

Keep Your Middle Schooler Organized

Helping kids develop organizational skills relieves the homework struggle
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My youngest stomped into the living room last Monday and dumped his pack on the floor.

- "How was school?"
- "Great! I only have math homework."
- I paused "Are you sure?"
- "Absolutely. Nothing else. I asked my friend, too."
- "Didn't you have Spanish today?"
- "Oh yeah, he gave us a worksheet to do. And we started our new technology class today. It looks great."
- "Don't you usually have a syllabus or something to sign when you start a class?"
- "Oh yeah, I forgot. I need you to sign two papers."
- "It's Monday. Didn't you have a letter you had to write in class today in Language Arts? Do I need to sign it?"
- "Yeah."
- "And spelling due Thursday?"
- "Uhuh. She handed out a sheet."
- "Your social studies teacher sent me a copy of your study guide for your test Friday."
- "But that's not due until Thursday!"

City or Zip

The Organizational Demands Of Middle School

Sound familiar? Five assignments. My son had only remembered one. And given that up to 75% of his grades are based on homework, not remembering to do it - or to turn it in when it's complete - can cause major problems for kids, failing grades, and even retention in middle school,

Middle school differs from elementary school in many ways - one of the most important, but underestimated, is the increased pressure it puts in kids' organizational abilities. Take the above example. Not only does it show off my son's not atypical difficulty keeping track of his work. It also shows up just how COMPLICATED the work is that he has to keep track of.

- Five courses with six different teachers
- Due dates of one, two, and four days.
- Different types of tasks, each needing different types of materials to complete them

Cognitive Development In Middle School

Although kids make major gains in cognitive ability as they enter adolescence, often the demands of school outstrip them. As I wrote in my previous post: [What Middle School Parents Should Know: Adolescents Are Like Lawyers](#), middle schoolers make five major gains in their ability to think:

- They can think about possibilities
- They can think about abstract concepts
- Their metacognitive abilities improve (they can think about thinking)
- They can think multi-dimensionally, playing one idea off of another
- They can think relativistically, understanding things from different points of views.

The misfit on middle schools to early adolescents' development

A positive side of this development is that they are capable of much more abstract, multidimensional thinking.

Unfortunately, these new abilities often put them in conflict with the demands of middle schools.

- **Middle school requires more rote learning.** As developmental researcher Jacqueline Eccles has written, at the same time that adolescents develop new cognitive abilities, many middle schools ask students to do more ROTE tasks that are LESS cognitively demanding. Whereas elementary school projects often ask kids to integrate and think creatively about material,

middle schools often ask kids to memorize and repeat back information. Although there are many good reasons for this, you can't think integratively and intelligently in the absence of facts and solid knowledge, it can also be frustrating for students who feel that they are doing more repetitive, less challenging tasks. Math, in particular, tends to focus on review and consolidation rather than learning new skills.

- **Thinking about multiple possibilities can cause kids to freeze.** Presented with many different possibilities, kids can freeze up, spending more time thinking and deciding than choosing a path and doing.
- **School's demands for organization may outstrip kids' abilities to do it.** Moving from class to class requires kids to rapidly adjust to the expectations of different teachers. Assignments are rarely as integrated as they are in elementary school or as teachers would like them to be. And the physical act of bringing home all those books and all those papers - and getting them back again - can be daunting.

The responsibility for completing their work lies in your child

It is important to remember that the primary responsibility for completing work well is with your child. But it's also really easy for us to believe that when they don't immediately do that well, it's from stubbornness, or laziness, or lack of effort.

Begin with the assumption that it's not. Most kids want to do well. They certainly don't want to get in trouble and don't want to spend more time on their homework than they have to. Giving them the tools they need can improve homework quality while at the same time reducing the time it takes to complete it.

Some strategies that work

Parents can help kids get organized by focusing on the PROCESS and LOGISTICS of school and not just 'helping with homework' and working on content. By focusing on HOW they do their homework (what time, what conditions) not the content of it, you let them keep control over it while giving them tools to manage it effectively themselves.

In addition to these suggestions, go to this page on [Children With Special Needs](#) for a wealth of additional information. A list of strategies for both teachers and parents are available [here](#) at [Intervention Central](#).

Where things fall through the cracks.

When my son and I went through his problems with completing and turning in his work, we came up with five key points where things fell apart. These were the principles we arrived at:

- *Eliminate thinking as much as possible*
- *Make organization automatic*
- *Use planners or assignment books effectively - you can't count on memory*
- *Make sure all materials are home when they're needed*
- *Make sure completed assignments can be found and TURNED IN*

Make things automatic. The single most important thing you can do is to help your child make good organizational skills AUTOMATIC. The less they have to think, the less likely they are to make mistakes. The goal is for good organizational skills to become habitual so your child doesn't have to think about and remember what to do. They go to class, sit down, and open their planner and check the board for assignments.

Organize all materials together in one place. When my son got his supplies list at the beginning of the year, he was asked to get 7 folders and 7 spiral notebooks, plus two three ring binders. The idea, I know, was to minimize what the kids had to carry back and forth to school. Kids are supposed to bring home what they need and leave the rest at school. This only works for organized kids. For my son, it meant that he'd always be home without the notebook he needed to do his homework.

Last year we had solved the problem by putting everything into one humungous three ring binder.

This year, that didn't work, as the folders and notebooks were just too numerous. After six month's experimentation, we finally got a new system: a large expanding accordian folder that took file folders and spiral notebooks alike. It even took his assignment book.

