



By Gregory Ramey, PhD, child psychologist at Dayton Children's and *Dayton Daily News* columnist

Nagging Parents

Kids hate hearing it and parents dislike doing it, but nagging is common in most families. Younger children complain that it feels like their parents are always upset about something, constantly reminding them to do chores, finish homework, or clean rooms. "From the moment I get home from school until I go to bed, my mom is always telling me what to do," lamented one fourth grader.

Teens frame this issue somewhat differently, usually within the context of trust and responsibility. "My parents don't understand that I'm 15 years old and don't need to be constantly reminded about what to do. It will get done when I want to do it. I'll be in college in a few years. Do my parents expect to move into the dorm with me?" remarked a high school junior.

Parents have a different perspective. "I tell him a million times to do his homework," said one parent. "If I said nothing, he'd watch TV and play video games all night." Parents have a simple answer to their kids whining about this nagging issue. "Do it the first time I tell you and I won't have to repeat myself. My so-called nagging is caused by your lack of responsibility."

Nagging creates tension and resentment within the family. How can you avoid it?

1. **Focus on what's important.** Think carefully about what's really important about your children's behavior. When you nag about everything, you really diminish the significance of

the few things that really matter. Make certain that you and your spouse have the same priorities.

Focusing on a few things means that you'll need to let go of other issues. A single mom recently asked how to get her 8th grade daughter to keep her room clean. The daughter excelled in school, played sports, and did chores around the house. I complimented the mom for raising a wonderful daughter, and told her to ignore the unkempt bedroom.

2. **Let your child know what really matters.** Make certain that your expectations are clearly and specifically communicated. Most parents want their kids to start homework "after school," but what exactly does that mean? If you allow your child to have a snack or play video games for a while, clearly specify what you mean. "Nicole, you get home from school around 3:30 pm. You can get a snack, relax, or watch TV for a while but I expect you to start your homework no later than 4:00 pm every school night.

3. **Develop rules with consequences.** Nagging ends when consequences begin. Rules without consequences are wishes. Make certain that your child is involved in the development of these consequences. They should be reasonable and be meaningful for your child. There is no one reward or punishment that works for every youngster.

Here's the problem with consequences. Many parents aren't consistent. Why are you surprised when your children won't obey your rules, since you have taught them over the years that you won't follow through with what you said? Nagging is parents' emotional response to a problem that they are unable or unwilling to solve by taking consistent and decisive actions.

4. **Refrain from reminders.** Once you have a specific rule that has been clearly communicated, there is no need for frequent reminders. Allow your child to experience the consequences of their behaviors a few times. You'll be pleasantly surprised at how quickly they will learn that you mean what you say.

Here's a great idea I learned a few years ago from a parent who freely admitted she couldn't avoid reminding her kids. Her children played soccer, and were used to yellow and red penalty cards. She would write out the rule and consequence on a yellow card, and give it to her child and walk away. The youngster got a reminder without any verbal nagging by the mom.

5. **Stay positive.** Whether your children are toddlers or teens, they still need your approval and recognition. Make certain you notice the many positive things they are accomplishing.

Gregory Ramey, Ph.D., is a child psychologist and vice president for outpatient services at The Children's Medical Center of Dayton. For more of his columns, visit www.childrensdayton.org/ramey. Send comments to Dr. Ramey at rameyg@childrensdayton.org.