

Slate

FAMILY

The Messy Room Dilemma

When to ignore behavior, when to change it.

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Thanks to more than 50 years of research, we know how to change children's behavior. In brief, you identify the unwanted behavior, define its *positive opposite* (the desirable behavior you want to replace it with), and then make sure that your child engages in a lot of *reinforced practice* of the new behavior until it replaces the unwanted one. Reinforced practice means that you pay as much attention as possible to the positive opposite so that your child falls into a pattern: Do the right behavior, get a reward (praise or a token); do the behavior, get a reward. Real life is never as mechanically predictable as that formula makes it sound, and many other factors will bear on your success—including your relationship with your child, what behaviors you model in your home, and what influences your child is exposed to in other relationships—but, still, we know that reinforced practice usually works. If you [handle the details properly](#), in most cases a relatively brief period of intense attention to the problem, lasting perhaps a few weeks, should be enough to work a permanent change in behavior.

So, yes, you can change your child's behavior, but that doesn't mean you always should. When faced with an unwanted behavior, first ask yourself, *Can I let this go?* Sometimes the answer is *Hell, no!* If your kid likes to spend hours at his window in full-body camo and a Sad Clown mask, tracking the neighbors in the sights of his BB gun, you'll probably want to put a stop to that right now. But a lot of behaviors fall into the lesser category of annoying but not necessarily worth addressing. Ask yourself if changing a behavior will really make a worthwhile difference in your child's life and your own.

Many unwanted behaviors, including some that disturb parents, tend to drop out on their own, especially if you don't overreact to them and reinforce them with a great deal of excited attention. Take thumb sucking, which is quite common up to age 5. At that point it drops off sharply and continues to decline. Unless the dentist tells you that you need to do something about it right now, you can probably let thumb sucking go. The same principle applies for most stuttering. Approximately 5 percent of all children stutter, usually at some point between ages 2 and 5. Parents get understandably nervous when their children stutter, but the vast majority of these children (approximately 80 percent) stop stuttering on their own by age 6. If stuttering persists past that point or lasts for a period extending more than six months, then it's time to do something about it.

There are a lot more behaviors, running the range from annoying to unacceptable, in this category.

Approximately 60 percent of 4- and 5-year-old boys can't sit still as long as adults want them to, and approximately 50 percent of 4- and 5-year-old boys and girls whine to the extent that their parents consider it a significant problem. Both fidgeting and whining tend to decrease on their own with age, especially if you don't reinforce these annoying behaviors by showing your child that they're a surefire way to get your (exasperated) attention. Thirty to 40 percent of 10- and 11-year-old boys and girls lie in a way that their parents identify as a significant problem, but this age seems to be the peak, and the rate of problem lying tends to plummet thereafter and cease to be an issue. By adolescence, more than 50 percent of males and 20 percent to 35 percent of females have engaged in one delinquent behavior—typically theft or vandalism. For most children, it does not turn into a continuing problem.

Now, we're not saying that you should ignore lying or stealing or some other potentially serious misbehavior just because it will probably drop out on its own in good time. There's an important distinction to be made here between managing behavior and other parental motives and duties. Parents punish for several reasons—to teach right and wrong, to satisfy the demands of justice, to establish their authority—that have little to do with changing behavior. You can't just let vandalism go without consequences, and it's reasonable to refuse to put up with even a lesser offense such as undue whining, but don't confuse punishing misbehavior with taking effective steps to eliminate it. Punishment on its own (that is, not supplemented by reinforced practice of the positive opposite) has been proven again and again to be a fairly weak method for changing behavior. The misbehaviors in question, minor or serious, are more likely to drop out on their own than they are to be eliminated through punishment.

Especially as your child gets older, more independent, and more capable of holding her own in a household struggle over behavior, you will need to practice parenting triage—asking, *Is it worth drawing the line here?* Be especially wary of slippery slopes, falling dominoes, and other common but not necessarily relevant rationales for intervening in your child's behavior.

Consider, for example, an adolescent's fantastically messy room, a typical flash point for household conflicts about things that really matter to kids and parents, like autonomy and respect and the rights of the individual in relation to the family. Messiness is a habit, a set of behaviors, so it would not be difficult to define a positive opposite of mess-making, set up a system of rewards for cleaning up, and replace a bad habit with a better one. But let's first ask a basic question: *Why focus on the messiness of your child's room?* There may be good reasons to. It may be that your child never has presentable clothes to wear because they pile up dirty on her floor. Or her room could present a real sanitation problem, if there are dirty dishes or discarded food in there. Maybe there aren't enough clean forks in the house because they're all on her floor, in empty TV dinner trays.

These are significant matters that would need to be addressed right away, but what if the problem is not presentable clothing or sanitation or the household fork supply but just sloppiness? You could fix it, probably, but is it really that big a deal?

