

Laundry, Cleaning & Home Maintenance Guide for Autistic Young Adults (18+)

A simple guide for parents and caregivers to help your young adult keep a clean, healthy home. Many autistic young adults feel overwhelmed by laundry and cleaning, but a short, repeatable system prevents chaos and keeps them housed. A messy home can cause big problems: lost housing, pests like roaches or mice, mold in the bathroom, and bad smells that affect roommates and neighbors. This guide teaches a daily 15-minute zone system and a weekly laundry routine your young adult can manage independently.

Why Home Care Matters

A clean home is more than appearance—it's about independence and respect. Landlords can evict for "unlivable conditions." Pests spread disease. Bad smells damage relationships. Your young adult will feel proud of a clean space and more likely to keep it that way.

Safety warning:

- Always keep cleaning products away from children and pets.
- Never mix bleach with ammonia or vinegar—this creates toxic gas.
- If your young adult has asthma, allergies, or chemical sensitivities, use unscented products and have them wear a mask and gloves (consult with doctor first about product safety).

Core Cleaning Skills Checklist

Your young adult needs to master these skills before living alone. Practice one skill per day with a timer until each feels easy.

Skill	What You Do	How Often
Sort laundry	Separate lights, darks, delicates, towels	Weekly
Run washer	Load, add detergent, choose cycle, press start	Weekly
Run dryer	Clean lint trap, choose heat, start, remove on time	Weekly
Wipe bathroom sink	Spray, wipe sink and counter	Daily
Take trash out	Tie bag, carry to outside bin	Daily or when full

Skill	What You Do	How Often
Vacuum or sweep	Floor in one room	Daily (small area)
Spot-clean spills	Wipe spills right away	When spills happen

Allergy note: Choose hypoallergenic, fragrance-free detergent and cleaners if your young adult has skin allergies or eczema. Test a small area on skin or fabric first.

Your role: Time each skill. Practice until confident. Celebrate when they master it.

Cleaning Zones System (15 Minutes a Day)

Divide the apartment into 5 zones and clean one zone per day. This prevents overwhelming cleaning days and keeps the space manageable.

Zone Color	Area	What You Clean
RED	Kitchen	Counters, sink, stove top, floor
ORANGE	Bathroom	Sink, toilet, shower, floor
YELLOW	Bedroom	Bed, floor, trash, nightstand
GREEN	Living Room	Couch, floor, tables, TV stand
BLUE	Entry/Laundry	Shoes, mail, laundry area

Weekly Zone Schedule:

Day	Zone	Time
Monday	RED – Kitchen	15 minutes
Tuesday	ORANGE – Bathroom	15 minutes
Wednesday	YELLOW – Bedroom	15 minutes
Thursday	GREEN – Living Room	15 minutes
Friday	BLUE – Entry/Laundry	15 minutes
Saturday	Deep clean 1 zone (extra dirty)	30 minutes

Day	Zone	Time
Sunday	Take out all trash + quick scan	15 minutes

Timer rule: Use a phone timer. When time is up, you stop. You do NOT need to make it perfect—just get it clean enough.

Daily maintenance (while timer runs):

1. Spray and wipe surfaces with appropriate cleaner (spray bottle or wet cloth).
2. Sweep or vacuum the floor in that zone.
3. Empty trash if full.
4. Put items back where they belong.

Your role: Set up zones together. Label with color tape or signs. Check progress weekly: "Red zone looks great. You're staying on top of it."

Laundry Mastery (Weekly System)

Laundry doesn't have to be complicated. A consistent system makes it automatic.

Sorting Laundry (5 Minutes)

Pick the same day each week (example: Sunday) to sort. Your young adult makes 4 piles:

Pile 1: Lights/Whites

- White shirts, light gray items, white socks, underwear

Pile 2: Darks

- Black, navy, dark gray, dark jeans, dark colors

Pile 3: Delicates

- Bras, thin fabrics, anything labeled "delicate" or "hand wash"

Pile 4: Towels

- Bath towels, hand towels, kitchen towels (wash separately so they dry faster and stay fluffy)

Color bleed warning: Wash new dark clothes alone the first time (red and dark blue especially can stain light clothes). Ask: "Is this color new or already faded?"

Your role: Help sort the first time. Then watch them do it alone. Praise: "You sorted these perfectly."

Washing Normal Loads (30 Minutes Total)

Step 1: Prepare clothes (5 minutes)

- Check all pockets (remove tissues, pens, gum, coins).
- Zip all zippers.
- Turn jeans and printed shirts inside out (prevents fading and pilling).
- Close Velcro fasteners (so they don't stick to other clothes).

