

## 379 - How to Help Kids Clean Their Room

Hi there! You're listening to The Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra Adachi, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. Today is Episode 379 - How to Help Kids Clean Their Room.

An important disclaimer to start. If you do not have kids, obviously this episode is not geared in your direction as much. However, everyone has the capacity to want a clean room, so if you wish your room was cleaner and you struggle to keep it that way, you might actually get some help from this episode. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if this approach gets some love from everyone, not just from parents.

In a minute, I'm going to share a loose five-step framework as it relates to cleaning a room, but before I get into it, I want to say at the top that my perspective towards kids and housework has been getting the best makeover recently. I told you in a previous episode about an audio course I've been taking from Sam Kelly called Little Cyclebreakers, and it is so incredibly excellent. The biggest takeaway for me from that course shows up in big ways in this particular episode. I now realize that teaching my kids to clean their room has much larger implications than I always thought. It's not just about them learning personal responsibility and basic skills even though both are great. It's about showing how housework and homekeeping does not and should not fall to one person, particularly the mother. More specifically, the act of noticing what needs to be done should not fall to only the mother in a home where there is one and that learning to notice is way more important than learning the actual cleaning skill. It's kind of like the parenting version of learning to pivot is more important than learning to plan. We've been taught that planning your life is so important and that you're just one planner away from getting your life together, but really the skill that's more important to nurture and develop is learning to pivot. Life will change a lot, plans will fall apart, and you can pivot around them. That skill is way more vital. The same is true of our kids and housework. Yes, the actual skills matter, but them learning to notice what needs to be done in a kind way is way more important than the specificity of how they do the actual task.

My goal isn't to teach my kids to clean their rooms. It's to help them see all the things clean could mean and how to notice it on their own. Which is a lifelong skill. So big shoutout to Sam Kelly for helping me see this perspective. That thinking plus Lazy Genius principles is quite a dynamic combo.

Alright, let's jump into this framework.

Step one: name what matters. Of course. But I want you to do that in three specific areas: first, what matters about you and your own attitude toward your kid and their room? Second, what matters as it relates to your kid? And third, what matters about the cleanliness of the room itself? So what matters most to you about you, about your kid, and about the clean room itself. Let's break those down.

First, what matters about you and your own attitude toward your kid and their room? I think it's important to start here because I know for me, I can get riled up and picky super fast, and even if I don't think I am, my kids still do.

Last night, we were watching a Dude Perfect video about Christmas stereotypes (my kids love Dude Perfect), and one of the stereotypes was called Tree Police. The video showed a mom saying "garland is like train tracks they're never supposed to cross" and then pulling out a tape measure to make sure ornaments were six inches apart or something. One of my kids was like, "Mom, that's totally you!" And honestly y'all it hurt my feelings. So I waited a beat and said, "Wait, you think I'm the Tree Police? With the tape measure and everything?" And my kid laughed and said, "Yeah!" Y'all. Ouch!

Okay, here's my perspective on how I decorate the tree. When we open up the boxes of ornaments and stuff, the kids start putting on ornaments before we do lights and string garland and all the things that come before ornaments. So I ask them to wait so we can go in order to make sure everything gets on there. And I do encourage them to spread out the ornaments when they put them on because they are just ornament clumpers, but never in a million years have I pulled out a tape measure or purposefully shamed them for their ornament placement. I see it as just normal guiding on decorating the tree so it's pretty and cozy and we don't have to undo any steps because of going in an unhelpful order. But apparently to my kids, I'm the Dude Perfect Tree Police. I'm the crazy stereotype. I would never see myself that way, but my kid does. I share that to say that sometimes our own attitude towards something comes off differently to our kids than we mean it to, and while I think that's normal, it's something to pay attention to.

While I don't mind being a mom that sometimes has standards for things that matter, I also want to be aware that my desire for something might come across as more intense than I realize. I'm trying to pay attention to that. And that, to bring it back around to clean rooms, is one of the things that matters to me about me. I want to teach my kids to notice and empower them to make their own decisions and help them see good orders for things, but I'm trying to do that with a lot more relaxation than usual. Because apparently my usual is still pretty intense. Go figure. But that's what matters to me about me. I want to be more loose, more flexible, and have a posture towards my kids and their rooms that's empowering and encouraging, not shaming with metaphorical tape measures.

