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# From Parent to Coach

## *Taking on a New Mindset to Get Your Child Organized*

At the risk of sounding as though we've promised too much in Chapter 1, it is time for us to admit that the process of handing over the job of executive assistant from you to your child is a slow and gradual one. It's also one in which you will be involved significantly: The task of getting your child organized will probably require *more* effort from you than you currently expend in just doing things for him. But it is a (relatively) short-term investment toward a long-term reward: a more self-reliant, self-sufficient kid.

And we know that's a lot to ask, because you are probably already doing a lot more work to organize your kid than you'd like to, and a lot more than you see the parents around you doing. As we've discussed in Chapter 1, as children grow older, they are increasingly capable of carrying out complex actions requiring organization, time management, and planning. But as your child grew, her struggles with these types of tasks likely became apparent, and many times it probably felt like it was easier to keep doing them yourself than to go through the struggle of handing them over. And thus your role as executive assistant became entrenched. Often these roles and habits have become so familiar (and the memories of the battles that may have occurred are still so fresh) that it can take a mental leap to really get going on the process of change.

The point of this program is to offer you a *different* approach to helping your child—because, frankly, if the traditional methods had worked for your child, you probably wouldn't be here reading this book. And trying a different approach will require some important shifts in mindset. In this

chapter we'll introduce you to some new ways to approach your child's disorganization.

**An important note before you dig in:** This chapter is meant to be an *introduction* to these concepts. Your real plan of action begins in Part II, where we begin to walk you, step by step, through how to use the concepts to implement the program. So even if you are chomping at the bit, don't use this information to get started on making any changes yet. We promise we will get there!

OK, so here's how to start:

1. *Increase expectations.* First, you will probably need to stop doing as many things *for* your child as you have been doing to this point. For example, your eight-year-old should be capable of picking out a snack and packing it, with a water bottle, in his bag each evening. Similarly, your nine-year-old should be able to put her homework assignments back in the correct folder each evening, instead of leaving them on the kitchen counter and running off to play. If your child knows that you will do these things for him, he will be less likely to try to do them on his own. In Part III we will walk you, step by step, along a path to setting new expectations one at a time. But if you find yourself saying, "I'll skip this skill; it's easy enough for me to keep doing it on my own," take a minute to stop and rethink. Your child's independence is a valuable goal, for both your sakes.

2. *Provide support.* While you want to start slowly to increase expectations for your growing child, you don't want to withdraw all support overnight or withdraw it in a punitive manner. Remember our discussion in Chapter 1 of teachers' use of scaffolding—supporting children while they need it, and then removing supports gradually and planfully? This works just as well at home as it does at school. You can let your child know that because she is getting older and more responsible, you believe that she can start doing some of the tasks that you have been doing for her. Then tell your child which concrete steps she will now be expected to do, and let her know that you are available to help, if needed. For instance, you might say, "Before you go to bed each night, please pick one snack from this cabinet, fill your water bottle, and put both items in your backpack. If you need my help unscrewing the top from the water bottle, I'll be happy to do that." When your child performs an organizational task independently, praise her for taking more responsibility.

3. *Monitor.* Your child may not pick up on these new routines as quickly as you expect. For some children, increasing expectations and providing

clear prompts and praise will do the trick. However, for a child who has weaker organizational skills, you may need to provide more explicit, guided instruction and use behavior management strategies to motivate mastery, especially when it comes to school-related tasks. If this is the case for your child, do not fear—Parts II, III, and IV of this book outline a plan that will help you and your child work together on becoming more organized.



### Tip for Older Children

If your child is already in middle or high school and struggles with organization, you may feel even more frustrated with the lack of independent functioning in this area. Your frustration is completely understandable—but try not to let it guide the way you address this issue with your preteen or teen. You may be tempted to simply stop helping and let your teen suffer the consequences—and, in some situations, that “tough love” approach might work. For example, you may find that if you stop putting your preteen’s iPad in his backpack each morning, and your child gets in trouble with his teacher for not having it in class, he will be more likely to remember it in the future. However, this approach will probably not work for some older children who have true deficits in organizational skills. For these children, forcing them to “sink or swim” may backfire—because they’re not just going to learn how to “swim” as if the instructions were already ingrained. If your child is in this group, you really need to teach her to swim. For her, following the three steps for moving toward more independence will be essential in helping her gradually make changes.

