

by Theresa Nelson

MOVING BEYOND

Life's Messes

**God loves His children,
whether or not their beds
are made.**

Lately I've been observing a side of me I don't like. It's a sarcastic, critical, nagging side concerning my early-digit teen daughter, Ashley.

I find myself annoyed at small things: her leaving her clothes on the bathroom floor, not hanging up her towel, not putting away her books or colored pens, leaving her dishes and stuff lying about, taking four times as long as it should to get ready. So how have I been responding? I've taken up nagging, criticizing, and throwing out passive-aggressive, sarcastic remarks, such as "How many days does it take before you make your bed?" "Anyone can take a shower in five minutes." "Can't you remember to do anything I ask?"

I've been focusing on her bad habits, not her as a person. I've been viewing her as a sloppy person who takes too long to get ready. When I finally asked myself why I'd been so critical and sarcastic, I had to admit that it's because I'm a recovering perfectionist who enjoys having a clean house. When I clean up after capable people, I tend to become resentful. Yet this was something I'd chosen to undertake. Ashley hadn't asked me to clean up after her. I took the chore on myself. Since I perceive the house as a reflection of me, and I don't wish to be viewed as sloppy, I began viewing Ashley's sloppiness as a reflection of myself.

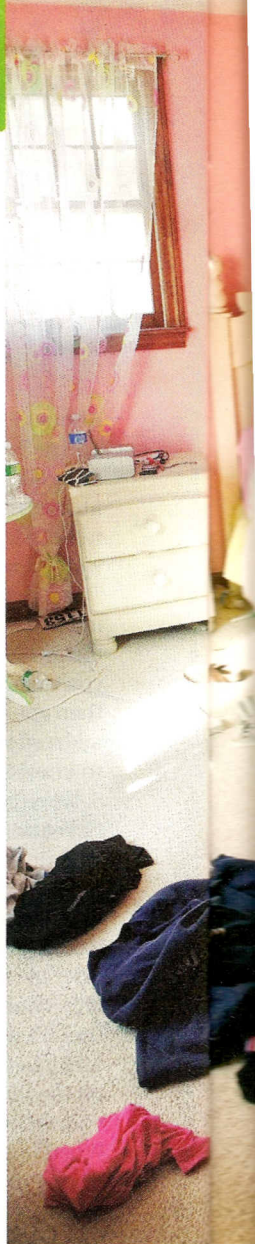
I also had to admit that I was a bit jealous of Ashley. She's enjoyed a much different childhood than I had - one with money and leisure. When I was 12, I had five siblings and was cleaning the entire house, cooking meals, babysitting younger siblings, and picking berries during the summer to earn money.

There I was, focusing time and energy on Ashley's negative characteristics, yet she has so many positive traits. She loves God and tries to do what's right. She tries to please her parents and others. She reads her Bible without my asking her to open it and ponders on deeply spiritual things. She's encouraging, loving, kind, empathetic, a true friend to others, enjoys helping others, and thinks of others first. And sometimes, she even makes a great effort to clean.

When I thought of her positive traits, her sloppiness didn't loom as large as I'd tried to make it. I thought, *Why can't I praise her efforts and focus on her positive aspects? Why hadn't I taken my concerns to her kindly, spending as much time praying for her as I'd spent nagging and criticizing?* Continuing in the same critical dance would slowly drive a wedge between us, eventually destroying our relationship. I would become resentful of her sloppiness, and she'd become resentful of my critical nagging and put-downs.

Watching our children grow in body, but not always in responsibilities and habits into the mature and unrealistic adult-like people we desire can create a tug-of-war between them and us. Conflicts and arguments can arise that begin to undermine our ever-changing relationship. Here are a few things I learned through this process that may be helpful if you find yourself entrenched in struggles with your children:

1. Pay attention to what's most important. Focus on the relationship, not the behavior. Without a relationship, there's no influence. Why should Ashley listen to me, care what I think, respect me, or desire to please me? Our





relationship is more important than a few clothes scattered throughout the room. When she leaves for college, I won't wish I had nagged her more about her sloppiness.

2. Keep God in the picture. When I ask God to show me areas I need to change in my behavior and thoughts toward Ashley, it becomes apparent that I am a large part of the problem. I need to ask His forgiveness for grudges and sins against Ashley and then ask her for forgiveness. I pray with Ashley, focusing on thanking God for her, her talents, and for the blessing she is to our family.

3. Set a good example. Ashley is watching and absorbing my example. I need to think about what I want her to learn concerning how to treat people, how to live with annoyances, how to confront problems, deal with stress, and place her life focus. I certainly don't want Ashley to learn to nag and

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criticize her friends and future spouse if they don't satisfy her expectations.

4. Refrain from conditional love. I want Ashley to realize that I love her — faults and all. God doesn't stipulate: "No more listening to your prayers and no more assistance until you cease and desist from losing your temper." We shouldn't demand that from our children, either.

5. Be creative in solutions and consequences. Ashley likes to listen to books on tape and use a timer when she cleans. She also likes to have a list to which she can refer. I make lists, set time deadlines, and provide audio books for her.

6. Stay focused on what's changeable. My focus needs to be on changing my behaviors, reactions, and perceptions. Why does it upset me that her bedroom is dirty? Why am I critical and sarcastic? How can I respond differently to her behavior? Is her behavior or attitude sinful or just something I dislike?

7. Ask for help. Brainstorming with Ashley about the situation helps us compromise and decide on new solutions. It also provides understanding for both of us.

8. Keep a sense of humor. One day, I'm sure Ashley and I will laugh at how messy her bedroom was.

9. Be patient. I need to be patient with both Ashley and myself. Everyone fails and needs grace.

10. Be consistent. One of the hardest things is communicating my expectations, outlining the consequences, and then following through calmly without nagging, threatening, preaching, or being sarcastic.

11. Focus on the positive. Every problem and situation has lessons to be gained. Both Ashley and I are growing and learning from this situation. Character doesn't happen in a vacuum. When those around us are developing character, it will affect us, causing unpleasantness and inconvenience in our lives, but the long-term benefits can be great.

12. Change your perspective. When I expect messes, I'm not so surprised and overcome with them. When I realize that I irritate others and am still a work-in-progress, I am more patient with Ashley. When I remember that God is extremely patient with me when I continually stumble with the same problem, I can pass this grace onto Ashley.

Ultimately, I need to lovingly work with Ashley, praise her efforts, focus on her good points while gently guiding her, and thank God for her and her shortcomings. Isn't this what God does for us? He unconditionally loves us, whether our bed is made or not. ○

Theresa Nelson often writes about this wonderful and messy thing called life. Her writing has appeared in over 40 magazines. She lives in Missouri and is married with two children.