Step 2: Load the washer (2 minutes)

- Don't stuff it full—leave room for clothes to move around (imagine a hand-sized space).
- Load lights first (they're usually lighter weight).
- Add detergent: Follow the scoop line on the box or the "HE" line on the cap. Too much soap leaves residue and makes clothes stiff.

Step 3: Choose the cycle (1 minute)

- Normal: Most regular clothes
- Delicate: Bras, underwear, thin fabrics
- Heavy duty: Towels, jeans, heavily soiled items

Step 4: Start and wait (20 minutes)

- Press start.
- Set a phone reminder for when it's done (so clothes don't sit and get musty).

Helpful script: "Pocket check. Zippers closed. Detergent line. Start button. Timer set."

Your role: Stand nearby the first few times. Let them do steps but give reminders. Celebrate: "You ran the washer perfectly."

Drying Clothes (30 Minutes Total)

Step 1: Transfer from washer to dryer (5 minutes)

- Open washer when timer goes off.

- Shake out each item (gets rid of wrinkles).
- Put clothes in dryer.
- Don't overload—clothes need room to tumble.

Step 2: Clean the lint trap (1 minute)

- CRITICAL: Lint in the trap causes fires. Check it every load.
- Pull out the lint trap (usually top left or right inside dryer door).
- Wipe lint off with your hand or a cloth.
- Put lint trap back in.

Step 3: Choose heat and start (1 minute)

- Low heat: Delicates, underwear, thin fabrics
- Medium heat: Normal clothes, towels, jeans
- High heat: Heavy towels, work clothes (use rarely; wears fabric faster)

Step 4: Set timer (1 minute)

- Press start.
- Set a phone reminder for when done (usually 45 minutes).

Step 5: Fold immediately (20 minutes)

- Take clothes out right when timer goes off (prevents wrinkles).
- Fold or hang them.
- Put them away in drawers or closet.

Helpful script: "Lint trap. Shake clothes. Load dryer. Low or medium heat. Timer. Fold when done."

Your role: Check the lint trap the first few times. Explain: "Lint builds up. If we don't clean it, the dryer gets too hot and could catch fire."

Common Laundry Problems (And Fixes)

Clothes still wet after drying:

- Dryer was too full (clothes couldn't tumble).
- Heat was too low.

- Lint trap was clogged.
- Solution: Run dryer again for 15-30 minutes, or clean lint trap and retry.

Clothes are wrinkled or stuck together:

- Took too long to fold after drying.
- Heat was too high.
- Solution: Fold immediately when timer goes off.

Clothes are dingy or have stains:

- Not enough detergent.
- Clothes were already dirty and need a second wash.
- Wrong water temperature (cold water doesn't clean as well).
- Solution: Add more detergent, use warm or hot water (check fabric care label first).

Clothes are stiff or have residue:

- Too much detergent.
- Rinse cycle didn't work.
- Solution: Use less detergent next time. Follow detergent scoop, don't guess.

Colors bled onto light clothes:

- Washed new dark clothes with lights.
- Solution: Separate new dark clothes. Wash alone first time.

Your role: Troubleshoot together. "The lint trap was clogged. That's why the clothes were wet. Check it every time, okay?"

Kitchen Cleaning (RED Zone – Monday, 15 minutes)

A clean kitchen prevents pests and keeps food safe.

What to do:

1. **Counters and table:** Wipe down with a damp cloth or spray cleaner. Move items and wipe under them. Remove crumbs.
2. **Sink:** Rinse dishes or load dishwasher. Rinse sink and wipe dry.

3. **Stove top:** If you cooked, wipe down spills right away. Use appropriate cleaner (glass cleaner for glass tops, all-purpose for others).
4. **Floor:** Sweep or vacuum. Pick up any dropped food immediately.
5. **Trash:** Empty if full.

Food storage rule (CRITICAL—prevents pests):

- Don't leave food out overnight.
- Put leftover food in containers with lids.
- Wipe spills immediately (don't let food sit).
- Take trash out daily if you cooked.

Warm, humid climates can get roaches and ants fast if food is left out. Keep counters crumb-free. Always close trash bags and use a bin with a tight lid. Wash dishes daily; do not leave dirty plates overnight. Fix leaks and wipe standing water.

Your role: Check on Monday evening. "Counters look clean. Sink is empty. Good work."

Bathroom Cleaning (ORANGE Zone – Tuesday, 15 minutes)

A clean bathroom is essential for health and prevents mold.

What to do:

1. **Sink:** Spray with bathroom cleaner. Wipe sink, counter, and faucet. Dry with paper towel (wet surfaces get moldy).
2. **Toilet:** Spray inside toilet bowl with toilet cleaner. Let sit 2 minutes. Scrub with toilet brush. Flush. Spray outside with general cleaner and wipe.
3. **Shower/tub:** Spray cleaner on walls and floor. Wipe down. Rinse with water. Wipe dry.
4. **Floor:** Sweep or wipe with damp cloth.
5. **Trash:** Empty trash if needed.

