

Psych Savvy

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Children and Organizational Skills

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All too often we take for granted that the ability to organize, plan and work efficiently is somehow present in all individuals. Even more surprisingly, we seem to assume that children have such skills. Consequently, when problems exist in these skill areas, they are often blamed on lack of motivation, procrastination, laziness, avoidance, or irresponsibility. Organizational problems cut across race, age, intellectual level and economic status. Many bright, emotionally stable children exhibit poor organizational skills. School failure and unhappiness in the school setting can often be traced to poor organizational skills. Every teacher and psychologist has "success stories" about children who dramatically improved their school performance because of assistance in becoming better organized.

Very little is actually known regarding how organizational skills grow and develop. Some indicators which may suggest problems include: difficulty learning sequences by rote (days of the week, the alphabet song), concepts of place and time (before, after, tomorrow, below, above), learning how to tell time and estimate its passage, and understanding sequences of events. Language skills may be delayed in development and the child may have difficulty finding the right words to express thought. Telling stories or giving directions in the proper order may be a problem.

Children with organizational problems often have messy work areas, lose materials and possessions, are unprepared and have disjointed notes or journals. Additionally, they often manage time poorly, have trouble following schedules and misplace or lose assignments even when they have been completed. Children with significant problems of organization may appear confused or disoriented - especially under time pressures. They may have difficulty seeing the patterns or expectations in their environment.

What Can Teachers and Parents Do?

1. First and foremost provide a structured, well ordered environment with specific, well defined rules, regulations and expectations.
2. Assist children in seeing the commonality of ideas, procedures and objects. How traits and characteristics of things allow us to group and organize them. Assist them in learning how to sort, analyze and finally how to see overall patterns.
3. Work together - parent, teacher and child to determine where the organizational breakdown is occurring. Then, develop routines, checklists, strategies and systems for dealing with the organizational needs. Take the child through - step by step to show how common patterns exist in problems and tasks and how an organized approach may be used over and over in a wide variety of settings.
4. Break tasks into smaller, more workable sub-units and show how the parts work into the whole.
5. Assist the child to develop time management skills. With older children a time chart will work.
3:30 - 5:15 Hockey practice
5:30 - 7:00 Homework (free reading if homework is completed)
7:00 - 8:30 Supper, free time (if homework is done)
9:00 Lights out

For younger children a chart using pictures plus times will work.

The key to successful use of a schedule system is not slavish adherence without any exception, but rather a high degree of consistency combined with reasonable occasional flexibility, as is required in modern life. The key word is occasional. Once, twice, three times a month is occasional. Two or three times a week means the system is not consistent. Re-organize, re-negotiate.

All children should have some say in the development of systems and plans aimed at improving their organizational skills. Parents and teachers need to consult with one another in order to decide just how broad the input from the child should be.

6. Use visuals - charts - job charts, task charts, homework assignment check offs. For longer tasks or projects have sub-steps or areas which may be checked off along the way (this is vital - especially with younger or very discouraged children).
7. Close home-school communication is a necessity if disorganization is resulting in poor school work. A variety of check system notes or forms are possible.
 - A. Keep it simple
 - B. Be consistent
 - C. Reinforce attempts not just full success

It is important not to overload the communication system back and forth between school and home. Agree on one, two or at most three areas. Use a short, simple way to assess what has happened. Avoid lengthy notes. Organization among the adults assisting the child is a prime way of modeling the value of being consistent. Parents and teachers have lots of demands on their time. Don't begin a home-school communication system to assist organizational skills unless you are willing to make it a very high priority and to consistently follow through (another reason to keep it simple).

Small successes lead to larger ones. This is especially true when working on improving organizational skills. Reinforce attempts - small progress.

8. Assist the child to use self-reminders to organize and remember. ("B-L-H - say it to yourself as you put on your coat" - standing for - Do I have my books, lunch, homework?).
9. Show how organizing possessions and materials (a room or a desk) is similar to a game of solitaire (i.e. - all units or items are sorted according to similarity until all items are in an appropriate group).
10. Allow some decision making by the child (this is possible with even pre-schoolers) as to their schedule, and how they will approach their organizational responsibilities. The degree, will of course, vary with age and how responsible the child has proven to be (but allow for additional "chances" at times).
11. Discuss and model decision making, priority setting, schedule making and boundary setting. Teach by example. Also, debrief after the fact and assist the child in seeing how various choices positively or negatively influence organization.
12. Provide positive, interesting but non "lecture" type examples of how planning and organization leads to valuable, interesting and even exciting consequences (a visit to a space center showing the literally millions of steps leading to a step on the moon - a visit to a big time college training room where charts show the hundreds of hours of preparation for a few minutes of glory on the athletic field). Be creative, think of other situations where planning and organization result in excitement - feelings of worth. Most of all, assist the child step by step make the process meaningful and enjoyable.

Resources:

Your building school psychologist
Smith, S. No Easy Answers. Winthrop Press
(especially good for parents of learning disabled students)
Winston, S. Getting Organized; Warner Books

* Adapted from the Communiqué, September, 1990, Gail Mengel