

Mission: Organization

Transform your middle schooler from a backpack pack-rat to a planning pro.

Teach your child the organization skills he or she needs to take on middle school responsibilities.

Do the contents of your middle schooler's backpack resemble something that should only be approached with a pair of tongs and protective gear? Does he routinely misplace assignments or forget to bring home books he needs to complete homework? Many middle school children, faced with increased demands and tight schedules, find it hard to keep track of the endless papers, books, and assignments they need for school. Nowadays (compared to your junior-high years) there are more courses with their accompanying books, papers, and handouts; schedules may vary from day to day and week to week; and some kids may be shuttling between two parents' homes as well.

Nevertheless, as a middle schooler your child will be expected to take greater responsibility for her schoolwork: daily assignments, tests and quizzes, and long-term projects. And this comes at a time when her focus may be more on friends and socializing than worrying about whether she's ready for a math test on Friday. How can you help her make sense of it all so she can focus on learning? Try this step-by-step guide.

1. Make time to discuss getting organized. Call a family meeting or initiate a discussion at the dinner table when the entire family is present (older sibs can share some been-there-done-that advice and empathy). Entice your pre-teen with his favorite snack or meal!

2. Assess the organizational system used at school. Typically at the beginning of the school year, teachers ask students to use certain organization methods, such as keeping their work in a binder. However, that system may not work for your child. "You may see that there's no paper in the binder," says Donna Goldberg, author of *The Organized Student: Teaching Children the Skills for Success in School and Beyond*. "What you want to do is tweak the system to meet her needs." Find out what she doesn't like and look for alternatives that are acceptable to the teacher.

3. Enlist your child's help. Don't insist that he get organized your way. The idea is to help him discover a way that works for him. Too much "guidance" from you can cause conflict, notes Patrick Akos, assistant professor in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "Your child wants to be autonomous and independent. How you help is critical. Give him as much choice as possible." Offer him some options (see #4, below; better yet, brainstorm some ideas together) and let him analyze the pros and cons of each.

4. Come up with a plan. Consider some combination of these strategies:

- **A clean start.** Take a look at your child's desk or workspace. Is it covered with all of last year's papers or artwork left over from kindergarten? If so, purge! Help her make decisions about what to keep. "That's critical to decision-making and organizational skills, says Donna Goldberg. Start off each school year with a clear surface and the correct supplies. "She needs a definite place — a shelf, desk, or box dedicated only to schoolwork so it doesn't get lost," says Sheila McCurdy, a professional organizer who works with children who have attention deficit disorders.
- **An assignment notebook.** He can't remember his homework without writing it down, so your first step is to make sure he does that, says Donna Goldberg. She recommends a planner that helps children prioritize by showing a week's schedule across two pages. "This allows him to track what will happen

in class over a week — that's what middle school is about," says Goldberg. "Some work is due the next day, some 3 days later; there are long-term assignments and tests 4 days away." It's also a good idea to record long-term projects in more than one place, says Steven Evans, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. "Teach your child to write it down on the due date, and the day it's given, plus build in checks in between." If he is really struggling with this, Evans also recommends asking his teachers to initial the assignment list daily to confirm its accuracy. (Once he shows progress here, you can ease up on this requirement.)

- **The right paper-tamers.** Aside from the planner or homework notebook, your child needs some way to corral the loose papers she carries back and forth to school each day. "Have her put homework she takes to school in some type of contained unit like a sheet protector; have one for each class," kept together in a binder, sturdy folder, or accordion file, says Sheila McCurdy. "Then it won't fall out, blow away, or get tossed by accident."
- **Great gadgets.** If a notebook is too low-tech for your young gadget guru, try a handheld electronic organizer. If he struggles with handwriting, find out if he can take a tape recorder to school," says McCurdy. "When the teacher announces the assignment, he can click it on and not miss a word."
- **Daily duties.** For some kids, a 30- to 45-minute work session every day is essential — no matter what homework the teacher has assigned, says Steve Evans. "Tell your child, 'Every school night you'll do school work. If there's nothing due the next day you can study for a test or work on an upcoming project.'" If he insists he has nothing to do, give him the newspaper to read and write about. "That's a disincentive," says Evans. "If you make work, he's more likely to find the things he has to do for school."
- **The little-by-little approach.** Be sure your child understands how to break a big project down into pieces so that it's not so overwhelming, says Patrick Akos, assistant professor in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "We expect kids to know how to do these things, but they don't," he says. Using a calendar, show her how to work backward from a due date and set interim goals. Ask her how she'd go about earning the high score on her favorite video game — what steps would she need to take to get there?
- **Role-modeling.** If she often forgets books or loses papers, try demonstrating your own organizational methods, rather than lecturing your child, says Akos. When you're running errands, think out loud: "What do I need to take with me? Do I need to make a list?" Your child will pick up strategies as she observes. "You can also talk about how you approach projects at work if you think your child would respond to that," says Akos.

5. Don't criticize. Once you've got a system in place, keep touching base. If things get sloppy again (which should not surprise you!), don't pass judgment. Just help him get back on track without comment. It takes time to learn this, along with a healthy dose of patience and persistence from you. "One day they have it, but the next day they don't. That's what happens," says Akos. "Sometimes they'll insist they can get organized on their own, and the next minute they're begging for help. That's normal."

6. Clean out the backpack regularly. Have her do it, say, every Sunday. Don't do it for her, but sit nearby. If you come across a test she did poorly on, don't comment. The session will revert from backpack cleaning to grades and very likely go downhill from there. Instead, "have a checklist, a definition of what 'keeping it organized' means," says Evans. The list might include items such as:

- No extraneous papers, clothes, or food
- All papers must be inside pockets in folders

7. Keep a family calendar. Along with soccer practice and Mom's book club, keep track of big tests and the due dates of special projects. Seeing the bigger picture will allow you to help your child plan her time more effectively. "We post school, sports, and music lesson schedules on a bulletin board by the door," says Joy Sutherland of Collierville, Tennessee, who has two daughters, ages 11 and 14. "On Sunday nights, we transfer key info from the bulletin board to a wipe-off calendar on the fridge, with entries color-coded for each family member. It's another reminder of what's happening that week."

8. Provide opportunities for practice. Look for ways to reinforce organizational skills outside of schoolwork. "Our younger daughter wants to change bedrooms," says Sutherland. "So we've assigned that to her as a project: Figure out what you need to move, what you need to buy, what it will cost, etc. It shows her that something like this needs to be broken down into stages."

9. Call for reinforcements. If you've tried everything and your child still resists, get additional help. "You may need to a third party – an organizer, school counselor, favorite teacher or tutor – to find out what's going on and recommend some strategies," says Sheila McCurdy, who serves in this role for her clients. Your child may respond better if your role changes from coach to cheerleader.