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"Where's My Math Book?" Organizational Tips for School Success

By Meg Drake, M.A., M.A.

All of George's teachers love him. He is an active participant in class and always seems to understand the material. George has a wonderful imagination and loves to tell larger-than-life stories. He has a wide circle of friends and is popular with both boys and girls. But, behind the scenes, George is falling apart. He can't find his homework even though he spent time on it the night before. His book bag is a mess and contains essential material as well as last week's sandwich. George keeps his daily assignments in his head long enough to walk out of the classroom, but he cannot remember the details by the time he gets home, necessitating a phone call to a friend. Despite his lack of organization, George is smart enough to get by in his classes. But George's parents are worried that he is so unorganized.

Graham's teachers describe him as a team player. He learned early on that in order to do well at school he needed to be organized. Graham's friends depend on him to know the daily schedule and the list of homework assignments. He prefers to keep his school subjects organized by color. Math is red because it is hard for him and Language Arts is blue because it is his favorite color and his favorite subject. He keeps his daily papers in folders that he can recognize in his book bag quickly, so he can hand in his homework on time. Graham knows that he is not able to study for a big test in one night so he

starts early if he plans to get a good grade. School can be challenging for Graham. He uses a lot of index cards and asks his parents to drill him on a regular basis.

Perhaps you have a child exactly like George or Graham. Whatever the case, 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.

There are many ways that children learn to organize their materials, time and actions. Some may learn by watching others and some may gain the skills by being told what methods to use. A subset of children may need to receive direct instruction and practice in order to adopt effective routines. Here are some organizational strategies and tips for parents:

Preparation

The first step in becoming an organized student is to make a trip to the store for basic supplies. While every teacher has specific requirements for folders and binders, it is important for students to pick out items in colors that are appealing to them so they will enjoy using them. Subjects can easily be categorized by colors, thus easily

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identified for quick access.

To minimize the weight of a child's backpack, it may be necessary to have a set of tools at school and a duplicate set at home. A duplicate set of heavy textbooks is especially useful to keep at home instead of lugging back and forth and minimizes the chance of forgetting them for an important test or assignment. Student planners are key tools for success. It is important for students to learn to plot out longer assignments and to keep track of their work through the use of a planner.

Starting in the fourth grade, students should begin to keep track of their assignments, even if they can remember without writing it down. Keeping lists and writing down key dates are skills that we all need as adults. If children learn to use a planner early on, they will adapt this skill to the increasing demands of school as the years go by. My preference is the AT A GLANCE® Teacher Plan books that have a week on two pages with the days lined up on the top and subject spaces on the left.

Structure at home for doing homework is essential in teaching children to be organized. Students should have their own special space for doing their homework. Children should determine their own preference for location. Please note that doing homework in the kitchen is not recommended. While some young children may need to be monitored during the completion of their homework, the kitchen is too busy.

Students need to learn that they are in charge of their own supplies, so they do not have to get up to get anything once they settle in. Each student's desk should be organized and supplies should be assigned a place. It is important to teach children that if items have homes, they can always be found there. Just as you put your keys in one place everyday and therefore can find them easily on the way out to the car, a child needs to learn to assign a convenient location to find her things.

Time for doing homework should

be regularly scheduled and adhered to. For example, if dinner is served at 6:00 quiet time for homework can follow, which minimizes distractions. Everyone in the house can benefit from quiet time. If homework is finished before the allotted time is over, quiet reading can fill in. Consistency is the operative factor in creating a quiet time in any household. Once the routine is set, children will come to expect it and rely on the time to get their work done.

A common problem for students is making sure their homework gets handed in on time. Using a homework folder with two pockets labeled TO DO and DONE is the easiest plan for younger students. Young children need to be taught to use the folder and it may need to be checked every night to be sure the papers are in the right place. As the homework load increases, several folders may be needed, one for each subject. Each student should develop a system to use throughout the year.

To ensure a less stressful beginning of the day, a little time spent the night before preparing for the following day can make a huge difference. Some children have difficulty figuring out what to wear to school, which can take up extraordinary amounts of time in the morning. Outfits should be decided upon the night before school and be ready to wear in the morning.

When your child's homework is finished, it should be packed up and put back into the backpack before going to bed. A checklist is often helpful for some children to be sure that everything is put into the pack. Sometimes a checklist for each day is helpful to remind children of special instrument lessons or after school activities. A magnetic weekly calendar in a student's room listing the daily special activities can be a

helpful tool for a child to develop the independence they need to be prepared (BoardDudes.com or 1-800-521-4332).

Children who bring their own lunch to school have an extra item to be in charge of. For families with multiple lunches, it can be fun to assign the role of lunch chef to each sibling on a rotating basis. The role of the lunch chef is to prepare as much of the lunch the night before as possible. Sandwiches can be the final item inserted into each lunch bag in the morning.

Study Skills

The key to being a successful student is to be organized. While learning styles may differ, organization is the bottom line in reaping the rewards of success. Using flashcards can be helpful to students of all ages and can be used in every subject area. The simple act of making the cards is one way to assimilate information; the

repetition drill ensures access into long-term memory banks.