Mold prevention (CRITICAL):

- Wipe the shower/tub dry after each use.
- Leave the exhaust fan on for 20 minutes after a shower (or open a window).
- Don't leave wet towels on the floor—hang them to dry.

- Check the ceiling and corners weekly for black spots (early mold)—if you see it, call landlord.

Allergy note: Choose fragrance-free bathroom cleaner if your young adult has allergies. Wear gloves if skin is sensitive.

Your role: Check Tuesday evening. "No mold spots. Toilet is clean. Excellent."

Bedroom Cleaning (YELLOW Zone – Wednesday, 15 minutes)

A clean bedroom helps your young adult sleep better and feel calmer.

What to do:

1. **Bed:** Change sheets weekly or when needed (if spill or accident happens). Fold used sheets and put in laundry basket. Make bed with clean sheets and pillow.
2. **Floor:** Pick up clean clothes and put in drawer or closet. Sweep or vacuum.
3. **Nightstand:** Wipe surface. Put items in drawers (keep nightstand clutter-free).
4. **Trash:** Empty trash if there is any.
5. **Air out:** Open window for 10 minutes if possible (fresh air helps prevent musty smells).

Sheet changing routine:

- Pull off old sheets and pillowcase.
- Put in laundry basket.
- Put on fitted sheet (tuck corners under mattress).
- Put on flat sheet.
- Put on clean pillowcase.

Your role: Help change sheets the first few times (it's tricky). Check Wednesday evening: "Sheets are clean. Floor is clear. Nice room."

Living Room Cleaning (GREEN Zone – Thursday, 15 minutes)

Keep the main living space clutter-free and clean.

What to do:

1. **Couch and chairs:** Pick up items (blankets, pillows, trash). Vacuum cushions or brush with your hand.

2. **Floor:** Vacuum or sweep. Pick up any items.
3. **Tables:** Wipe surfaces with damp cloth. Put items back where they belong.
4. **TV stand:** Dust. Put remotes and items neatly.
5. **Trash:** Empty if needed.

Clutter rule: If something doesn't belong in the living room, put it away. This keeps the room feeling calm.

Your role: Check Thursday evening: "Couch is clear. Floor is clean. Living room feels open."

Entry and Laundry Area (BLUE Zone – Friday, 15 minutes)

The entry sets the tone for the whole apartment. A clean laundry area prevents mold and pests.

What to do:

1. **Shoes:** Line up by the door (not scattered). Remove shoes you don't wear.
2. **Mail and papers:** Separate bills from junk mail. Put bills in a folder. Recycle junk mail.
3. **Laundry area:** Wipe down washer and dryer. Sweep floor. Put laundry basket neatly.
4. **Entryway surface:** Wipe down table or shelf by the door.
5. **Trash:** Empty if needed.

Your role: Check Friday evening: "Entry looks welcoming. Shoes are organized. Good work."

Deep Cleaning (Saturday, 30 minutes)

Once a week, pick one zone that needs extra work and spend 30 minutes on it.

Rotating deep clean schedule:

- Week 1: Kitchen (oven, under fridge, baseboards)
- Week 2: Bathroom (grout, corners, under sink)
- Week 3: Bedroom (under bed, baseboards, window sills)
- Week 4: Living room (behind couch, light switches, walls)

Deep clean steps:

1. Pick one area (example: under the kitchen sink).
2. Pull everything out.
3. Wipe the space with cleaner.
4. Put items back neatly.

Your role: This is optional—not required. If your young adult keeps up with daily zones, deep clean is extra credit.

Trash and Recycling System

Keep trash and recycling separate and take out regularly.

Daily trash routine:

- Use a trash can with a lid or bag.
- When full, tie the bag closed.
- Carry to outside trash bin.
- Put in bin with lid (keeps pests out).
- Come back inside.

Recycling routine:

- Put paper, plastic, metal in separate bin (check city rules—they vary).
- When full, carry to outside recycling area.

Sunday rule: Take out ALL trash even if not full. This prevents weekend smells and pests.

Your role: Make trash days simple: "Trash goes out Sundays. Put the bag at the door Sunday morning."

Sensory Adaptations for Cleaning

Many autistic young adults find cleaning overwhelming. Here are ways to make it easier.

Sensory-friendly cleaning tips:

- Use unscented cleaners (no perfume).
- Wear noise-canceling headphones and listen to calm music while cleaning.
- Use soft gloves so chemicals don't touch skin (consult with doctor first if sensitive).
- Set a timer so cleaning has a defined end.

