

THE PARENT LETTER



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

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HELPING YOUR CHILD DEVELOP ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS

It is important for parents to support and facilitate the instruction that their children receive in school. Students whose parents are involved in their education do better at all grade levels. However, there are many skills that children may need to learn at home in order to flourish in school. A thirst for learning, persistence, and effective social interaction are sets of behaviors which are learned at home and can distinguish between successful and unsuccessful students at all levels of intellectual abilities and academic aptitude. In addition, children may benefit from lessons designed to develop organization, time management, and planning skills. In work completed at the NYU Child Study Center, we have learned that children vary in three areas that seem important in managing school and home routines. Students vary in how well they: (1) manage materials and papers for school and home; (2) use time to complete tasks and respond to scheduled events; and (3) plan their actions to reach goals for school assignments and home activities.

Discussions with educators suggest that organization, time management, and planning skills may be crucial for success. In some situations, a child who does not have a clear set of routines for completing school tasks is hindered even if the child possesses all of the necessary knowledge for the tasks. For example, a child that has not established a procedure for writing down assignments may find that s/he is unable to complete homework assignments because required papers such as worksheets or reading materials have been left in the school locker. Parents find that many conflicts at homework time often result because children have not written down the complete assignments, they do not know how to complete the steps needed for the assignment, or they have not taken the correct actions to assure that they have the papers that they need. It seems that establishing routines for day-to-day school tasks is a goal of great significance.

There are many ways children learn to organize their materials, time, and actions. Some children may develop organizational skills by watching others and thinking of a way to take care of their supplies, manage their time, and select actions that are needed. Still other children may gain the skills by being told what methods to use. A smaller number of children may need to receive direct instruction and practice for varied periods of time in order to adopt effective routines for organization. According to our research, this latter group of children consists of more boys than girls, and includes many youth with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and learning problems. Our clinical experience suggests that problems in organizational skills may emerge in the middle of elementary school and can persist throughout the school career, even into college.

What can parents do to facilitate the development of organizational skills? Consider these ideas that are based on our experience and general principles of learning.

- Demonstrate appropriate use of routines to manage the supplies you use in your life, such as your house keys, car keys, and important papers. Discuss how you manage your time, so your child learns how long tasks take and what you do to fit those tasks into your schedule. Include your child in discussions of family activities and routines, so s/he can learn that foresight is useful.
- Help your child develop a way to transport materials back and forth from school. Consider books, papers, and other items such as lunch, money, and the school bus or subway pass.
- Make homework a part of your regular evening routine. Consider how long it should take. If you are not sure, ask your child's teacher for an estimate on how much time should be spent on homework and studying.
- Discuss long-term projects such as book reports with your child. Children may not know what steps to take and how to complete assignments that take several days or weeks.
- Develop ways to store school supplies and your child's toys and equipment.
- Determine a work area for school activities and stock it with needed supplies.

If your child demonstrates major problems with organization that are interfering with school success and contributing to conflict about school assignments, consider these ideas:

- Check with your child's school. Many schools have added courses in organization and study skills to their curriculum, especially at the middle-school level. Additionally, your school may be able to offer a brief form of tutoring to overcome problems.
- Private tutoring in organizational skills is also an option. However, be careful. An extensive review of educational and psychological literature shows that instruction in organization is an area that has received very little evaluation. Many practical, reasonable ideas and methods have been proposed, but there is little data to support their effectiveness.
- Finally, if your child is afflicted with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder or you suspect that your child has the condition, the NYU Child Study Center may be able to offer assistance. During the last few years, we have been exploring methods to assess and treat organizational skills deficits in children with ADHD. These approaches are receiving critical review to ensure that they are useful and effective.

Through a grant funded by the National Institute of Mental Health to Dr. Howard Abikoff, the NYU Child Study Center is offering free treatment specifically designed to help children with ADHD improve their ability to organize their materials, their time, and their school and home activities.

We are working with children between the ages of 8 and 11 (3rd to 5th grade) who meet diagnostic criteria for ADHD and have organizational skills difficulties. Youngsters who qualify for the program will receive an intervention which specifically targets improving organizational skills (i.e. materials management, time management, and planning). The treatment is individualized, one-on-one, and intensive. Parents and children will participate in meetings twice a week for about 10 weeks. Teachers are consulted and asked to assist in the efforts. Teachers who participate are compensated for their extra help in facilitating progress.

At this time, we are not able to work with children with major learning or developmental difficulties.

For further information, please call (212) 263-5840 or (212) 263-2734.

Written 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 research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. The Family Education Series consists of 13 informative workshops focused on child behavioral and attentional difficulties. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8861.

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.

AboutOurKids.org

THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER ONLINE

Changing the Face of Child Mental Health
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