

# THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:  
A Letter for Parents by the  
NYU Child Study Center

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## ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS

How children organize the many demands of their busy lives is critical to their success at school as well as to their personal sense of control and accomplishment. Because of this, educators and mental health professionals have begun to focus on the techniques used by children to manage the materials needed for their schoolwork, manage time when completing assignments, and plan their actions in order to meet learning goals. Teachers report that a tool-kit of organizational skills is becoming more important because homework loads have increased. In addition, learning approaches based on discovery and projects rather than lecture presentations and repetitive practice require children to use multiple sources of information rather than a single textbook for each subject. They handle more paper and books, and need to make more decisions about how they approach their work. As a result, understanding the organizational skills used by children has become increasingly complex and important.

Teachers have indicated that individual children seem to vary in their mastery of the skills required to stay organized in school. While some children seem to learn techniques for keeping their materials and actions organized simply by observing others or listening to advice, others seem more haphazard in their approach and do not acquire organizational techniques so readily. These children do not have a reliable way to remember their school assignments or a systematic way to store their papers. They may not coordinate their activities with the available time and may perform school-related activities on almost a random schedule. Educators believe that these organizational differences among students play a large role in determining which children get the most out of their educational experience. Parents have also reported that they experience much less stress in helping with school assignments when their child just “stays organized”.

Researchers and clinicians from the NYU Child Study Center began to investigate organizational skills in children by developing a standardized and systematic way to measure each child’s level of skill. Questionnaires were constructed to gather real-life information from teachers about the ways all kinds of children manage their schoolwork. Using the reports of over 180 teachers, detailed information was collected about the organizational approaches of over 900 children from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grades in the New York Metropolitan region. Through this effort, we have been able to learn more about what teachers have noted about general students in their classrooms.

- Children are simply not alike in their ability to be organized. Some children have better organizational skills than others.
- Children vary in their ability to meet deadlines and manage their time effectively.
- Children vary according to the following categories of behavior:
  - How often they use planning tools to keep schedules.
  - How often they use other organizational tools to manage supplies and papers.
  - How often they remember needed papers or due-dates. Some children regularly forget such things.

Descriptions of the organizational approaches used by children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) were particularly intriguing to the researchers, because disorganization has long been considered a serious barrier to success for even bright children with ADHD. According to the responses to teacher questionnaires, ADHD students demonstrated more deficits in organizational skills than a mixed group of children in regular classes. Using these insights, the staff of the NYU Child Study Center has developed methods for teaching organizational skills to children afflicted with ADHD. These training methods are currently undergoing a scientific test of effectiveness.

What we are learning about children with ADHD has practical significance for all children in improving and enhancing their organizational abilities. Practical advice for parents wishing to improve their child’s organizational skills includes:

- ❑ Make sure your child knows what to do and when to do it. Provide a reliable way to list homework, assignments, and due dates. (A simple note pad will do, but make sure it is always with your child.)
- ❑ Help your child create a way to store and transport papers to and from school. Provide a folder or binder, making sure your child can use it easily. (Many 3-ring binders fail because papers rip and fall out.) Ask your child to consistently store papers in that transportation system rather than stuff them into the book bag or backpack.
- ❑ Include a brief time in your schedule to review the assignments with your child. Ask your child to connect each task with all the needed materials (e.g. books, worksheet, pencils, etc.). Ask your child when the assignment is due and mark the date on a calendar if the due-date is not the next day.
- ❑ Create a consistent place for your child to complete homework. Stock that location with needed supplies and nothing else. Before your child begins to do homework, ask your child if everything needed is in the area. Remove unnecessary items so they are not distracting.
- ❑ Pack everything away when homework is complete. Ask your child if anything else is needed for school the next day. Doing this the night before school helps avoid mishaps that can happen in the rush to get ready in the morning.
- ❑ Help your child find a specific time to study and complete assigned work each day. Although the actual time may change according to the schedule of after-school activities, the discussion about scheduling a regular time should build time management skills.
- ❑ For large projects, ask your child to think about and list the steps needed to complete the project. This will build your child's ability to plan ahead.
- ❑ Praise and reward your child for using these steps. Do not assume that the behaviors will "stick." They need to be taught, practiced, and reinforced in order to become part of the routine. Your involvement and interest will tell your child how important you think it is to plan ahead and be organized.

**Written and developed by Richard Gallagher, Ph.D., and the staff of the NYU Child Study Center**

#### **ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER**

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the understanding, prevention, and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with mental health problems including anxiety, depression, learning, or attention difficulties, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We also offer a limited number of no cost services for particular disorders and age groups through clinical studies. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916. For information about two studies for children affected by ADHD, please contact (212) 263-8613 or (212) 263-7779 and ask about the free study of organizational skills or the treatment study for school-age children with ADHD. Participating children can receive an evaluation and free treatment if the program is appropriate for them.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, [AboutOurKids.org](http://AboutOurKids.org).



**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health  
NYU Child Study Center**

**577 First Avenue  
New York, NY 10016  
(212) 263-6622**

**1981 Marcus Avenue, Suite C102  
Lake Success, NY 11042  
(516) 358-1808**