Broader concepts in content areas can also be put on flashcards and even ordered into a sequence if necessary. To ensure that the cards do not get scattered on the

bottom of a backpack, purchase index card boxes and label them accordingly. That way they can easily be transported back and forth to school or kept securely at a student's desk. Long-term storage of flashcards is especially helpful for those students who take mid-term and final exams. Once the flashcards are made they can be stored for future use.

While students in public schools are loaned the books they need to read for English classes, they are limited because they are not permitted to annotate the text. In this case, taking notes on a separate piece of paper can be laborious and time consuming. I suggest purchasing one's own copy of the novels read in English class so that

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students can practice annotating their own texts. Taking notes in the margins and underlining important quotes as they read is an efficient way to prepare for the anticipated essay that is often assigned. If paragraphs and passages are marked, less time is needed to find appropriate quotes to support students' writing, not to mention the fact that it allows students to be more prepared for class discussions on a daily basis. Post it notes and tabs are especially useful in marking pages in a text and are readily available.

Making up rhymes and using mnemonic devices can be a fun way to help children remember how to spell a word, remember a concept, or memorize a math fact. To this day I teach some students how to spell the word BECAUSE the way I was taught: **Big Elephants Can Always Understand Small Elephants!!** Catchy phrases and fun rhymes can make a lasting impression on a learner!

The most important skill in teaching students to be organized is time management. Studying for a major test in one night is not productive. The process for preparing for a test should begin with collecting all the relevant materials, which can take a long time if studying for a mid-term or final exam. The review of the material should be repetitious and systematic. To simply read through the material to be tested is not enough. It is important for children to be able to recognize the correct answer and to recall the correct answer, which is an entirely different process. A *recognition* task simply means that the information is visually understood. It does not ensure that the information is stored in their memory bank. For example, in a multiple-choice format, one can find the correct definition of the word given a choice, (recognition task). To write one's own definition of a word is a much more difficult task, (*recall* task). In preparing for a test, it is sometimes helpful to make up a preparation test. While reviewing the material, questions can be generated

and answered in writing. A student is then able to assess to what degree the material is mastered and can go back to study information that was more difficult to recall on the prep test. Further, these preparation tests can be accumulated for future use on mid-term and final exams.

Time management does not only apply to long-term assignments. A daily homework routine has time management demands as well. The toughest assignments should be attacked first to ensure that students have used the freshest reserve of brainpower. Time consuming projects can be divided up into smaller parts and completed day by day. Time should be allotted for planning and brainstorming ideas, which lessens the time necessary to execute an essay or a creative project. Prioritizing one's daily routine is an essential skill necessary for success.

Here is a list of resources you may find helpful:

- ◆ Janet Fox, *Get Organized Without Losing it*. Free Spirit Laugh and Learn Press, 2005
- ◆ Julie Morgenstern and Jessi Morgenstern-Colon, *Organizing from the Inside Out for Teens: The Foolproof System for Organizing Your Room, Your Time, Your Life*. NY, Henry Holt and Co. 2002
- ◆ Kathy Waddill, *The Organizing Sourcebook: Nine Strategies for Simplifying your Life*, McGraw Hill, 2001.
- ◆ Maria Gracia, *Finally Organized, Finally Free for the Home*, Bluemoon Publishing, 1999.
- ◆ www.DiscoverOrganization.com
- ◆ www.Organizetips.com: Printable checklists charts and monthly calendars.
- ◆ www.RealSimple.com.
- ◆ www.GetOrganizedNow.com: Thousands of tips to help organize your home and office.



Co-Chairman of Parents Together, Meg Drake is a Learning Specialist in private practice in Old Greenwich. She can be reached at mwdrake@aol.com

A 'Game' of Life and Death

"Put the gun down. Get on your knees. Put your hands on your head and crawl away from the gun," ordered a Greenwich Police Officer, service weapon drawn, at a Greenwich teen. A seemingly "harmless" game of "Airsoft" was within one wrong move of becoming a personal tragedy.

It turned out the suspect was a fourteen-year old child, playing "Airsoft" with his friends. He had been instructed by his parents to stay in the backyard but instead he ran out into the road where the public could — and did — see him. He was dressed in all black carrying a facsimile firearm. His mannerisms and actions led a citizen to fear for her life. Fortunately, this incident ended without anyone getting hurt, but it easily could have ended in tragedy.

The Greenwich Community and Police Partnership ("CAPP") is a two-year old effort by the Greenwich Police Department to create and maintain a forum between the Greenwich community and its Police Department. Its role is to improve the relationship between the community and the Police Department; to identify and prioritize community concerns and bring them to the attention of the Police Commanders; to assist Police Commanders in short and long-term problem solving; and to act as a conduit for dissemination of police information to the community. The CAPP committees share ideas and suggest ways the Police Department and the community can become engaged in making Greenwich a better place in which to live and work. The East Sector CAPP committee, which includes students among its members, urges parents to speak with their children about the use of "Airsoft-type" replica guns.

The following individuals contributed to this article: Capt. Pacewicz and Sgt. Kris Shockley of the Greenwich Police Department, Frank Trotta, Cindy Zizzi and Matt Trotta.