

ARTS & CULTURE

## Daughter Knows Best

Kids have discovered a diabolical new use for science: rebutting their parents  
*Smithsonian* magazine, December 2010. [Subscribe](#)



"If you try to tell your kid to mow the lawn, he will cite a study published in *Geophysical Research Letters*..."  
*Illustration by Eric Palma*

- More from Smithsonian.com**
- [Fluent in 60 Seconds](#)
  - [There Was an App for That](#)

A few weeks ago I made a last-ditch effort to get my son to make his bed in the morning. We'd been having the same argument for 23 years, and now that he was going off to law school I thought it was time for him to shape up. I honestly believed that people who left their bed unmade would never be successful in life—that an unmade bed signified sloth, indifference and lack of moral character. Winston Churchill always made his bed. Martha Washington always made her bed. Conversely, Helen of Troy never made her bed. Neither did Attila the Hun or Al Capone. I was sure of it.

Like 171 people like this. Be the first of your friends.

0 submit reddit

160 -1

28 0 Digg 1 Share

**Article Tools**

Comments (3) Font RSS Email Print Share

**Related Topics**

Family

One morning, I arrived at my office to find an e-mail from my son with the message, "Ha! The tables have turned!" Opening the attached document, I found an article discussing why sleeping in an unmade bed was healthier than sleeping in a made one. According to a study published by Kingston University in London, a disheveled bed enables pockets of moisture in a mattress to dry out faster—thereby dehydrating and killing dust mites and other massively annoying creatures. Since my son has allergies, making his bed in the morning could literally make him sick.

This was not the first time my son had pulled a stunt like this. For years he'd been citing studies that homework was bad for kids or that people who played video games were more attentive and thus made better drivers. If I fired back that playing video games wrecked one's eyesight, he'd trot out a study proving that they improved a person's field of vision.

What these experiences drive home is that the information age is the bane of all conscientious parents. If you try to tell your kid to mow the lawn, he will cite a study published in *Geophysical Research Letters* indicating that the amount of fuel used in cutting a small lawn does disproportionate damage to the planet, so it would be better to leave it untended. If you try to persuade your children that "early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise," they will dig up a study in the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* indicating that students who get up at the crack of dawn lose their zip early in the day, while those who remain snuggled up beneath the covers long after sunrise maintain a high level of productivity well into the evening.

The worst thing about all this is the source of my son's information. His sister, who is in the neuroscience PhD program at Georgetown, is the one who funneled him the report about unmade beds. His sister is the one who found the study linking video games with improved vision. In discussions of this nature, his sister is both instigator and umpire, because she never allows an opinion to stand unless it can pass scientific muster—which wrecks things for people like me, who rely on conventional wisdom and common sense.

I have now officially given up trying to get my son to empty the dishwasher, put gas in my car or pay for the five boxes of cereal he eats every time he comes home. I know that he will merely text his sister and get her to produce a study proving that dishes are more germ-resistant if they remain in the dishwasher, that cars are more fuel-efficient when running on empty and that parents who constantly complain about their children's finances have short life expectancies.

This is what I get for having a daughter who's a scientist. If I return to this planet in some future life and again have kids, I hope they're a pair of screwballs. Maybe then I'll be able to get one of them to mow the lawn.

**Joe Queenan**, the author of nine books, writes regularly for the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Guardian*.

**Subscribe now** for more of Smithsonian's coverage on history, science and nature.

Related topics: [Family](#)

160 Like <171 submit Tweet <28 0 Digg 1 Share

### Comments (3)

Beverly, I think what made the difference is ACCESS to scientific information - by which I mean, the Internet. It's a wonderful thing!

Posted by fullerenedream on April 25, 2011 | 10:52 PM

In the December 2010 issue of *The Smithsonian*, Joe Queenan recounts the story of his son's scientific justification for not making his bed. Scientists in Kingston University in London, was the son's argument, have provided evidence that a disheveled bed enables pockets of moisture in a mattress to dry faster, thereby killing dust mites and other annoying creatures. Well, Joe Queenan's alternative to a disheveled bed is apparently a bed with sheets and blankets quickly pulled up, in an enactment of household mindedness.

This is not "making a bed"!  
And for sure, neither Winston Churchill nor Martha Washington ever made their beds in this way.

