

Organizing for Students: Help them Help Themselves

Back to school brings many routines we enjoy, such as the start of new activities and projects, yet brings just as many that we loathe, like wading through forms, to-do's and completed work, and managing scheduling conflicts. Since ignoring the piles and avoiding commitments is not an option for most of us, the best solution for managing the inflow of both information and demands on our time is to employ daily maintenance strategies that simplify the process and reduce the burden.

In turn, we teach our students these strategies to foster independence, reinforce self-maintenance routines, encourage good time management practices, and promote responsibility. When applied successfully, students learn to be accountable to the systems in place, validating their control of the process. End result: happier families all around!

Strategies for Incoming – Help them Put it Away

- Designate a “landing zone” for backpacks, bags and other items routinely dumped upon entry at the end of the day. Equip entryways or closets with hooks, bins or other storage options to manage items. Reinforce the system you implement on a daily basis, until it becomes routine. Encourage siblings to assist each other to remember.
- Designate an area (and communicate to your student) for incoming papers needing your (parent’s) immediate attention. Ideally, each student should have their own place to deliver papers, especially if your children attend more than one school. Options include stacking trays, file folders, magazine holders, desktop baskets, hanging wall or magnetized pockets or clips on the refrigerator. Label the container and locate it where you commonly manage paper, such as where you process your mail, a kitchen counter, home office desktop, a bookshelf or dining room buffet. Use of the kitchen or dining room tables is discouraged. At first, routinely request papers from your student to develop the habit. Praise them when they follow through.
- Set-up a desktop file for student’s completed work, with subject-specific hanging files, for filing school papers completed or in transition (future study materials). This is a visually effective and portable “home” for papers. Locate the desktop file either near the student’s work area (desk), the family computer or at your central paperwork station. Prepare one for each student and enlist him/her in the set-up process (labeling hanging and interior folders for each subject, selection of favorite colors, decorating or personalizing). Students who “own” a system are more likely to use it.
- Routine filing of completed work by the student, in subject-specific folders, reinforces organizing skills (for retrieval, reference or progress reviews) and offers you a self-contained system to review your child’s work when required. Desktop files can be found at all office supply stores; the most effective types are those open at the top, with notches for hanging files, and slim in design (6-8 inches deep, letter-size width). Avoid highly stylized “boxes” with lids. Keeping it simple and accessible will promote use.
- If your student works with a binder system that contains active as well as completed work, a desktop file at home is still encouraged to accommodate quarterly purges from the binder, as subject units are completed. Like binder purges, it is recommended that you also regularly purge desktop files when new material needs to be filed, or at the end of each marking period. Encourage your student to be responsible for this step.

Strategies for Scheduling – Help Them Remember to Do It

- Use visual aids such as a large wall calendar, white board or bulletin board to post important project deadlines, weekly activities and special commitments. Devote a separate one for each student and have him/her enter recurring activities, lessons and project deadlines as they receive them (at least once a week). Your student will be better able to plan for long-term assignments and manage related schoolwork when they can “see” what days they actually have open to work on projects.
- Post the calendar, white board or bulletin board near where they do their work (either on a wall above or next to their desk, or on the refrigerator if they use the kitchen table) and encourage them to reference it daily, either in the morning before school or when they do their homework. This calendar or reference board will also serve to remind them of special class outings (field trips) and items they need to bring to school (musical instruments). Use colored pens or dry erase markers to highlight certain activities or subjects.
- Review the upcoming week’s schedule with your student at the close of the weekend, or another mutually convenient time. For upcoming schoolwork deadlines, ask them to physically count back the days available to work on that project and to specify what they can get done each available day, in effect creating for themselves a time management outline. Writing each step of a project down on a specified day makes it a clear commitment. This strategy offers a tool for students to plan their time effectively, and to successfully follow through. Just like advising children about money, the earlier you begin teaching and reinforcing time management skills, and holding them accountable, the better they get at managing it for themselves.

Strategies for Outgoing – Help Them Get It Done

- Equip your student with a proper desk. Regardless of whether your student actually uses the desk for work (they may prefer their bedroom floor, surface of their bed, or dining room table), having a central place for storing their papers, reference materials and supplies is essential for developing good organizing habits.
- Create a portable supply kit, especially if your student tends to do homework in places other than at a desk. Use a plastic art supply tote, shoebox, large pencil case or other portable container to store everything they might need to complete an assignment. Having available supplies at their fingertips promotes focus and lessens distracting behaviors caused by having to look for things as they work.
- Stock nearby bookshelves, computer area or their desk with adequate paper supplies and appropriate reference books (dictionaries, thesauruses, writing guides, math workbooks, current-events magazines). Store like items together and maximize bookshelf storage and accessibility by containing loose items in appropriate receptacles (loose paper in trays, magazines in holders, supplies in clear boxes).
- Keep an analog clock in every room where schoolwork or lessons are done. Analog clocks, as opposed to digital ones, allow students to actively view the passing of time, relate it to what they are doing, and help them to better manage the time devoted to a particular activity. Alternatively, offer the use of a kitchen timer if your student performs better when they work in shorter, highly focused blocks of time, or visit www.timetimer.com for specialty timers commonly used in classroom settings.
- Designate a “launching pad” in your home, close to the door or wherever you gather items needed for the next day (keys, bag, lunch, backpack, library books, coat). Each evening, encourage your students to pack up items needed for the next day to leave at this location. This step reinforces next-day planning and reduces anxiety during the morning rush.

If you would like to discuss specific organizing challenges your student is facing, or to just get on the right track for the school year, contact Clearing House to schedule an organizing session. We will help you design and implement a system that meets individual needs.