When you ask yourself, *Why focus on it?*, you may decide that it's not worth addressing the problem. Or asking *Why focus on it?* may help you to narrow down the problem to those elements that really do need to be addressed. Some aspects of a sloppy room may really be nonnegotiable:

candles and incense near flammable material or rotting food or some other potential biohazard. If the mess is dangerous, if there are consequences for other people in the household, then it's certainly worth addressing. And, guided by your own answer to *Why focus on it?*, be prepared to trade an inessential for an essential. Let her keep her clothes on the floor if she does her own laundry and cleans up food mess as soon as she makes it.

Parents frequently respond to *Why focus on it?* by expressing a worry that if they let their child be sloppy in her room she will be sloppy everywhere: in her personal appearance, in her schoolwork, in her career. They have fantasies about her getting fired in middle age for having a messy office. But when it comes to messiness, the slippery-slope argument is a fallacy. Having a messy room is an identifiable stage that tends to appear in adolescence and then go away. After the messy interlude of the preteen and teen years, most people return to or rise to some basic standard of neatness—a standard very likely resembling the one you have modeled in your own housekeeping.

So if your adolescent child keeps herself reasonably clean and presentable, and if the problem's not so severe that it's causing other problems, consider letting slide the messiness of her room as a stage she's going through. Yes, every parent will always have a story of an adult who's a genuine slob to back up the claim that not everybody recovers from adolescent messiness, but those cases are exceptions. Really, how many adults do you know who have rooms like your kid's? Not many. They grew out of it. So why move heaven and earth—and increase the amount of conflict in the house, and use up energy and goodwill perhaps better reserved for more significant matters—to correct a problem that will almost certainly self-correct?

Of course, parents can have their own real reasons to object to even a little messiness in a child's room. It could be that you're a very tidy person, and you just can't abide it. That's a legitimate complaint, but recognize that it's not about any abnormal behavior on the part of your child. Be straight about it with her. Tell her that you can't live with such a mess in the house, and that, together, you're going to have to compromise on some middle ground between your standard (*no mess ever, anywhere*) and hers (*let the clothes fall where they may*). As you work out the compromise, consider that, especially if the rest of your house is neat, your child's messy room is an expression of autonomy and independence, normal for her stage of development. And try to remember that clutter, however much it offends you, may not belong in the same category of urgency as things that can lead to permanent consequences—like those candles right under the curtains.

What if you just ignore an unwanted behavior but don't reinforce its positive opposite? *Extinction*—eliminating an unwanted behavior just by ignoring it—does have the virtue of not reinforcing the unwanted behavior by attending to it, but it's not a very effective way to change behavior. The research shows that extinction on its own is likely to fail. And even if extinction works in the long run, the unwanted behavior you're ignoring often gets worse before it starts its slow decline, so you'll need to be disciplined and patient.

When the unwanted behavior does get worse before it begins to go away—a recognized effect called "extinction burst"—parents often become prematurely convinced that ignoring has failed and switch over to attending to the behavior again, explaining why it's bad, punishing it, yelling, and so on. This attention to the extinction burst unwittingly makes the behavior worse in two ways.

First, the parent attended to a more extreme example of the behavior than usual—so, for instance, if you're trying to eliminate tantrums, you've now reinforced tantrums that register on the Richter scale. Second, the parent attended to the behavior after a period of ignoring it, which is called intermittent reinforcement and helps to maintain it. Yes, you can get back on track, but you have now made your task more difficult, and ignoring is more likely than ever to fail.

Let's say you have exercised yogic self-discipline and have successfully ignored an annoying behavior to the point that it begins to go away. As you continue to ignore the behavior and it declines (very slowly), one final nasty surprise lies in wait: Just when you think success is assured, the behavior may return out of the blue, almost as bad as ever. This temporary return, a predictable late spike, makes most parents who get this far decide that they have failed and go back to attending to the behavior, returning them to square one. But the final spontaneous return of the behavior, a last gasp before it disappears for good, would be short-lived if you could tie yourself to the mast and ignore it. In some especially frustrating cases, a forewarned parent does find the strength to ignore even this last onslaught, only to be undermined by a grandparent, spouse, or someone else in the house who feeds the futility by declaring defeat and jumping in to attend to the behavior.

That leaves a further question we'll take up in a subsequent article: When do you get serious about actively dealing with a child's misbehavior? Getting serious usually means first taking steps on your own, but sometimes it means seeking professional help. Even if you're inclined to let a behavior drop out on its own, and even if it's likely to, you're not always in a position to wait for nature to take its course. Yes, sure, if your 4-year-old tries to steal a candy bar from a store under your nose, you might just make him put it back, and you see it as a phase he'll grow out of. But what if your 11-year-old steals a candy bar when he's in a store without you, and the cashier grabs him and calls the police, and your enterprising heir takes a poke at the cop and makes a break for it? It may still be a phase, a statistically predictable dalliance with stealing that's likely to end on its own, but you're going to feel a much more urgent need to do something about it. And you may even decide that you need the help of an expert. In a follow-up article, we'll offer some guidelines for making such decisions.

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