I still can't believe he said I was the Tree Police though. Whatever, I'll work it out in therapy and it'll be fine. Moving on!

So that's me. What about you? What matters most to you about you in this process? Do you want to be more consistent? More fair if you have multiple kids? More personalized if you have multiple kids? Do you want to keep your anger in check? Do you want to avoid avoidance?

What matters most to you about you in this process? Allow that to impact your foundational posture as you listen to the rest of this episode and also as you interact with your kids.

We're still in step one. This step actually matters the most, so I'm glad we're spending some extra time here. After you name what matters to you about you, name what matters most to you about your kid. What do you want your kid to feel or experience when it comes to cleaning their room? This doesn't have to be super emotional or existential. It could be something like you want them to develop a habit that helps them, or you want them to learn to do something basic like make a bed. Your priorities can change over time and should, so just think about right now. What matters most to you about your kid in this process?

I would have different answers for all my kids because they're all different, and that might be true of you. Or you might want something that is consistently true for everybody. Obviously, you get to choose.

In the past for my oldest, I would've said the thing that matters most to me about him is that he develops the habit of tending to his room. But we just confirmed he has ADHD, and do you know what I recently learned from a friend who also has ADHD? The ADHD brain literally does not develop habits. I won't get into the specificity of that because I'm not a doctor, but anything a person with ADHD does that is habitual or rhythmic is due to outside forces like timers, reminders, and visual cues. It's not intrinsic. And I have absolutely been expecting Sam to clean his room habitually like it's intrinsic. Now that I have better information, what matters most is that he learns to utilize timers and visual cues for his room and his stuff. Habits don't make sense for him. Learning to see and respond does.

What about you and your kid or kids? What matters most to you about them and their experience with cleaning their room?

And the third area where you want to name what matters most is the room itself.

In order to help a kid clean their room, they need to know what clean is, and that definition is different for everyone. Which can be a problem, right? Not only is saying "clean your room" too big, it could also mean multiple things. And a kid doesn't really know. If you just tell a five year old to clean her room, she's likely not going to have any idea what that means or how to break down the tasks to accomplish it.

In just a minute we're going to identify what I'm calling a Clean Compass because I like alliteration, but first, you need to name what matters about the room itself. That will guide you in creating your own Clean Compass.

What one thing, if it's done in your kid's room, will make the entire room feel cleaner to you based on what your definition of clean is? Is it that the bed is made? The area rug doesn't have anything on it? The trash is thrown away? The desk is cleared off? There aren't any clothes on the floor? It might be several or all of the above, but try to name one. Name what matters most about the actual cleanliness of the kid's room. If this one thing gets taken care of regularly, it'll make the rest of it more tolerable.

Alright, so we've done step one: name what matters, and we did that in three important areas. . What matters most to you about you, what matters most about your kid, and what matters most about the cleanliness of the room itself?

Now, let's move on to step two.

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The definition of clean is personal, but it's also gradual. If you say "clean your room" to your kid, you probably don't mean deep clean the baseboards or wash the windows or launder the bedspread. So what do you mean? That's the purpose of step two which is to create your Clean Compass. A compass helps us know what direction to go in, right? We need that for cleaning, too.

So where would your Clean Compass point? A compass has four basic directions in north, south, east, and west, and I've always had four levels of clean in our house so it works great. I'll share our four levels of clean, but you can break your Clean Compass down however you want. My guess is you'll break them down by either levels of clean or by frequency, and honestly the two align pretty well. I personally go with level of clean though, so I'll just share ours.

The first direction is a basic tending task. This is something that is done pretty much every day that honestly helps the room from becoming chaotic faster than necessary. In our house, it's dirty dishes and trash. If you have dishes or trash in your room, you're expected to take care of it before you get in the bed.

