

Organization Tips

How many times has your child responded “I don’t know?” when you ask them where something is? How many times has your child forgotten their lunch bag at home? Have you ever been stuck looking for the dreaded “other shoe”? Ever look in your child’s backpack and find missing crumpled papers from months ago? How many times are you just about to leave the house, and your child realizes that they forgot something (if you’re lucky, it’s before you leave the house)? It’s no fun and quite frustrating to spend wasted time looking for lost items, and even worse, disorganization can make you run late and miss out on important things. Organization skills are a key ingredient for success in school as well as life. People who are well organized find things more quickly and may even save money (the more you lose, the more money you spend replacing). Some people seem by nature more organized than others, but anyone can learn the skills necessary to organize themselves.

Most of the research in organization points to two key ingredients which include making sure everything has a “home of its own”, and making sure unnecessary items are purged to reduce clutter. Making sure that “everything has a home of its own” means that the same items are always placed in the same central spot to avoid loss and chaos. Some examples would be a central tub where all legos are placed, or a specific place by the door where backpacks are kept. Your child’s work space should be organized so that everything is in a central location too. You may want to keep a folder in a specific drawer to be used for all completed schoolwork that will be kept for the year. Maintain a homework supply kit so that all items necessary for homework are in the same box (e.g. pencils, sharpeners, scissors, crayons, glue sticks). Also, make sure you invest in enough storage containers (e.g. closets, bins, trays, folders and drawers) to contain necessary items.

Visual reminders are successful organization strategies that help people quickly decide which “home” to place things in. Color coding is a great visual way to organize materials so that they can be easily stored and retrieved. Even young children can benefit from visual reminders. For example, if you take pictures of blocks and place them on a storage container, it will remind young children that this is where the blocks need to be stored. You can also take a picture of the way their bedroom looks when it’s all cleaned up so that children can focus on matching the end result with the picture. As adults, we know that visual reminders assist with mental organization of tasks, and these strategies can be taught in the elementary grades. For example, use corkboards and dry erase boards to hang up messages and important papers. Use checklists and sticky notes to break down tasks into their component parts. Don’t be afraid to show your children your own visual reminders so that you are modeling what you are trying to teach.

Regular purging (this is very difficult for many people) of unnecessary items keeps you organized by avoiding clutter. In my house, if we haven’t used something within the past six months, and it has no significant sentimental value, we get rid of it. A good goal that you can set for yourself and your child is to make a pact that when you buy something new, something old must be thrown out or donated. I used this strategy myself when my

house seemed to contain an unending amount of stuffed animals/items. After some initial, and yes painful purging, the new rule is that whenever any of my children request any stuffed toy (even one that they've won at a fair), they have to agree to give up an old one. Not only did this work to reduce the amount of stuffed animals in our house, it also seemed to help my children prioritize what's important to them (an extra life lesson). Before every birthday party and holiday where gifts are given, my children go through their old toys and make a donation bag of toys to donate in order to make room for the new ones coming in. Another purging idea is to make every Friday "Clean up Backpack Day". Many teachers don't give as much homework on Fridays, so this is manageable before the weekend fun begins. On the days that your child is cleaning out their backpack, you can also model good organization skills alongside of them by cleaning out your own pocketbook or drawer!

The following is a list of suggestions adapted from the Coordinated Campaign for Learning Disabilities, which you can use to help your child stay organized:

1. Use checklists.

Help your child get into the habit of keeping a "to-do" list. Use checklists to post assignments, household chores, and reminders about what materials to bring to class. Your child should keep a small pad or notebook dedicated to listing homework assignments. Crossing completed items off the list will give him/her a sense of accomplishment.

2. Organize homework assignments.

Before beginning a homework session, encourage your child to number assignments in the order in which they should be done. He/she should start with one that's not too long or difficult, but avoid saving the longest or hardest assignments for last.

3. Designate a study space.

Your child should study in the same place every night. This doesn't have to be a bedroom, but it should be a quiet place with few distractions. All school supplies and materials should be nearby.

4. Set a designated study time.

Your child should know that a certain time every day is reserved for studying and doing homework. Include your child in making this decision. Even if he/she doesn't have homework, the reserved time should be used to review the day's lessons, read for pleasure, or work on an upcoming project.

5. Keep organized notebooks.

Help your child keep track of papers by organizing them in a binder or notebook. This will help them review the material for each day's classes and organize the material later to prepare for tests and quizzes. Use dividers to separate class notes or color-code notebooks. Separate "to do" and "done" folders help organize worksheets, notices, and items to be signed by parents, as well as provide a central place to store completed assignments.

6. Conduct a weekly cleanup.

Encourage your child to sort through book bags and notebooks on a weekly basis. Old tests and papers should be organized and kept in a separate file at home.

7. Create a household schedule.

Try to establish and stick to a regular dinnertime and a regular bedtime. This will help your child fall into a pattern at home. Children with a regular bedtime go to school well-rested. Try to limit television and computer play to specific periods of time during the day.

8. Keep a master calendar.

Keep a large, wall-sized calendar for the household, listing the family's commitments, schedules for extracurricular activities, days off from school, and major events at home and at school. Note dates when your child has big exams or due dates for projects. This will help family members keep track of each other's activities and avoid scheduling conflicts.

9. Prepare for the day ahead.

Before your child goes to bed, he/she should pack schoolwork and books in a book bag. The next day's clothes should be laid out with shoes, socks, and accessories. This will cut down on morning confusion and allow your child to prepare quickly for the day ahead.

10. Provide needed support while your child is learning to become more organized.

Help your child develop organizational skills by photocopying checklists and schedules and taping them to the refrigerator. Gently remind him/her about filling in calendar dates and keeping papers and materials organized. Most importantly, set a good example.

Organization skills are essential life skills that create order from chaos and help everyone feel more secure and relaxed. Make sure you set a good example for your children. As I always say, children watch what you do more than they listen to what you say. Please feel free to call me (203-3600 ext. 5286) and share any creative organizational strategies that work well in your family. I'm always looking for fresh ideas to share with families and your ideas may be used in upcoming posts.

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