My teen's a slob!

The solution may be to let it go. BY LISA EVANS

Does this scene look familiar? You pry open your teen's door and "argh, why is that shoe box in the way?" As you glance over the clothes strewn upon the floor, the half-eaten bag of chips on the nightstand, and the damp towel flung over the unmade bed, you wonder how you managed to raise such a slob.

Alyson Schafer, Toronto-based psychotherapist, parenting expert and author of *Ain't Misbehavin'* says teen sloppiness is most often an act of rebellion rather than a developmental flaw. "In adolescence, the child is trying to be more autonomous, so to mark their independence they have a tussle with anything that's perceived as an arbitrary rule from above."

While you may be tempted to kick open the door, gather up everything from the floor and toss it out, Alyson warns this draconian attitude will only intensify rebellious behaviour. "If you do that, it turns into 'I'm mad at my mother. She threw out my stuff. She controls my life,'" says Alyson. And when more serious opportunities to rebel arise (such as smoking or drinking, for example), your child might jump at the chance, purely to defy you.

Allowing your teen to maintain their pigsty may seem like un-parenting, but Alyson says a dirty room may be worth letting go. "You're really only given the opportunity to voice three big No's in your teen's life. You probably want to use your No on 'don't drop out of school' instead of having a clean bedroom," says Alyson.

But accepting your teen's messy room doesn't mean handing over full control. Follow these tips to get along with your teen slob:

SET BOUNDARIES

"Teens need to have their own territory," says Alyson, but the mess crosses the line when it affects the rest of the family. "If there's an infestation of mice because they're leaving food in their room it's obvious something needs to be changed," says Alyson. Talk with your teen about what a reasonable level of messiness looks like and hold them accountable to those boundaries.

AVOID PLAYING THE "IT'S MY HOUSE" CARD

"Parent-teen relationships are at their healthiest when they have achieved a sense of equality," says Alyson. While demanding a tidy bedroom ("as long as you live under my roof, you will have a clean room") will intensify rebellious behaviour, talking about it as a problem that requires a solution ("the dishes in the bedroom are attracting ants, what can we do about this?") is more likely to garner a positive response.

COACH, DON'T NAG

Saying "I've noticed how much more smoothly the morning goes when you get your backpack and clothes ready the night before. Do you notice that too?" will more likely result in a behaviour change than nagging your teen to do this before bed. Providing your teen the tools they require to keep their room tidy, such as storage bins and closet organizers, and allowing them to figure out the best way to use them, shows you respect their independence and their ability to make their own choices about their space.

USE CHORES TO TEACH RESPONSIBILITY

You may worry that a messy room is a sign your teen will turn into an irresponsible adult, but Alyson says these fears are unfounded. "Quite often you'll see the kid who was a slob as a teen complain about his roommate in university being messy," she says. She advises parents to focus instead on teaching life skills through chores. Choose chores that aren't time-sensitive, such as mowing the lawn and doing the laundry, to take into account your teen's hectic schedules while still teaching them these important life skills. ○

Editor Janice Biehn explores the teen years at ParentsCanada.com/abcsofteens

BRING ORDER TO YOUR TEEN'S ROOM, WITHOUT A FIGHT

Messiness may be a common teenage habit but Heather Cameron, Ottawa professional organizer and mom of two teenage boys, says getting control over the clutter isn't impossible.

➜ Allow teens to decorate their space. "This will help them take pride in it," says Heather. Giving teens freedom to paint the walls in the colour of their choice, hang posters that appeal to them or honour their interests by prominently displaying them in the room, fosters a sense of ownership and means they're more likely to keep it tidy.

➜ Work together. Teens, just like adults, can get overwhelmed by the task of cleaning up. Heather recommends sharing the work load. Try offering to hang up the clothes if they organize the paperwork cluttering their desk. If you know you'll be bumping heads by working together, consider asking someone else to fill in. Heather has worked with teens who have requested her organizational services after seeing what she's done in their parents' home. "Because I'm not their mother, they approach the cleanup in a very different way. I can ask 'why do you want to keep this?' and they don't hear it as an accusation," says Heather.

➜ Set a good example. Lead by example by cleaning up your own space. "If you're a disorganized parent, you can't tell your kid to keep a tidy bedroom," says Heather.

The White House Family Theatre can accommodate 30 people.