- Dim lights if fluorescent lights bother your young adult.
- Clean in short chunks (15 minutes is perfect—not all day).
- Use a visual checklist so your young adult knows exactly what to do.

Products to try:

- All-purpose cleaner (unscented)
- Disinfecting wipes
- Toilet cleaner
- Bathroom spray
- Glass cleaner
- Vacuum or broom
- Microfiber cloths (feel better than paper towels)

Your role: Identify what sensory input bothers them. "You don't like the smell of bleach. Let's use vinegar instead."

Pest Prevention (Critical for Keeping Housing)

Pests are the #1 reason landlords evict tenants. Prevention is easier than fixing an infestation.

Roach and ant prevention:

- Never leave food out overnight.
- Wash dishes immediately or load dishwasher.
- Keep trash in a bin with a lid.
- Take trash out daily if you cooked or have food scraps.
- Wipe counters and floor of crumbs.
- Don't leave pet food out (if applicable).
- Fix water leaks (roaches need water; fixing leaks stops them).

Mouse prevention:

- Store food in sealed containers (especially grains, cereals, nuts—do not use if allergic).

- Don't leave crumbs on counters or floor.
- Seal holes or cracks where mice could enter.
- Tell landlord immediately if you see droppings.

Bed bug prevention:

- Don't bring used furniture home (especially mattresses and couches).
- Wash sheets weekly in hot water.
- Check mattress and bed frame for tiny bugs or dark spots.
- Tell landlord immediately if you find signs.

If pests appear (what to do):

1. Don't ignore it.
2. Tell landlord right away.
3. Landlord must send pest control (it's their responsibility).
4. Clean more frequently until problem is solved.
5. Document in writing ("I reported roaches on [date]").

Your role: Teach prevention. "If we keep the kitchen clean and trash sealed, pests won't come. You're preventing a big problem."

Mold and Moisture Prevention

Mold damages housing and affects health. Watch for it.

Signs of mold:

- Black or green spots on walls, ceiling, or around windows
- Musty smell in a room
- Wet spots that don't dry
- Fuzzy growth on bathroom walls

How to prevent mold:

- Dry the shower and tub after each use (wipe with towel).
- Leave bathroom exhaust fan on for 20 minutes after shower (or open window).

- Don't leave wet towels on the floor—hang them to dry.
- Fix water leaks immediately (tell landlord).
- Wipe standing water (under sink, around toilet, around AC unit).

If you see mold:

1. Take a photo.
2. Tell landlord: "I found mold at [location]. I sent a photo. Can you fix it?"
3. Document in writing.
4. Clean with a bleach solution (spray, wait 10 minutes, wipe) while wearing gloves and a mask.

Your role: Check for mold monthly. "Look at the bathroom ceiling. No black spots. That means we're keeping it dry."

Landlord Communication

Keeping a clean apartment means fewer landlord issues. But sometimes repairs are needed.

How to tell landlord about problems:

1. Email is best (leaves a record).
2. Be specific: "The kitchen faucet leaks. Drips about 10 times per minute."
3. Include a photo if possible.
4. Don't use emotional language: "Hi [landlord name], The kitchen faucet is leaking. Can you send a plumber to fix it? Thanks."

What landlord must fix (your responsibility):

- Leaks in walls or ceilings
- Broken plumbing
- Broken appliances (stove, fridge, heat)
- Broken locks or doors
- Mold or water damage
- Pest infestations

What you must fix (your responsibility):

- Small damages you caused (holes in walls from hanging pictures)
- Clogged drains from your hair or trash
- Damage from not cleaning
- Broken items you own

Your role: Help your young adult write the email to the landlord. "Be respectful and specific. Landlords fix problems faster when you ask nicely."

Progress Tracking and Milestones

Your young adult should track progress and celebrate wins.

Timeline	Milestone	What It Means
Week 1-2	All supplies bought, zones labeled	Ready to start
Week 3	Completes one full week of zones	Building routine
Month 1	Cleans daily, no reminders needed	Habit forming
Month 2	Laundry is consistent; clothes are clean	Laundry mastered
Month 3	Apartment looks and smells clean	System is working
Month 6	Landlord has no complaints; no pests	Independence achieved

Your role: Check in weekly. "You've done zone cleaning for three weeks. Your apartment looks great."

Remember This

A clean home is within your young adult's reach. They don't need to be perfect—they need to be consistent. Fifteen minutes a day and 30 minutes of laundry per week is all it takes.

A clean home keeps them housed, keeps them healthy, and gives them dignity. That's powerful.

You belong in your own space. A home you care for is a home you're proud of. One zone at a time. Your pace is valid.

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