

Improving Your Child's School ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS



One of the more common causes of poor grades and school performance is disorganization. Organization and planning ahead are learned skills. In order for students to become more organized, they will need to have a plan and practice it. Children often have a hard time organizing themselves and staying motivated to practice good organization skills. Parents play an important role in teaching their children organizational skills and keeping them motivated to practice the skills.

SIGNS OF POOR ORGANIZATION

Below is a list of situations that may be a sign that your child is having problems with organization and planning.

- Fails to bring home homework assignments
- Does not know the exact homework assignment
- Fails to return completed homework
- Does not know *when* the teacher gives homework (e.g., days of the week)
- Does not know *how* the teacher typically informs them of the homework assignments
- Fails to bring home books or needed materials
- Does not know when assignments are due
- Does not have papers and study guides to study for test
- Does not know when tests are
- Does not have a regular study space
- Does not have needed supplies for homework
- Waits until the last minute to start homework/studying
- Runs out of time when studying for tests

If your child is having any of the above problems, the following organizational strategies may help.

ORGANIZATIONAL METHODS

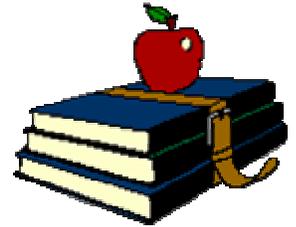
In order to avoid the problems listed above, students need to do four things successfully: (1) write down assignments and bring home books and materials, (2) keep track of papers, (3) plan ahead, and (4) have a study place.

The following steps are recommended to help your child develop these organizational skills.

Writing down assignments and bringing home books and materials

-  Have your child talk with the teacher about when and how homework is assigned. Some teachers assign homework only on particular days. In addition, teachers tend to provide the homework assignments at a particular time and in a particular way. For example, some teachers write the homework assignments on the board at the end of class. Others provide the assignment verbally to the students. Knowing this information will help your child keep track of her assignments.

- ✎ Provide your child with an assignment journal. Your child will need a pad or notebook to write down daily assignments, test dates, project instructions, and other important school information. This journal can be a simple pocket size spiral pad or as fancy as a daily planning calendar. Many office supply stores carry different types and styles of notepads and books that can be used for an assignment journal.
- ✎ Teach your child a system for remembering which books to bring home. Some tricks for remembering which books to bring home include having your child position books that need to go home in his locker or desk. For example, the student can put the books to go home on a particular shelf in the locker. Other students turn the binding of the books to go home toward the back of the locker/desk. If your child regularly has trouble remembering which books to bring home, he may need to bring every book home every night.



Keeping track of papers

It will be important for your child to have a system to keep track of all the papers that need to go back and forth to school. In addition to homework papers, your child will need to keep track of study guides and previously graded papers to study for tests at home.

- ✎ Provide your child with a subject folder. Your child will need a folder to keep all her papers organized. A notebook with multiple pockets will allow her to keep her papers organized by subject.
- ✎ Teach your child to have a nightly planning time. Teach your child to spend a few minutes each night organizing her papers. This should include placing all papers that need to go back to school in their proper pocket in the subject folder and placing the folder, books, and other needed materials into her backpack.

Planning Ahead

Most children have important social and recreational activities going on throughout the week. In order to have time for these activities and still have enough time to get homework completed and study for tests, your child will need to learn to plan ahead. One of the best ways of keeping track of time and all their activities is through a daily and weekly schedule. An example of a schedule is provided below.

- ✎ Provide your child with a way to map out a daily and weekly schedule. A dry erase marker board attached to the bedroom wall provides a good way for your child to see the activities of the week at a glance. Making a large paper schedule or using a week-at-a-glance calendar can also work. Before school, these schedules can serve as a reminder of what your child needs to bring home from school that day. After school, they can help your child decide what he needs to work on that day.
- ✎ At the beginning of the week, have your child list out all the activities for the coming week. This will help your child plan. For example, if your child has a Social Studies test on Wednesday and he needs two days to study for it, he can plan on bringing his Social Studies book home Monday and Tuesday nights.

- ✎ Each day, help your child decide what needs to be done that day and when to do it. This should include a listing of all homework assignments and other activities and responsibilities. It is often a good idea to decide ahead of time on the order of homework assignments, sandwiching the harder assignments in between the easier assignments.

