afternoon at the library.”

In each of these cases, everyone comes out a winner — something missing from a power struggle. In a power struggle, someone comes out ‘THE WINNER’, leaving the other with the title (often unspoken — but still felt) of ‘loser’.

Attitude and gratitude

Jobs of any kind play an important role in helping children to feel like valued and contributing members of the family.

Appreciation = Encouragement
Criticism = Discouragement

When we acknowledge and appreciate contributions — we get increased cooperation. When we find fault — we get discouragement.

“You are taking good care of our marking pens. I really appreciate having them nice and moist so the colors stay bright.”

Contrast that to:

“The markers got put away but your books are still all over the floor.”

Which statement would make you want to continue the job? By acknowledging one task or even a successful effort, “All but one of the marker caps is matched up. Thank you. Great job! Let’s see if we can find the missing cap together,” we encourage cooperation’s growth.

When only perfection will do — most of us leave a lot to be desired. If perfection seems almost unattainable — why keep trying?

“Clean your room” not
“Go to your room”

The task of getting your child’s (or your neighbor’s child’s) room cleaned does not need to end with that child being sent to her room *to suffer*. By

approaching the task in a different way, with a new attitude — the result can be cooperation as well as a clean room (or cleared up play area, de-cluttered bathroom, or the tidying up of any other mess).

Focus on cooperation instead of obedience or *suffering*; go at it step-by-step; make the time worthwhile by expressing gratitude for your child’s contributions, providing an opportunity for him to feel competent and valued.

There will be less mess and more happiness — at least at your house (though we can’t guarantee what will be happening at your neighbor’s).

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