

“I’LL TIDY MY ROOM IN A MINUTE.”

When younger, your teenager used his room as a place to sleep and keep his things. Now he sees it as a personal expression of who he is. In his mind, not tidying his room may also represent his freedom to start living life on his own terms.

SCENARIO | Your teen’s room looks as if it’s been hit by a bomb.



To your son, his bedroom is the one place that belongs just to him. As he gets older, it becomes a treasured sanctuary into which he can escape, process thoughts, relax, and be private. How he decorates it also provides a window into his interests. However, keeping it tidy involves a level of planning and self-discipline that he struggles with while his brain is developing. You may see chaos, but he sees a place to enjoy his possessions, however they’re arranged.

WHAT YOU MIGHT BE THINKING

You may be concerned and frustrated by his disorganization and by how he puts off your simple request to maintain basic levels of tidiness. You may also feel he shows a lack of respect for you and for his belongings.

WHAT HE MIGHT BE THINKING

- **The cognitive processes** in the frontal lobes of his brain are still developing, so he may not have the organization and planning abilities to keep on top of mess. It’s also possible that he genuinely doesn’t see untidiness in the way that you do, but as more of a comfort blanket.
- **Your teen is coping** with increased academic and extracurricular pressures and may feel he doesn’t have to keep his room neat, too.
- **He’s processing** lots of new information as he juggles his social life with academic demands. In this pressured phase, his room is a place to recuperate, on his terms.
- **He knows that tidiness** is more important to you than it is to him. Not being as neat as you would like could be his subtle way of asserting independence. If he’s feeling the weight of adult expectation in the only place that he feels is his, he may be pushing back.

HOW YOU COULD RESPOND

In the moment

See it as a phase

You want to prepare your teen for the day when he’ll have to live independently. He wants more autonomy, but doesn’t yet see tidiness as a priority. Try to view messiness as part of the transition.

Talk about the advantages

Rather than make tidying up feel like a punishment, point out the benefits. Is there a danger he could feel overwhelmed if he can’t find things?

Appeal to a desire to look good

Point out that clothes look better when hung up or put away, rather than getting creased on the floor.

Break the task down

When faced with a big job, he may not know where to begin. Limit instructions to one or two. Perhaps give him a rubbish bag for waste, or put the laundry basket in his room so he can tidy up dirty clothes. Suggest he blitzes his room while listening to a song to see the difference he can make in a few minutes.

Don’t sweat the small stuff

As long as mouldy food or damp clothes aren’t creating a health hazard, allow him some control. Trust that he’ll eventually work out that a tidier room can be more pleasant.

In the long term

Don’t overgeneralize

Resist the temptation to call him a slob because his room is messy. He may think you disapprove of him, not just of his room.

Let him choose the décor

If he feels the décor reflects his personal tastes, he’s likely to be more invested in keeping his room looking relatively tidy.

Think about storage

Most teens want to find the things they need quickly. Brainstorm storage solutions, such as putting

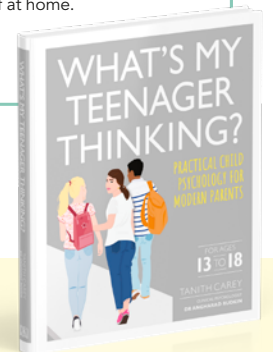
up hooks to remove possessions from the floor.

Suggest a clear-out

Teens often hold on to childhood toys while acquiring new gadgets and clothes. Would he like a clear-out so he can move to the next stage of his life?

Look at it as a positive

Anxious teenagers are more likely to be obsessively tidy, so see his messiness as a sign he’s relaxed enough to be himself at home.



“JUST ONE MORE GAME.”

Teens are hard-wired to take risks, and will often display more aggressive and dominant behaviour to establish pecking order. Video games allow your teen to do this in a virtual world and he may often find it hard to break away.

SCENARIO | Your teen asks for time to play one more game on his video console.

While gaming may look antisocial to you, your teen believes it's a legitimate hobby that he plays with friends, which just happens to be on-screen. He's also likely to think you don't understand gaming culture if you don't recognize how important it is not to disturb a game in progress.

Nevertheless, setting limits is important. While studies show that playing video games for about an hour a day can benefit wellbeing, they also find that playing for over three hours is linked to negative outcomes, such as antisocial behaviour, irritability, and poorer grades.



WHAT YOU MIGHT BE THINKING

You may be concerned that he's often irritable when you ask him to stop playing and worry that his school work and exercise are being neglected. If he spends lots of time with his headphones on, glued to the screen, you may think he's isolated from the family.

WHAT HE MIGHT BE THINKING

- ◉ **Gaming can make him** feel competent, powerful, and in command. It's tough for him to transition back to a place that's less rewarding and where he's told what to do.
- ◉ **If he plays** with multiple players, this may give him a sense of belonging and win him social status when he does well. Abruptly telling him to stop could frustrate him if he's at a vital part of the game. If he's in a team contest, it could mean letting down other players.
- ◉ **He may feel he deserves** this downtime and likes to immerse himself in the action to take his mind off school. It's likely he can't find anything more immediately rewarding.
- ◉ **If you never play** games with him, he probably thinks you're out of touch and that you'll never understand why he loves them.



