

Why Your Child With ADHD Has Such a Messy Room

And what parents can do about it

By Rae Jacobson

What You'll Learn

- Why do kids with ADHD have messy rooms?
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Parents can help kids tackle the mess in their room by:

- Breaking “Clean your room!” down into smaller tasks
- Using a chart to list what needs to be done
- Building routines to clean at a regular time, not just when it gets overwhelming

Mess and *ADHD* go hand in hand, and with them comes chaos, lateness — *Where is my coat?!* — and frustration. Parents often find themselves at wit's end, looking at their child and wondering: *Why can't you just clean your room??*

Because for kids with ADHD, it's not quite that simple. People with ADHD have a difficult time with many of the executive functioning skills most of us unconsciously use every day. These invisible skills are what enable us to plan, prioritize, manage our time, and get things done.

A person without ADHD might look at a messy room and think, “Okay. I've got an hour to get things done. First, make the bed, then pick up the laundry, then...” But for a child with ADHD, that breakdown of what to do, when to do it, and how long it will take, isn't automatic.

Understanding how executive functioning issues affect kids with ADHD can help parents know what a child's trouble spots are and how to help. Common issues include:

Prioritizing tasks: Deciding what needs to get done and in what order. For example, a child with ADHD might not understand that putting dirty laundry in the hamper takes priority over organizing all of their books by color.

Managing time: Figuring out how long smaller tasks will take, and how much time they'll need to complete the whole job. For example, a child who has two hours to get their room cleaned up before friends come for a sleepover spends so much time on one small job, like clearing off their desk, they don't have time to do the rest.

Staying focused: Getting off track or distracted. For example, they get caught up in reading a book instead of putting it back on the shelf.

Task initiation: Difficulty getting started, especially when the task at hand seems overwhelming, complicated, or boring (like, say, cleaning up a messy room).

Transitions: Trouble shifting from one task to the next. For example, they might get stalled instead of moving from one cleaning job, like making the bed, to another, like putting their shoes away.

Self-regulation and impulse control: Sticking with a task, especially a boring one, is challenging for anyone. But for kids with ADHD who often lack the skills to regulate their behavior and control impulses it can feel impossible. This can look like frustration, giving up, or getting off track— *I was cleaning up, I just decided to take a quick video game break!* And often ends in a rushed, messy job, like just shoving all their clutter under the bed, or just failing to finish at all.

So, what can parents do help?

Break it down: Instead of issuing a blanket order to “clean your room,” it helps to break the job into more manageable tasks. For example, let's say your child needs to make the bed, put their laundry in the hamper, and bring dirty dishes to the kitchen sink. You could say, “Start by making your bed.” Then, when that's done, you move on to the next task: “Ok, now pick up the laundry.” And so on. Doing one thing at a time can help kids feel less overwhelmed and make it easier for them to get a sense of how much time each task will take.

Avoid multi-step directions: Try not to give strings of directions or commands — “Pick up your socks, then do the bed, then hang up the clothes...” Keep instructions clear and short, “Start by making your bed.” Then when one task is done, you can move on to the next, “Great job. Okay, now put the shoes away.”

Use a chart: If you don't (and let's be real, who does) have time to stage-manage your child as they clean, try making a task chart together. Write each job on a white board or piece of paper, and leave space for your child to check it off when they're done. If having some incentive helps your child stay motivated you could offer a reward for finishing all the tasks on the list, like extra gaming time or a special treat for dessert.

Keep it simple

Make your child's room as easy to clean, and keep clean, as possible.

- Declutter. Clutter is the enemy of clean. Get rid of old papers. Put papers or pictures you'd like to save into scrap books instead of piles. Donate old toys, books, clothes, and anything else your child no longer uses. Putting a to-be-donated box in the house can help encourage kids to participate, and be a good way to teach them about giving back.
- Make putting things away as easy by possible creating extra space. Store seasonal items, like winter coats and boots away when they're not being used. Try to make sure kids' closets and dressers are uncrowded and easy to use.
- When it comes to storage focus on finding solutions that fit your child's needs. For example, younger kids will be more likely to put things away if storage is easy to reach and use, like low-down cubes with sliding baskets for putting toys away.

Get creative

Kids with ADHD often benefit from nontraditional solutions. Remember, what *does* work is more important than what *should* work. For example, if your child has a hard time putting clothes in a dresser, get easy-to-use bins instead. One for clean clothes, one for will-wear-again items, and one for dirty laundry. Because...you guessed it. The easier a system is to use, the more likely your child will be to use it.

Build routines

Kids with ADHD benefit from clear routines and repetition. Knowing what's expected of them, and having a clear understanding of how to meet those expectations, helps kids build confidence and executive functioning skills. Establishing routines can help kids get into a groove and become more independent when it comes to tidying up. For example, making their bed every day, or putting their shoes in the same place every time they come home.

For bigger jobs, stick to a schedule. For example, you could agree that your child will clean their room every Tuesday and Friday after school, instead of randomly suggesting they clean up when things get too messy. When kids know what to expect, and when they're expected to do it, they feel more prepared and less overwhelmed. If your child benefits from ADHD medication when it's time to clean, try to choose times when their meds will be working, for example weekend mornings, instead of weekday nights.

Be patient

Finally, and this is easier said than done, remember to be patient with your child as they learn these new skills. Building habits takes time, and children with ADHD are starting from a deficit. If your child was learning a second language, you wouldn't expect them to be fluent overnight.

When your child *does* clean up offer positive, specific feedback, for example, "Thanks for putting your clothes away — that was a big help." And let your child know that it's okay not to be perfect right away. You'll get there together.

It's about more than a messy room

The benefits of helping your child learn the skills they need to get organized go far beyond a (finally) clean room. The messiness and disorganization that comes with ADHD can have a big impact on children's self-esteem. Kids may feel embarrassed or ashamed by their struggles, and these negative feelings are often confirmed by outsiders — a friend who points out how messy they are, a fed-up teacher asking them why they don't have their homework assignment *again*.

The cost of being messy can be even higher for girls, who are less likely to be diagnosed with ADHD, but more likely to be subjected to negative social feedback for being disorganized, or looking less-than put together.

Focusing on building your child's executive functioning skills – and supporting their self-esteem – will help them feel more competent and confident both now and as they grow up. Not to mention that, hopefully, they'll be doing that growing in a nice, clean room.

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