

Tips for Parenting a Disorganized Child

By Joyce Cooper-Kahn PhD and Laurie Dietzel PhD

Kids with weaknesses in planning and organization have trouble independently imposing structure and order on tasks and on ideas. So, they have difficulty organizing information in their heads, as well as organizing their stuff or planning out a long-term project. When faced with a task, the disorganized child may have trouble thinking through the steps required, and she may tend to underestimate the complexity and the time needed.

Does this sound like your child?

- He neglects to turn in completed assignments.
- She arrives at an event completely unprepared.
- He underestimates the effort involved in a project.
- She is overwhelmed at juggling multiple classes and projects.
- He has trouble identifying the most important information.
- She has trouble organizing space.

If so, there are tried-and true behavioral interventions you can try--and continue to practice--with your child to help him or her with this challenge. Here are six:

Break down tasks into component parts.

For example, for a school project, divide the tasks into daily chunks, and enter these on the calendar or in an agenda book as homework. Build an extra day or two for the unexpected so your child gets in the habit of planning a cushion of extra time.

Offer organizational frameworks in advance.

Discuss the most important points to be learned before the child starts an independent reading task. Provide an outline of the major topics and subtopics from the text with space for the student to fill in specific information. Offer study questions in advance so the student understands the learning objectives before starting to read.

Teach the use of tricks and technology aids.

Buy a watch that can be set to vibrate and show a reminder phrase at the programmed time. When a student prints out an assignment, prompt her to also email it to her teacher. Teach a student to write a one-sentence summary on a sticky note after reading each paragraph that he can use later for his report.

Develop templates for repetitive procedures.

Make a checklist of everything that needs to be in his soccer bag. Laminate it and keep it in the soccer bag for last-minute checking. For young children, create photo charts with pictures from magazines for completing chores, preparing to catch the bus, and gathering necessary gear for sports practice.

Walk through the planning process with the child.

For a child who chronically loses or doesn't turn in homework, talk through the process. Is the homework getting lost at home? Is it in the bottom of the backpack? In his locker? Is it in the right notebook but forgotten once class starts? Once you identify the sticking point, add a step to his routine to get past it.

Provide accommodations at home and at school.

Simplify your child's schedule; consider reducing the number of extracurricular activities. For a high school or college student, it makes more sense to reduce the course load. Ask for advance notice of upcoming assignments from the teacher so you and your child can identify the most demanding times of the week or semester so appropriate adjustments can be made in her homework/study schedule.

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