

Help! My Kid is Disorganized!

Are you frustrated with your messy, disorganized, cluttered child? Are you tired of telling your kids to clean up, remember this, bring home that? You are not alone! Many kids struggle with disorganization. In some ways, it's a natural part of being a child, with a brain that's still developing. Differences in organizational abilities are also a basic preference in personality. But, for kids with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, (AD/HD or often called ADD) disorganization and forgetfulness are key symptoms and they can cause big problems. Disorganization can also come into play with autism and autistic spectrum disorders, Asperger's Syndrome, and other diagnoses.

To some extent, being disorganized is just a personality trait, a difference between us. Some of us like to be organized, others don't. Organizational preference is a basic characteristic that's measured on many personality tests. Flexible or structured, neither is right or wrong, just different.

At another level, being disorganized is a symptom, something related to a bigger problem. The symptom of disorganization may impact your child's ability to function at school, at home, or socially. It's important to keep this trait versus symptom difference in mind when dealing with your own child. The goal is to fix problems, not change your child's personality. This article discusses a concrete, step-by-step system to change behaviors, not children.

1. Pick one specific problem.

The first step is to define one very specific problem to work on. Being specific helps here because you can more easily solve many small problems than attempt to tackle one vague, massive complaint. You and your child will most easily be able to see the progress you're making when you're working on one small goal at a time.

For example, a broad problem is school performance. That's too much to tackle! How about first working on just completing math homework? This single problem will be easier to solve. Then using the momentum from your success and utilizing what you've learned in dealing with math homework, you can take on the next small goal, like English homework, or not speaking out of turn in homeroom.

2. Teamwork!

This problem solving technique works best if you and your child agree that the problem is worth solving. Look at the consequences of this problem. Natural consequences, like missing out on a field trip, are generally more motivating than parent created consequences, like losing TV privileges. Try to get your child to be the main problem solver, while you function as the coach. If your child isn't buying into the problem, maybe there's something else he'd like to work on first.

3. Where is the glitch?

Suppose you're working on improving math homework. You know it's a problem, but how exactly? Is your child not doing the work at all? Not doing it correctly? Forgetting to bring it home or forgetting to bring it back? The more specific the definition of the problem, the easier it is to find a solution.

3. Try a concrete, action-oriented solution.

This step involves you and your child making your best efforts at finding a solution. One solution might be putting a sticker on the math binder saying, "Double check. Did I pack everything I need?" Or, the answer might be putting completed homework in the car as soon as it's done, so it can't get lost or forgotten. Give a solution some time to work, but be willing to make changes if you're not seeing success.

4. Use the experts

Organized people love to create organizational systems. You may get good advice from highly structured teachers, other parents, even classmates. How do the other kids get the book home? Just remember to keep the solution simple. Sliding the papers in the backpack will effectively get them home, even if they're rumpled. Organizing them into color coded ringed binders may be more effort than your child can manage.

5. Set a goal, or not.

Many kids respond well to a defined, measurable goal, especially with a reward. If so, that's great! For other kids, and their parents, this kind of system is more difficult to manage than the original problem was. Do what works for your family. You can succeed without sticker charts.

6. Celebrate your success!

It's important to take a break and congratulate your child when things improve. Be sure to enjoy all the wonderful traits of your child that have nothing to do with disorganization.

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