## Remember That Executive Functions Are Needed Everywhere

Consider this scenario (which probably happens in your home more often than you would like): As you’re tucking your eight-year-old son into bed, you remind him that he has band practice in school the next day and should take his flute to school. The next morning, at about 10:00 A.M., you get a call from your son at school, begging you to bring him the flute that he left in his room. You recognized that this is hard for him and gave him a reminder. Why wasn’t this enough?

It will be important as you work through this program to think constantly about the hidden executive skill gaps that may be tripping up your

child, even on tasks that may seem easy. For children who struggle with organization, a verbal reminder is not always enough, especially if that reminder is not given in the immediate situation when action is required. For the boy in this example to succeed, he would have to use strong working memory skills: He would have to hold your verbal reminder in his memory overnight, recall that reminder the next morning, and use that information to motivate concrete action (putting the flute in his bag). While these steps might seem simple to an adult who is able to use working memory efficiently, they are incredibly complex for children with weak executive functioning. For these children, telling them to do something is simply not enough.

## Behavior Change Is Hard Work for Kids

While your child might recognize that forgetting important items or neglecting to hand in assignments is not an appropriate behavior, she probably does not know *how* to carry out the actions necessary to organize herself, given her still-developing executive functioning skills (see Chapter 1). Your child will need time and extra support from you to learn to use a new organizational routine consistently. You might think it's a simple step to pack up the homework materials after finishing nightly assignments, but your child may struggle to remember this step without a reminder. Furthermore, most children have a hard time understanding the long-term consequences of their actions. Your child sees a backpack that isn't packed or a pencil box that is running low on materials. You see the poor grade that the child will get if he doesn't hand in his homework consistently, or the problems that will occur when your child doesn't come to class prepared with his materials. Your child may have real difficulties mentally connecting short-term behaviors to their long-term consequences.

Organization is not an innate ability that naturally emerges in children (or adults). Organizational skills must be taught and practiced to become automatic, just like your child must learn how to decode words and add numbers before she can become proficient in reading or math. Acquiring the basic skills that are necessary for organization may not come easily to your child, just as some children have more difficulty understanding why  $10 - 2 = 8$ . If you tell a child who struggles with math to "just try harder," or get frustrated or punish her when she can't complete a math assignment that she doesn't understand, that child is unlikely to get any better at math. The same is true for a child who has difficulty being organized: The child

needs a chance to learn and practice the building blocks that lead to organized behavior, and needs you to support her as she attempts to master this difficult new skill area.

## A Telling-and-Doing Program

For these reasons, the program outlined in this book is not a *telling* program; it is a *telling-and-doing* program. You do give your child verbal explanations and suggestions (the telling), but you also provide the necessary support for the child to put what you just told him into practice—the doing. As you work through this book, you will feel more confident telling your child about tools or routines that can help him become more organized—for example, suggesting that he use an accordion file instead of individual folders to file papers. However, these suggested steps are only one piece of the puzzle and will get you only so far without the second piece—your active support in motivating your child to practice and integrate those new skills and routines into his life. OST is based on behavioral principles of change. Simply stated, you need to break down each behavioral objective into its concrete, component parts; provide ample opportunities to practice each specific part; and motivate continued performance of the desired behavior(s) with praise and rewards. Let's break that process down a bit more specifically:

**Teach by breaking it down.** First, you will teach your child a specific routine—for example, packing her backpack after she finishes her homework. You will not assume that your child knows *how* to pack her backpack; instead, you will break down this routine into essential steps and demonstrate how each step is carried out. We outline steps for teaching organization, time management, and planning in Part III, so you don't have to make this part up! For example, if you are teaching your child to break down the backpack-packing routine, you will point out the essential steps: "Put all your papers back into the correct folders, and then place all the folders in the backpack. Add a snack and a water bottle. Now check that you have everything you need: Did you leave any papers on or under the table? Have you considered other things (such as library books that may need to be returned, instruments for band practice, or gym clothes)? Finally, zip up the backpack, and leave it by the front door."

**Practice.** Next you will have your child practice this routine while you observe, praising the things she does well ("You remembered to check

your folders for all the papers you need!”) and pointing out things to try again (“Did you think about what specials you have tomorrow?”). You may need to practice a few times before your child gets the hang of it. In Part III, we give you some tips for making sure these practice sessions go smoothly.

