

Ask A School Psychologist: Is Your Child Organizationally Challenged

Dr. R. Coranne Johnson

Parents often voice frustrations about their children's (lack of) organizational skills. They cite examples of lost clothing, messy bedrooms and forgotten homework assignments. I generally become involved when poor/ineffective organizational skills are impacting success at school. When I meet with parents, I explain that it is never too late (or early) to focus on developing their child's organizational skills.

As we discuss their child's organization strengths and challenges, I frame the development of organizational skills through four important practices:

1. Motivate your child to be organized: Explain the benefits of being organized. For example, children who are organized get their homework completed faster so they have more free time. They do not have to waste time looking for lost pencils or misplaced assignments.

Reward organizational success with praise, stickers or prizes.

2. Teach organizational skills: Many children have difficulty developing effective organizational skills at different stages of development; therefore, parents should consider their child's age and skill level when deciding what skill/task to teach on first.

Orally explain the organizational process as you model for your child the completion of a task. Think about how you would explain to your child how you organize the dishes in the dishwasher as you load it.

3. Coach organizational skills: As a parent, if you have cleaned your child's room for the past 12 years, do not assume after one instructional session, s/he could do it independently the next day. Parents need to take the time to coach children on how to think about organization - work with them on what to consider when deciding where items are put and how to develop or refine a system of sorting.

Promote a sense of ownership and pride by accepting your child's level of organizational proficiency. Coach the progression of a skill, do not expect perfection.

4. Model organization:

- Lead by example. When parents have effective organizational skills, their children are able to observe organizational processes and experience the benefits of an organized household.

I believe that effective organizational skills are based on fundamental organizational strategies. Some strategies that I find are useful to teach children are:

- Color coding - Teach your child how to use color for quick identification and categorization. Help them pick the colors of their binders, scribblers and other educational tools to correspond to

different classes.

- Lists - Develop your child's ability to create and use a 'to-do' list. Checklists can be created to list household chores or as reminders of things to bring on a trip. I encourage children to cross off completed items as a way of developing a sense of accomplishment.
- Calendars, agendas or planners - Model for your children how to manage time and plan for upcoming activities by using a family calendar. Discuss and demonstrate how to break a large project into manageable chunks. As early as Grade 1, have your child start to write down homework assignments, tests, playdates, piano lessons and other commitments into an agenda or planner. By creating and referring to a planner, your child will develop the ability to strategize tasks and organize time.
- Routines - Encourage independence by setting up and teaching routines. For example, after-school routine; snack, homework, play. Routines help reduce stress and frustration as children know what the expectation is while developing a sense of personal responsibility.
- A place for everything - When children know where something belongs, then it is more likely that they will put it back there. Teach your children to use containers and shelving to sort and store items. At all ages, incorporate a cleanup time into the daily/weekly routine.

Instilling in your children the understanding and practice of how to organize both their environment and their time is vital in helping them succeed in school but will also prove to be pivotal in their lifelong productivity. Take the time and have the patience to do it!

Dr. R. Coranne Johnson, R. Psych., has been working in the education field for 24 years as a teacher, administrator and school psychologist. She has also taught university courses in the areas of special education, psychology and program effectiveness. Through Dr. Johnson's work in schools, she has developed a wealth of knowledge about learning, literacy and special education. Dr. Johnson can be contacted through her website, helpingchildren.ca.