Understanding and Managing Organizational Challenges in Children

"She's so disorganized!"

How often we as tutors hear parents bemoan problems resulting from their son or daughter's alleged "disorganization." It is not surprising, as this is a widespread problem- and one that is growing. When is the last time you heard someone say that life is getting "simpler?" Family, work, and social demands increase as the complexity of our lives grows.

Feeding the complexity is technology, with email, mobile technology, and social tools making communication more frequent and seemingly more imperative. This fuels distraction and disorganization, creating a sort of "culturally induced ADHD," though there are literally thousands of emerging applications for technology that can also provide solutions.

The first portion of this article addresses how parents can best play an effective role in encouraging better organizational skills. The second portion describes some of the underlying learning processes that contribute to weaker organization. When we observe the thinking processes involved in an organizational task, we can better understand why there is a breakdown for a particular person and we can select the best strategies to improve the situation.

A Parent's Role in Organization

To help our "disorganized" child become less so, we must understand that we don't simply have people who "are" organized and who "are" disorganized. Organization is more of a process than a personality type, and the more we participate effectively in the process of getting and staying organized, the more organized we become. If you want to help your child be more organized, it might be more effective to approach the process by becoming your child's partner and being less of a "parent." Complaints, nagging, and angry responses won't much help and in fact will likely hinder your goal. Telling a child how to be organized does not always lead to independent organizational skills. Participating as a partner with your child, however, with the goal that you both become better organized, each in your own way, can work well.

When you become a partner in better planning, the child is no longer the problem: getting and staying organized is the problem, and you can tackle it together. You can model the fact that this will require ongoing participation and effort; it's not a single problem that can be solved "once and for all." Together, you can share what tasks are bothersome to each of you and why, what tools and tricks can help rectify the situation, and what successes you have. You can also share your personal failures and oversights, further emphasizing that one never quite finishes the job of getting organized. Besides, it is far less likely that a child will become organized in an environment where space, time, and transitions are haphazard and unpredictable: your child is likely to become more organized as you yourself become more organized.

Understanding Breakdowns in Organization

Different things go wrong for individuals in various situations, leading to disorganization. Students with specific learning disabilities often encounter organization problems rooted in their area of processing weakness. Look closely at these stumbling blocks in order to select the most effective tool or strategy to overcome them.

Motivation: This is often a huge factor, but assuming a child is "not motivated" may be a mistake. Generally speaking, students want to succeed; they are not intrinsically unmotivated. They don't always see how to make things work, though, and unless they have the chance to experience success at a task, they are unlikely to want to try hard at it. Help them find success through your participation as a fellow organizer, and they will want to repeat it. It is important, however, to eliminate or reduce overwhelming distracters that impinge on motivation. Phone calls, TV, email/chat/text, and broad Internet access may need to be limited when a task calls for more attention.

Spatial: The child who constantly loses things, doesn't know what to take when coming and going or where to put things, leaves regular messes, has a chaotic binder, or who shows left/right confusion or poor sense of direction may well have weaknesses in visual-spatial awareness. His disorganization may be rooted in this perceptual weakness. Be aware, though, that what looks unorganized to you may in fact be organized to him. If a person has a desk piled high with papers and files, it does not mean he is disorganized. He may in fact function better when everything is within reach and grouped according to his own sensibilities. You might think something should be filed in a drawer, but he may never think to look in that drawer if it is tucked away where you imagine it to belong. It's a good idea to suggest and experiment with solutions in order to find what works best for each person. What works for you might not be the solution for another.

Temporal and Sequential: Students who struggle with estimating and allocating time, the order in which to do things, lateness in arrival or task completion, sequencing in math or spelling, calendar skills, or following multi-step directions are displaying disorganization in time and order. Understand that for some, this is a genuine difficulty not solely attributable to lack of attention or effort. This underlying processing weakness magnifies organizational challenges. Calendars, clocks, timers, automated reminders, and other tools can be useful for time and order management.

Memory: Short-term, long-term, and working memory weaknesses make it more difficult to be organized. It's not hard to understand how or why. What is harder to keep in mind is that forgetting is not synonymous with not caring. Memory is subject to many momentary influences, but the fact is that for most of us, "forgetting" is common, unintended, and very frustrating. People seem especially inclined to react with anger or disappointment when others forget something. They often assume it is intentional or careless and often don't think about hard it is on the other person to have forgotten what they perfectly well intended to do.A particular type of memory demand is especially hard- that of "prospective memory," or remembering at a later time to do something. For example, you may easily be able to remember the ten things you need to buy at the store but be unable to, at exactly 10:30, remember to take a scheduled medication. Numerous "reminder" tools, from Post-its to electronic devices, can help solve prospective memory problems as well as general recall.

Language: Students who have language-based learning difficulties often feel lost. Having trouble with word retrieval, labeling math procedures, distinguishing general ideas vs. details, generating categories to help in consolidating ideas, comprehending lecture or text, and more can make it hard to function effectively. This can carry over into organization of written language as well: students with language weaknesses need a lot of guidance in structuring their writing in an organized fashion. Computer technology holds vast potential for such students, as well as clear, conscious communication from guiding adults.

Motor: Poor motor planning-the ability to think ahead about a task in order to make the right movements-promotes inefficiency. Knowing how to hold a paper you plan to cut, situating materials so they are in easy reach, and knowing when you are trying to do two incompatible things at once are examples. Sometimes we can best help with this by direct instruction ("Be sure to put the palette on your right so you don't drip paint across the paper.") and by modeling actions in advance.

Attention Differences: Most people who recognize their own attention challenges will testify that they struggle with some aspect of organization. Short attention span, limited depth of attention, distraction, and other traits affect spatial, temporal, memory, and language components of organization, usually for the worse. There are those, with and without attention difficulties, who pride themselves on being great "multi-taskers." Unfortunately, in far too many instances being a "multi-tasker" means being someone who is willing to do multiple things poorly or to less than their best ability. A recent Stanford study showed that people who identify themselves as strong multi-taskers are often "suckers for relevancy," meaning they are constantly distracted by the task they are not currently doing. Their poor prioritization and filtering often is a major contributor to perceived and actual disorganization.

Some Tips for Managing Organization in Children

Maintain a sense of humor!

Labeling or identifying a behavior can allow a student to draw her own conclusions about what might work. "Hmmm, I notice that when you do your homework in your room, it seems to take much longer than when you work at the desk in the office." You might not need to tell him what to do.

Do not expect immediate compliance with your suggestions. Some students will reject your idea if they feel you are enforcing it, while they may well adopt the change on their own next time the situation arises.

Breaking routines and rhythms requires more conscious thought and time, and it results in more errors. Think about how much more complex it is to brush your teeth when you are living out of a suitcase on a trip than when you do it at home. Allow plenty of extra time, support, and advance warning when making transitions between very different activities or when operating in an out-of-the-ordinary setting.

Know that kids are more successful with organization in tasks they enjoy, so use their successful times as examples and teaching opportunities.