**Prompt, monitor, praise, and reward.** This is the most important part of the process, and one to which we dedicate an entire chapter (Chapter 5). If you stop after the teaching and practice phases, and expect that your child “got it,” you will be sorely disappointed by the results: Your child may remember the steps for the next day or two, but is likely to slip right back into old patterns fairly quickly. You will need to follow through by prompting your child to use the new skill/routine each day, monitoring your child’s progress in a formal way, and praising and rewarding your child for using the skill/routine. Children with weak organizational skills will not be able to master new routines without timely prompts and increased motivators from parents and teachers.

## “What If I’m Not Organized Enough to Teach My Child Organization?”

Often we speak with parents who blame themselves for their children’s disorganized habits: “How can I expect my kid to get ready in the morning on time when I’m late picking her up at school almost every day?” or “It’s no wonder my child loses his planner all the time; it’s impossible to find anything in our house!” Our advice to parents with these concerns is, first, to drop blame from the equation, because that is never a productive place to start! However, it may be useful to examine your own organizational habits and think about whether small changes in the home environment could help support your child’s organization. You might want to consider the following questions:

- *Is a calendar posted somewhere in the house where my child can view the schedule for the week?* Many parents find that keeping a large calendar can help everyone keep track of after-school activities, playdates, doctors’ appointments, and the school day schedule (for those schools that operate on a rotating six-day schedule).

- *Can I organize the “stuff” in my house more efficiently?* Chapter 11 provides some suggestions for how to get stuff under control by using storage

containers and bins. If you think that the “stuff” in your house might get in the way of setting up more organized systems related to schoolwork (for example, if you can't find a good homework spot for your child because every room is overrun with her younger brother's toys), it might be a good idea to preview Chapter 11 and see if you can get the mess under control first. One mom shared a simple solution with us that worked wonders in her house: She bought a rolling cart with file folders and bins, and assigned each child file folders for artwork and important papers; the bins held writing, drawing, and art supplies. Of course, she had to make sure that the kids learned routines for filing the papers and putting materials back on the cart—but after a short time there were no more piles of papers on the kitchen table, and everyone had the necessary materials for homework and art projects, no matter where each child chose to work.

- *Is there a clock in every room where my child needs to do schoolwork or get something done in a timely manner (such as showering and getting dressed)?* We discuss how to help improve your child's time management skills in Chapter 9, and the use of a clock is an important piece of all the suggested routines.

- *Do I need to shift the schedule slightly to make it more likely that my child can get things done on time?* For example, if the morning school bus comes at 8:15 and you wake everyone up at 7:45, you might have trouble getting everyone out the door with what each child needs on time. Consider all the times during the day when you find yourself rushing (and probably yelling), and think about whether there is a way to shift the schedule a bit to minimize stress and maximize success.

- *Do I model a playful approach to tasks for my kids?* Chapter 10 outlines steps for helping your child plan for larger tasks. As you read that chapter, think about how you might be able to model that process for tasks that you have to complete every day. Is your mom's birthday coming up? Talk to your child about the things you need to do to be ready with a gift and celebration for Grandma. Are you planning a holiday dinner? Ask your child to help you come up with a menu and grocery list. You use organizational skills on a regular basis, so the more you can start actively modeling those skills for your child—that is, pointing out what you're doing, and demonstrating appropriate steps—the more likely it is that your child will use those skills.

Don't worry if your first answer to some of the questions above is “no.” Throughout the book, we provide tips that we have developed from work with parents and children that will help you carry out the steps in the

program. As you read the chapters that follow, you will work on ways to improve not only your child's organizational skills, but also the organization of your home environment. Remember to cut yourself some slack if you don't follow through perfectly—every new system will have its stops and starts!—and then think about what you need to do differently to achieve a better result. For example, if you find that you often forget to prompt your child or give a reward for using an organized routine (a process we describe in Chapter 5), think about how you can remind yourself to do so. Perhaps you need to post the list of skills that your child is working on in a more visible location (on the refrigerator door, for instance), and set a specific time each evening to review what she earned points for and to give a reward. Give yourself and your child some time to adjust to this new way of doing things. (If you find that your efforts fall short, you can seek some professional guidance, as there are several books and programs for enhancing organized actions in adults. See the Resources list near the end of the book.)

Remember that you are your child's first and most important teacher. So settle in and prepare for the first round in your professional development as an organizational coach. Part II will give you the inside information that you'll need to start training your child to take control of organization, time management, and planning.