GAMING MAKES YOUR TEEN FEEL IN CONTROL. TRANSITIONING BACK TO REALITY CAN BE HARD.

HOW YOU COULD RESPOND

In the moment

Find a natural pause

Agree that he can finish at the end of the game. Recognize that it's hard for him to move on instantly after being so absorbed.

Give good reasons

Provide a reason why you'd like him to stop, whether it's so he

can eat a meal, enjoy family time, or get ready for bed.

Allow transition time

Recognize he may need a few minutes to transition afterwards. Try offering an incentive, such as a favourite drink, which will help him make the sensory shift.

In the long term

Agree limits

Although he may push back, he's probably seen the impact on peers who stay up late gaming and struggle at school, so is likely to appreciate your concern. Agree a plan and set parental controls on games so that there's less conflict over rules. Hold the line so the rules become routine.

Promote other activities

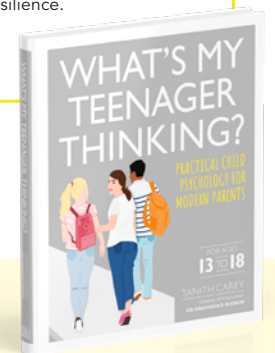
Rather than just being *against* video games, be *for* other activities. Say that he can play video games only after more important activities, such as sports or homework.

Suggest screen-free days

Keep consoles in common areas and have console-free days. Ask him to notice signs of overuse, such as needing to spend more time playing to feel good, struggling to stop, or falling behind on work.

Engage

Find out about the game and who he plays with. Appreciate its good points, too. For example, he's learning skills such as strategy, planning, teamwork, problem-solving, and resilience.



“WE BROKE UP.”

Although teenagers’ feelings can be intense, the likelihood is that your teen’s first love won’t last. Devastating as this can feel, his first break-up can be an important way for him to learn how to heal from difficult experiences and manage emotional pain.

SCENARIO | When you ask why you haven’t seen your teen’s girlfriend after noticing he’s been looking sad, he tells you she broke it off.

Whether a first relationship felt like true love or was a brief summer romance, its ending will be upsetting for a teen who has never dealt with a break-up. Most teen break-ups occur because of differing needs, directions, and expectations of intimacy, or cheating.

At this stage, his self-worth is more reliant on what others think of him, and if he was rejected, this feels particularly hurtful. He may feel

overwhelmed because his brain is more sensitive to hormonal and chemical changes now. He’s also hypersensitive to social exclusion – a break-up signals lack of approval by a peer so is likely to cause intense feelings of sadness and anxiety. All of this may be why studies have found that break-ups are a leading cause of psychological distress in young people.



WHAT YOU MIGHT BE THINKING

Your reaction will depend on how long your teen’s relationship was, how well you got to know his girlfriend, and how good you thought she was for him. As you know that only a few early relationships last, you may feel that he also needs to be realistic and not mope around.

WHAT HE MIGHT BE THINKING

- ◉ **His relationship** was an important part of his development and a key step towards independence. If it’s the first time he shared intimate thoughts and experiences, his rejection may feel especially hard.
- ◉ **Brain scans show** that withdrawal of romantic love triggers the same brain activity as withdrawal from opioids, so his pain may feel physical.
- ◉ **Even though** the relationship may seem brief to you, it may have been one of the defining experiences in his life so far. Because he has little long-term perspective, he may wonder if there’s something wrong with him and if he’ll ever find love again.
- ◉ **After a break-up**, many teens block their ex or delete or un-tag them from pictures. Losing that constant connection can make a break-up feel even more significant and lonely.



THOUGH DEVASTATING, RELATIONSHIP BREAK-UPS HELP TEENS TO LEARN HOW TO MANAGE EMOTIONAL PAIN.

HOW YOU COULD RESPOND

In the moment

Take his feelings seriously
You may feel confident he’ll move on, but he feels bereft. In a study of teen break-ups, 52 per cent had symptoms of depression, which can include difficulty sleeping and intrusive thoughts. Say how, though it feels painful now, he’ll eventually be able to put his loss in the past.

Look at the pro and cons
To deter him from idealizing the relationship, suggest he list its

pros and cons and focuses on the positives of breaking up – such as seeing friends more and avoiding painful rows. Writing feelings down can help him to gain perspective and heal sooner.

Warn against monitoring his ex
Advise him against checking up on his ex on social media, which will prolong his heartbreak. A clean break will help him resist contacting her in a weak moment and to move on more quickly.

In the long term

Say it may take time
Discuss the five stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This helps him learn he’ll go through a process that’s essential for healing. Tell him to watch for when he feels anger so he’s not tempted to retaliate by posting pictures or sending messages.

Remove mementoes
Suggest he consolidates his memories, archives photos, and reorganizes his room to put reminders of the relationship out of sight so he doesn’t dwell on his ex. Most pictures reflect

happier times, so could make him idealize his relationship.

Help him look after himself
Rather than listen to self-critical voices telling him what he did wrong, suggest he thinks about what advice a good friend might give. Encourage him, too, to sleep, eat well, and exercise as it’s easier to feel better emotionally and manage psychological pain if he’s physically strong.

