



The Chores Challenge

Does the Bed Really Need to be Made?

Kay Kosak Abrams, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Kay,

We have not been consistent about asking our children to make their beds and do other chores. Sometimes, I do it for them and sometimes, they go to sleep in beds that have not been made. My friend's kids not only make their beds, they seem to always say "please" and "thank you." What am I doing wrong?

Dear Parent,

Parenting is about managing and teaching. We teach our children by our actions and our expectations. We also choose our priorities based on our situations, our values and our traditions.

Some behaviors we teach our children are necessary, such as brushing their teeth. But stressed and overly busy parents can sometimes manage only the essentials. And many parents may be so eager to create a kid-friendly world that they end up with more demands than they can handle.

When it comes to manners and forming good habits, overwhelmed parents may hope their children learn through osmosis or pick the skills up in kindergarten. Behaviors that involve manners or discipline, such as saying "please" and "thank you," turning off lights when you leave the room and clearing your plate, fall in the basket of learned behavior.

Most of us grew up with manners drilled into us, like multiplication tables. Indeed, good habits must be shaped and practiced repeatedly and integrated into everyday living from early on. But it is never too late to stop and think, and thereby to be mindful, as we parent. I tell parents that not every child has "ADHD." Most can, indeed, "sit in a pew" and "wait for a meal." And they can, indeed, make their beds.



Jana Christy

- The first step is for you to think about values and long-term goals. If you decide that making the bed is of value, it is time for a plan of action.
- If your children are very young, you are in luck! Making the bed is like teaching children to wash their hands before a meal. It is a learned habit, so starting young and making it a natural part of the morning routine is smart.
- Let your children know that you are all going to start making your beds. Make it simple and matter-of-fact.
- For starters, make the beds with your children, and avoid perfectionism. Keep the goal age-appropriate and, therefore, doable.
- Avoid power struggles by keeping your tone calm but confident. For most children, showing appreciation or commenting on the fact that they have made their beds helps them continue to remember to do so.
- With older children, you may have to set two or three minimal expectations, such as "put your dirty clothes in the hamper and make your bed, then we will stay out of your hair."
- If frequent reminders fail, and you would rather not resort to

tiresome discussions to establish a new behavioral expectation, a natural consequence may be necessary. Put some careful thought into a logical and meaningful consequence that you can realistically reinforce. Older children can have a voice about the consequences, but parents have veto power.

- You may try connecting “making the bed” with the privilege of bedtime. Restate your expectations and let your children know that they will be going to bed an hour earlier when they fail to remember to make their beds. You can also turn the “stick” into a “carrot” by saying, “If you remember to make your bed, you will have a later bedtime.”

- Never state the connection of a behavior and its outcome with a lot of emotion. Your child will hear it as a threat or bribe.

- Some families prefer payment of allowance as a positive consequence. But another, more natural, one may be to have the children make the bed when they get home from school.

- To avoid setting up a system of “let’s make a deal,” there is no need to rely upon stickers and points or television as reward. Such incentives only work in the short run to jump-start a new behavior. After that, most parents feel helpless and at the mercy of the prize.

- Reinforcing a behavior takes time. Give it a chance, and do not change the consequence frequently. Frequent changing of the rules undermines your authority and makes everyone angry.

- Remember that families do not operate like controlled scientific labs! Shaping and reinforcing behaviors in the real world is more “one step forward and two steps backward.” Begin with frequent reminders. And despite setbacks, stick to the same expectation with the same system, and don’t give up.

- Warning: Children can “sniff out” ambivalence. Inconsistency is a demon when it comes to changing behavior. Emotional reactivity is also a demon because then it turns parenting into a power struggle. Children know when screaming and whining reinforce parental helplessness and let *them* shape *your* behavior.

- Finally, if morning time is already filled with power struggles and commands, you need to manage your system of getting ready in the morning *before* you take on yet another behavioral change.

I failed to instill the “make your bed” habit early on. But I, like you, was able to slow down, think and turn our expectations around in my efforts to raise children who behave in a responsible manner. Confidence is clarity, and clarity comes from thinking about your values and your goals as parents. The dirty clothes will be in the hamper, at last. Family members will say “the magic words,” and beds will be made-most of the time.

Kay Kosak Abrams is a psychologist in private practice who brings psychology to the community through her public speaking, writing and educational recordings. Join her for a monthly “Parenting Coffee-house” for inspiration about how to parent with greater confidence. For details go to www.kayabrams.com.



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