Which system works for your child may differ. But the idea is simple: if everything is in the same place and goes back and forth from home to school, materials are at home when needed and completed work goes back to school where it can be found. It's one less thing to remember. If you buy thinner notebooks and eliminate completed work, it isn't too much to carry.

Assignment books are the critical first step in making sure that homework is done. Many kids' metacognitive skills haven't caught up with the fact that the complexity of their tasks has outpaced their ability to keep everything in their heads.

What they can do:

- **Your child MUST keep an accurate list of assignments in their planner.** Many kids think they'll remember an assignment, because they haven't yet realized how hard it is to keep track of the many tasks they're assigned. Different schools use different methods. Make sure you understand the system that your child's school uses to record assignments so you can help them use it effectively:
 - **Write down the assignment on the day it is due.** The way I and many parents were taught to use a planner is to write assignments down the day it is due. You look ahead and know what to work on. You can put in 'tickler' notes to break down long assignments into smaller parts.
 - **A newer method: Writing down an assignment the day it is assigned.** Both my sons - in two different school systems 10 years apart - were taught to write down assignments on the day they are ASSIGNED. After 10 years, I have finally learned how this system is SUPPOSED to work, although neither of my sons ever did. It does make sense and is an excellent system if your child can use it.
 - When an assignment is assigned, write it down the day assigned AND THE DAY DUE.
 - The next day, check the previous day's assignments. Anything not complete gets written down again. Each day, continue to add new and uncompleted assignments. When an assignment is done, check it off.
 - With this system, each day's listing works as a 'to do' list. It thus combines both an agenda and a to do list.

What you can do:

- **Ask your child about each class and check to make sure any assignments are written down.** Be especially aware of patterns. Is spelling always due Thursdays? Math tests on Fridays? Put it on your own calendar so you can remember to ask.
- **Check their planner against other sources of information.** One way that parents can help is to check assignment books against other sources information to make sure they are complete. Your kids can do that too. Many schools put some assignments on-line. Other teachers hand out calendars. Others have weekly scheduled. For example, my son's Language Arts teacher assigns spelling, analogies, and grammar on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, respectively, and everything goes in on Thursday. Writing that down at the beginning of each week helps to keep things in order.
- **If it's still not working, ask for help from the school.** If, after all best effort, your child still isn't bringing home an accurate list of assignments, enlist help. Ask them to stop by their teachers after school or at the end of each class and check their assignment books. If your child isn't turning in homework, your child's teacher is probably at least as frustrated as you and your child.

Make sure needed materials are home when they're needed. One of the real challenges of getting homework done is making sure that each of the books, handouts, and assignment lists are home when they're needed.

What they can do:

- **Check the assignment book at the end of each day as they're packing for home.**
- **Set up a system to remember books.** Have your child mark down what they need when they write down the assignment. For example, they can put a post-it note on the front of the planner. When they write down the assignment, they write down the books or handouts they need to do it on the post-it. If they check their post-it before they leave at the end of the day, they should be set.
- **Just bring home all their books.** Those books are heavy, but if they always come home in the backpack, they're always there when needed.
- **Don't forget worksheets!** Sometimes putting all worksheets directly in the planner is the best way for them to make it home.

What you can do:

Still not working?

- **If you can get a second copy of your child's books, DO IT.** Some books are needed every day, but others are only needed once in a while. Kids often forget books not needed on a daily basis. This can cause major problems. It had never occurred to me that I could solve this problem by getting an extra copy of textbooks, but when I asked, my son's teachers were happy to oblige. If you're having a problem, they may have extra copies of old textbooks stuck in a closet somewhere. Ask. They can only say no.

Turning in Completed Homework

Maybe it's just my family, but both my sons and two of my neices complete their homework and then never get credit for it because they (a) leave it in their locker (b) can't find it when they teacher asks for it or (c) forget to turn it in. Because teachers are trying to reward good homework skills, this often means 0's entered into their grades or, when we're lucky, losing half the credit or more. Frustrating.

What your child can do:

- Put all homework in their assignment book. For some children, slipping all homework for the day into their assignment book is a good strategy, as they need to take it out to write down their new work. If that works, go for it.
- Flag assignments that will be turned in. Because some homework needed to be in binders and other was loose, keeping it all in one place simply did not work for my son. Flags did. You know those bright post-it notes or flags you can buy? Or paper clips? Every time my son completes an assignment, he puts a bright flag on it before he sticks it in his accordion folder. When he opens the folder up, the first thing you see is four or five bright markers, showing what has to be turned in for the day. Since he began using this system, he hasn't lost one assignment.

What can you do?

Essentially nothing. You can teach your child strategies and give them the tools they need to do their work. But ultimately, once the homework is done and they are off at school, they're on their own.

The Disorganized Child

The New York Times published a piece today by noted psychologist, Alan Sroufe, about the long-term problems of relying on ritual to help kids who have problems with hyperactivity and concentration in school. Bottom line: it doesn't work. Whatever your feelings about the diagnosis or over-diagnosis of attention deficit disorder, ALL of us need tools to help us stay organized and on-task in this very demanding and multi-tasking world.

Middle school is a great place to learn skills that can carry kids forward into adulthood. Some kids may develop those skills naturally. Other kids need some help. But all of us can benefit from making good strategies automatic, so can work more effectively.



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