

# Helping Kids Get Organized

By Sarah Arnold, Psy.D.

Back to school time again! You've likely started out with the best intentions of helping your child get organized for the year. You've purchased all the school supplies and helped your child prepare for the school year. The backpack, desk and locker look great for the first few days of school. So, will it last this year?

Organization as well as disorganization comes in varying degrees, so one never knows for sure if it will last this year. What we do know is that organizational skills can be learned.

Here are the basics to teaching organizational skills:

**Organize together.** While it may be easier to organize your child's backpack for him/her, you'll want to do this *with* him/her. In the long run, you'll have taught your child how to problem solve and organize on his/her own.

**Allow your child to choose the system.** You may be a very organized person, so your organizational system may seem to make perfect sense to you. Keep in mind that every child thinks differently. Allow your child to choose the organizational system (e.g. order of binder folders). If your child creates his/her own system to suit his/her needs, he/she will be more invested in the system, being more likely to maintain the system.

**During the process:**

- **Discuss the process of organization in a positive manner.** After all, this is your child's opportunity to succeed and find control over his/her materials for success this school year.
- **Timing can be everything.** Approach your child with the initial organization project when he/she will be most receptive to the idea. A child is not likely to be as

participatory once things are a mess or something is lost, and you say, "That's it, we're organizing your stuff." Rather, pick a neutral time (or preferably a time before things are disorganized) when you suspect your child will be receptive to the project.

- **Avoid being punitive.** "I told you so" is rarely effective, if ever. Again, either start the project before things get disorganized, or find an optimal time (not when you, your child, or both are frustrated) to work on the organization project together.
- **Listen more than talk.** While getting organized, give your child the control to put things in the order they choose and label his/her own folders/ notebooks. Let your child choose the categories. While you may have "better" ideas, spoken, "shoulds" will hinder the process. (e.g. "you should put that first," "you should write homework folder here," "you should write smaller"). If your child asks for a suggestion, you may offer multiple suggestions for them to choose from, but in the end, let your child pick and let him/her discover things on his/her own, such as writing crooked or too large for a label. You'd rather your child have a binder with character than have a perfectly set-up binder that goes unused.

## Stick To It

There are several types of homework planners, binder systems, accordion file systems, & wall and desk calendars, so people often shift from one system to the next in hopes of finding a better system. The truth is, organization lies not in a particular system, but one that is used consistently. Once you've come up with a system for recording homework, organizing materials to bring home and return to school, and developed a homework routine, use it consistently.

- **Keep up with the system.** Regular maintenance won't take long and it will make a difference. Pick a day of the week to go through the backpack together (and encourage your child to do the same thing with his/her desk or locker at school) to make sure all stray papers are in their place and miscellaneous things are where they belong.
- **Be a role model for weekly upkeep.** Show your child that you regularly maintain your materials. Organize your briefcase, purse, wallet, or stack of mail while your child helps you or you talk your-self through the process with your child nearby. You may even do this simultaneously to the backpack organization on a weekly basis.

#### Other Organizational Tips

1. **Use a clear folder solely for homework to be turned in.** This way your child will see the work and better remember to hand it in.

2. **Develop a launch pad.**

Organization is not just about a system; it is about routine and consistency. Each night prior to a school day, have a special area designated to place all the things your child will need for school the next day. Have the backpack packed with permission slips signed and put the backpack and anything else needed for the next day in the launching area so your child can grab and go rather than running around at the last minute trying to find everything in the morning.

3. **Breaking large assignments/projects into smaller steps.** Kids don't think past the end of the day sometimes, so thinking long-term can be difficult. Help your child to break a large project down into smaller parts and assign him/herself a part to do on certain days leading up to the due date.

And lastly, remember that organization takes practice (and patience) to learn!

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