For you, the basic tending task could be to make your bed or pick clothes up off the floor or make sure the area rug is clear or that there's a path from the door to the bed. What is the most bare bones definition of clean or the thing that you'd like for your kids to either do or have help doing on a fairly daily basis? That's the level one basic tending task on your Clean Compass.

Level two for us is a quick tidy. This doesn't actually mean that everything is put away. That's later. A quick tidy is about basic visual order, and the things that contribute to visual disorder in my kids' rooms are trash, dishes, and clothes. And if you recall, trash and dishes are level one. They're tended to pretty much every day. Which means that a quick tidy really just adds one more thing which is clothes. If the kids don't put away their laundry, that means they don't have a laundry basket to put the dirty stuff in, and then the dirty stuff is just all over the floor. That can definitely contribute to visual disorder in a room, making it feel dirty. It also makes you react as a parent to a higher level of clean when just taking care of that one thing in a quick tidy could make a huge difference. So for us, level two is a quick tidy which really is just taking care of the daily basics of dishes and trash and then adding clothes on top of it. That might happen once or twice a week.

Level three is a reset. That's probably the level most closely associated to how we've been conditioned to think about cleaning a room. Everything has to be put in its place. Now, I love putting things in their place. Put everything in its place is a Lazy Genius principle. It's helpful and awesome and doesn't need to be demonized here. But it might be getting you into trouble if you're expecting a level three reset where everything is put away in a kid's room, but that kid doesn't yet regularly experience smaller tasks like the basic tending task or quick tidy. Jumping to level three as your baseline might be part of your frustration and your kid's too.

So level three is a reset. A reset can mean anything you need it to mean, but for us, it's that everything in the room is put back in its place. Maybe Annie has had her cousin over three days in a row, and Barbie paraphernalia has just thrown up all over the room. A quick tidy doesn't tend to that, but a reset does. A reset means we put the Barbie dolls in the doll basket, the clothes in the clothes basket, and the furniture in the furniture basket. Once those things are put in their place, the room automatically feels cleaner and gets a reset.

I've pretty much always used these levels, but when I was listening to Sam Kelly's Little Cyclebreakers, she said something like, "you have to teach your kids what a reset looks like, and it might take awhile." It was such a simple concept, but that was where I'd left a step undone. I was assuming my kids knew what a reset meant, and they didn't really. So I'm having to teach them. It's slow work, but it's worth it.

So level three is a reset where everything is put back in its place. This happens maybe once every couple of weeks. Really, it's responsive to the kid's energy or to my level of tolerance. If either one would benefit from a room reset, we do a room reset.

The fourth level doesn't happen often, but it does happen and that's the deep clean. You get things out from under the bed. You go through old clothes to see what fits and doesn't. You remove toys that a kid doesn't play with anymore. Usually level four leads to a yard sale.

But here's what we do, y'all. And this is important, so listen up. Because we don't have specific levels of clean, because we don't have our Clean Compass laid out, we don't prioritize levels one and two, we might unreasonably expect level three all the time, and then we react to a kid's dirty room by forcing a level four. That's Big Black Trash Bag Energy. That's "everything is going to be different around here" energy. Level four needs to happen, but if you focus more on levels one and two, on basic tending tasks and quick tidys where not everything gets put away, you'll be less reactionary. Doesn't that sound amazing?

So step two in all of these is to create your Clean Compass. If you want to borrow my words - basic tending task, quick tidy, reset, and deep clean, go for it, or you can choose your own. You can also build these around time. One thing is daily, one is weekly, one monthly, and one quarterly or annually or something. That reeks of old school cleaning schedule energy which I tend to actively avoid because I don't like people telling me what I should and shouldn't do, mostly because I feel terrible when I don't measure up, but you could handle it like a Lazy

Genius and make your own list of what your daily, weekly, monthly, and annual tasks should be based on your season of life.

Okay, the rest of these steps are a lot shorter. Step one is to name what matters to you about you, about your kid, and about the room itself. Step two is to create your Clean Compass so you and your kid know what direction you're walking in.