When I was a child and a teenager, in Milan, Italy, in the 1950s and 1960s, (and this was true everywhere else in Italy, Spain, France etc) every morning in every family, the sheets and blankets were removed from the mattress, the mattress was put in a window's frame and beaten with a carpet beater, allowed to rest perhaps half an hour in the frame of the open window together with the sheets and the blankets, and only the was the bed put together again, and actually 're-made' (the Italian word for this action of making the bed is indeed 'rifare il letto'). Maids in Winston Churchill's or Martha Washington's residences probably "re-made" the beds this way.

The scientists of Kingston University did not compare a disheveled bed with a bed who was actually 're-made', they compared a disheveled bed with a bed which was only "made", and this in an epoch successive to the years of social progress which allowed many women to find jobs other than simple "house maid".  
Sincerely yours

Paolo Giacomoni, Ph. D.

Posted by Paolo GIACOMONI on December 3, 2010 | 05:47 PM

My husband and I absolutely loved this piece and agree. It does feel this exasperating at times. Are we now just experiencing what our parents of yesteryear felt when we also snubbed their knowledge in favor of the knowledge we were gaining during our time period or has technology and scientific advancement really made the difference? No matter which is true, it does make parenting more difficult when your children can counter your logic and beliefs with the 'modern' information they are accruing 24/7!

Posted by Beverly Peacock-Barge on November 26, 2010 | 08:11 PM

### Post a Comment

Name:

Email:

Comment:

Comments are moderated, and will not appear until Smithsonian.com has approved them. Smithsonian reserves the right not to post any comments that are unlawful, threatening, offensive, defamatory, invasive of a person's privacy, inappropriate, confidential or proprietary, political messages, product endorsements, or other content that might otherwise violate any laws or policies.

**Winter Clearance Sale**  
Save up to **80%**  
Shop Now  
Item 10471  
SmithsonianStore.com

**Popular Videos**

Newest Most Viewed

Titanoboa vs T-Rex (01:33)

Sneak Preview of Titanoboa: Monster Snake (01:32)

Meet the Scientist: Carlos Jaramillo (2:08)

Titanoboa at the Zoo? (1:29)

[View All Newest Videos >](#)

**Most Popular**

Viewed Emailed Commented Topics

- Teller Reveals His Secrets
- When Did Girls Start Wearing Pink?
- How the Polaroid Stormed the Photographic World
- Errol Morris: The Thinking Man's Detective
- Music That Rocks the Imagination
- Seven Famous Photographers Who Used Polaroids
- The Measure of Genius: Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel at 500
- Ten Unforgettable Web Memes
- What Defines a Meme?
- The Essentials: Video Games

[View All Most Popular >](#)

**Smithsonian MYSTERIES OF THE ANCIENT WORLD**  
ONLY AT NEWSSTANDS & BOOKSTORES. SUPPLY IS LIMITED!  
SPECIAL COLLECTOR'S EDITION  
ORDER NOW

**Follow Us**

[f](#) [t](#) [+](#) [You Tube](#) [RSS](#) [Email](#)

**Recommendations**

Vote for your favorite photo in Smithsonian Magazine's 9th Annual Photo Contest  
1,125 people recommend this.

Foraminifera Sculpture Park, China  
13 people recommend this.

When Did Girls Start Wearing Pink?  
18,589 people recommend this.

Who Had the Best Civil War Facial Hair?  
17,701 people recommend this.

Facebook social plugin

**In The Magazine**

March 2012

- Shadow of the Titanic
- Optical Illusion
- They Missed the Boat
- One-Step Wonder
- The New Stars of Photography

[View Table of Contents >](#)

**SUBSCRIBE NOW & SAVE 81%!**

First Name   
Last Name   
Address 1   
Address 2   
City   
State  Zip   
Email   
  **SAVE 81%**

**ALREADY A PRINT SUBSCRIBER? ACTIVATE YOUR FREE IPAD® EDITION.**  
[CLICK HERE](#)

**Smithsonian Store**

The Jefferson Bible with Jefferson's Secret Bible DVD  
Purchase this special value of Jefferson's book with this DVD from Smithsonian Channel.

**Smithsonian Journeys**

Private Jet Tours  
Explore some of the most treasured and legendary places on Earth, aboard our private aircrafts.

RECENT ISSUES [View Full Archive](#)



**NEWSLETTER**

Sign up for regular email updates from Smithsonian magazine, including free newsletters, special offers and current news updates.

**Subscribe Now**  
Enter your email address

**ABOUT US**

Smithsonian.com expands on *Smithsonian* magazine's in-depth coverage of history, science, nature, the arts, travel, world culture and technology. Join us regularly as we take a dynamic and interactive approach to exploring modern and historic perspectives on the arts, sciences, nature, world culture and travel, including videos, blogs and a reader forum.