

**Q & A—How do I get my daughter to be more cooperative about doing chores?**

**Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

**Question:** I can't seem to get my 15 year-old daughter to take responsibility for anything around the house.

I have to admit that I've never really been consistent with her when I've asked her to clean up her bedroom or to help me in the kitchen, but I think that at her age she should volunteer, especially when she sees that I'm overwhelmed with other things to do.

Do you have any suggestions?

**Answer:** Unfortunately, it sounds like you've actually *trained* your daughter *not* to be helpful around the house. Even though you may have asked for her consideration when she sees that things need to be done, it sounds as if she knows that she can get away with doing little or no work and that the most that will happen is that you'll become annoyed with her.

It's incredible how kids can learn to put up with parents' nagging and reminding, yet rarely volunteer to pitch in and help out. This is normal kid behavior, although you really need to change the rules as soon as you can. Basically your daughter has learned that there will not be a consequence attached to her behavior, and so, therefore, she's trying to get by with as little effort as possible. By connecting a consequence with a behavior (watching television after her bedroom is cleaned up, for instance) your child will begin to become motivated to get her chores done. Don't worry that the motivation at this time may be externally produced (that is, not heartfelt consideration on her part, but an effort to gain TV time later in the evening). Eventually, even externally motivated behaviors become habits, and many of these routines become internalized. I've worked with several children who learn to take pride in having a clean bedroom or taking good care of their pets.

So, how to begin? I suggest that you sit down with your daughter and set up a written agreement of what's expected of her on a daily and weekly basis. The expectations should take two forms: The first are daily chores such as

making her bed, cleaning up the bathroom after she takes a shower, helping with dinner tasks and feeding and walking the dog, as well as weekly ones including vacuuming the living room, giving her bedroom a thorough dusting and completing her laundry.

The second section deals with giving her demerits for attitudinal and behavioral issues such as talking back, not taking "no" for an answer (bugging and hassling until you give in), or fighting and teasing with her siblings. Just think about all of the things that you reprimand during a typical day and add these to your list of behaviors to be improved (and demerits given).

Let her know that there will be daily consequences for her success or failure on the system. Specifically, she must complete most or all of the chores in a timely and cooperative manner as well as not receive too many demerits in terms of attitude and behavior. Positive consequences (rewards) are given if she's been successful, and negative penalties will occur if enough chores have not been completed or she chucks up too many demerits during the day. Sure, she'll probably complain that this system is rigid or demanding...but trust me, if you follow through with the consequences, it will work!

The four rewards that I find enticing to many teens and pre-teens are:

- *Reasonable* use of electronics for the next 24 hours (anything that plugs into an outlet or uses batteries)
- Freedom (the ability to go outside or to have kids come over)
- A daily allowance (especially effective if she now has to earn her CD's, pay the cell phone bill or fork out the \$8 for the movie)
- Daily clothing allowance (to be used to purchase tops, pants, shoes, etc.). Kids love to buy clothes and she'll learn to be a more cautious shopper if the money is coming from her own pocket!

If she's had a successful day in terms of completing chores as well as keeping a decent attitude, then she may earn all four rewards. If she hasn't had a good day, then she loses all four. Money and privileges talk, and your child will be listening and responding. Your previous nagging and reminding obviously didn't bother her, but the thought of losing a daily allowance, clothing money, time with her friends and use of electronics will surely get her attention, and cooperation!

**Dr. Peters' Bottom Line:** I think you'll be amazed at how cooperative your daughter will quickly become as soon as she realizes that her privileges depend upon her behavior. The key word, though, is *consistency* — if you do not follow through with the consequences, your daughter will probably not follow through with the good behavior.