Things To Do Today	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.
3:00-3:30 Snack and watch TV		Baseball	SS	Book	Spelling		Pool
3:30-4:30 Homework:		game 7:30	Test!!!	report	test		party
1. Read			Guitar	due			4:00
2. Math worksheet			lesson				
3. Write out spelling words			5:00				
4:30-5:00 Eat supper							
5:00-6:30 Baseball practice							
6:30-7:30 Play outside							
7:30-8:00 Practice instrument							

Daily and weekly schedule example

Study Place

One of the most basic habits you can teach your child is to study in one place. Help your child choose a particular location that she can use each time she studies. An effective workplace is one that has adequate space to spread out, is well lit, has the needed supplies close at hand, and is relatively free from distractions.



Observations and surveys of children and adolescents have shown that they frequently choose to study while listening to a radio or watching television. Should this practice be discouraged? Based on studies in this area, the answer appears to be “it depends.”

Audio and visual distractions will tend to interfere more with difficult assignments than with easy and routine assignments. In addition, meaningful background sounds, such as TV and speech, tend to be more distracting than music or other nonvocal background noise. As a general rule, you should try to control and limit meaningful distractions, such as telephone, TV, and interruptions from others during study time, particularly during difficult tasks. Do not worry as much about music and other nonvocal background noise during easy and routine assignments, if your child is completing her work.

TEACHING YOUR CHILD ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS

It is important for parents to keep in mind that using the ideas described above requires discipline and motivation. Your child will need to practice the skills until they become a regular part of his routine. You play an important role in helping your child develop these skills and keep motivated. There are a number of things to keep in mind as you work with your child.

- ✎ Shape up your child’s skills over time. Start with where your child is at and set small incremental goals. Do not expect perfection right away. Reward small steps toward the ultimate end goal of good organization. As your child makes improvements, you can expect a bit more, gradually moving toward the desired end goal of using the organizational skills regularly.
- ✎ Some of the skills may require teacher assistance initially. Some behaviors need to take place at school when you are not present to monitor them. For example,

your child will need to write her assignments in her assignment journal at school. For some children, it is helpful to have the teacher monitor the behavior at school until the child is able to do it on her own. Parents will need to talk with the teacher to enlist their cooperation.

 Monitor your child's organizational skills daily. In order to help your child establish a daily routine of staying organized, you will need to monitor several things.

≈ Each day, help your child with his daily and weekly schedule. Remind him in the morning to check his schedule. Immediately after school, help him update his schedule.

≈ Check his daily assignment journal

≈ Assist with his nightly planning time

 Motivate your child through encouragement and rewards. Parents should make a special effort to give their children frequent praise for the effort that they put into keeping organized. A general rule for using praise is to do it soon, strong, and often. A strong praise is one that is given in a warm tone of voice and includes a statement letting the child know what it is you are pleased with. For example, "I really like how you have been keeping track of your homework assignments! Great job!"

Tangible rewards may need to be used to help motivate children who are having some difficulty with using the organizational skills. A convenient method to manage tangible rewards is to use a behavior chart. With a behavior chart, you keep track of your child's organizational behavior on a chart or journal on a daily basis. You can provide your child with small, but meaningful rewards for using the skills each day (e.g., stay up later, snack, play game with parent, money, etc.). In addition, you can provide larger weekly rewards (e.g., trip to the ice cream store, rent a video game/movie, have a friend sleep over, money, etc.) for meeting some prearranged goal (e.g., using the organizational skills at least 3 days this week).

Your general approach with your child around organization should be positive. Avoid using criticism or punishment to try to get your child to use the organizational skills, these strategies will work against what you are trying to accomplish in the long run. You want your child to approach new challenges with confidence in her abilities, to have a feeling that she has control over her learning, and to be proud of her accomplishments. These goals are accomplished through being supportive and encouraging over time. When problems arise, your job should be to understand the problem and come up with solutions.

© 2001 Mark Edwards, Ph.D.

Center for Effective Parenting is a collaborative project of:
The Jones Center for Families
Department of Pediatrics-University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences
Arkansas Children's Hospital