Step three is to be age appropriate. I think your Clean Compass can work for kids of all ages, but *your* involvement in those things will change based on the age and even temperament of your kid. You'll do a quick tidy with your kindergartener, gradually empowering her to do it herself. But be patient with your kids. Be age appropriate in your expectations. This is a long game, and you don't need to panic. Be age appropriate.

Step four is to start a rhythm. I think the Clean Compass does that already. Just start with the basic tending task. Name what matters, and start the task. Connect to a time where your kids are already doing something like cleaning up after dinner or getting ready for bed. Pay attention to the time of day where energy is relatively high or to where you would personally not mind doing your own basic tending task. If you struggle to make your bed in the morning because you're rushed or because you don't see the benefit but you expect your kid to have the energy or motivation, I think you'll both get into a little trouble.

Start small with the rhythm. Something super tiny daily to begin, and do it for as long as you need to. Then start thinking about what your Clean Compass is. What direction can you accurately and confidently send your kid in or walk together with them in to reach a level of clean you both understand? I don't know that I'd even start with a deep clean or a reset and then start small. If their rooms are messy, start with that daily level one. It can't get any worse, right? And then you can teach them and yourself the value of those small, daily steps. Then add the quick tidy element that helps you get things in just enough visual order to not make you crazy. After that, you can start working on the reset. But I don't know that it's wise to start with the reset and reverse engineer the rest. It might, but consider starting where you are instead of where you think you should be.

And step five is to be kind. If you have a fourteen year old and you haven't done a lot of investment in teaching that kid skills or how to notice or there haven't been regular tasks and responsibilities toward cleaning, don't expect that kid to be able to do more than they currently are. They're young in tending tasks. Be kind and patient. Be kind to yourself if you feel like you've dropped the ball on teaching your kids this stuff. Y'all, being a person is tough, there's so much to juggle, and motherhood specifically fragments your brain in ways you don't even realize. Be kind, please. Be kind to yourself and to your kids. Be patient with them and the process. Be aware that the greater skill you're teaching them is to notice their space kindly and tend to it in a reasonable way which also takes the mental load off of you as the mom all the time.

So step one, name what matters. Step two, create your Clean Compass. Step three, be age appropriate. Step four, start a small rhythm. Step five, be kind.

And that's how to help kids clean their room.

If you'd like to check out Sam's Little Cyclebreakers course, we'll have a link in the shownotes. I'm an affiliate for her now because I love it so much, and she generously makes it easy to share and get rewarded for doing that, but I told y'all about this before she offered me that affiliate link. I like full transparency around here, so while this is an affiliate link, I'd tell you to look into Little Cyclebreakers even without one.

Alright, before we go, let's celebrate the Lazy Genius of the Week! This week it's Kate Walsh. Kate writes: "I'm in a hungry teenaged boy season right now and they love chicken and cheese quesadillas. It's important to me to have the ingredients on hand to make them quickly and easily. I started buying one of the jumbo packs of chicken breasts, trim with kitchen shears, then season, and bake on a large foil covered sheet pan. I shred all the chicken with two forks. I put the amount for one quesadilla into a freezer bag. Into the freezer they go, and now I have at least 10 bags of shredded chicken for quesadillas. Thanks for helping me lazy genius feeding my boys!"

This is great, Kate! I love it when we find a meal that works well and can have one thing ready to go to help it get to the table faster. That's me and pickled red cabbage. If I have it, somehow I always find my way to a meal. Thanks for sharing, and congratulations on being the Lazy Genius of the Week!

If you'd like to be considered for the Lazy Genius of the Week, email us your idea at [hello@thelazygeniuscollective.com](mailto:hello@thelazygeniuscollective.com).

This episode is hosted by me, Kendra Adachi, and executive produced by Kendra Adachi, Jenna Fischer, and Angela Kinsey. The Lazy Genius Podcast is enthusiastically part of the Office Ladies Network. Special thanks to Leah Jarvis for weekly production.

Thanks, y'all, for listening, and until next time, be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. I'm Kendra, and I'll see you next week!