

## **Top Ten Tips for Helping Your Middle Schooler Get Organized**

Many students with learning disabilities coast through elementary school because most work is completed at school, students have a single teacher and readily adjust to the teachers teaching and grading style, and parents receive direct communication about long-term assignments and homework routines. When students with a learning problem enter seventh grade, however, this nearly fail-proof system disappears to be replaced by expectations that some work will routinely need to be done outside of school hours, by different teaching and grading styles of a multiple teachers, and by more emphasis on the student being responsible for both daily and long-term assignments with little direct communication about these between teachers and parents. Many students are overwhelmed by the barrage of tests, handouts, homework assignments and backpack contents that need to be juggled and organized. The problems with organization may continue through the high school years as well.

For many students, the difference between a passing grade and a failing grade is the number of missing or incomplete assignments. When attending a parent-teacher conference, whether the meeting is part of school wide conferences or one called specifically by the parent or teacher, it is important to determine whether the students poor grades are caused by missing assignments, poor test performance, or both.

A review of the accommodations in your child's Section 504 plan or IEP or the modifications in the IEP plan is necessary. Ask your child whether these are being done in the necessary classes. If many of the accommodations and/or modifications are not being implemented, it will be necessary to call a review meeting, with your child's teachers present. Use the time to go over your child's needed accommodations subject by subject. Make sure each teacher knows what accommodations are to be made and how to make them. If test grades are the major problem, review what accommodations and modifications need to be implemented. Inquire about study skills or study strategy classes to help your child develop the skills needed to organize and review material for test-taking purposes.

If the majority of the identified accommodations and/or modifications are being implemented and the major detriment to better grades is assignments not being completed or turned in, work with your child to develop some strategies for becoming more organized. Below are some suggestions to help your child get better organized. These may also be useful for high school students.

1. If your child does not already have a daily planner/organizer, purchase one that can easily fit in the child's backpack. If your child has one, locate it and see whether it is up-to-date.
2. Ask the teachers to check the planner for correctly recorded daily assignments at the end of each class period or at the end of the day. Another option would be for the student to be paired with a student who is well-organized in order to obtain homework and other assignments and record them. It is amazing how many students report that they have no homework when they have simply failed to record the assignment. Some teachers record their homework assignments on their voice mail so students (and parents) need only telephone the number to obtain the assignment. Ask each of your child's teachers if

he/she records assignments in this manner.

3. Review the planner with your child every night and show your child how to record assignments. One method of distinguishing tests, daily homework assignments and long-term assignments is to use colored pens or markers--a different color for each category.
4. Purchase a large calendar--either the wipe-off kind or a desk blotter size. Hang this in a prominent place, such as on the refrigerator or in the room where your child studies. Record on it the long-term assignments and dates of scheduled tests. Break down long-term assignments by helping your child work out a plan to complete the assignment or the study time needed prior to the deadline. You might use the analogy of getting ready to cook a holiday meal, which requires planning what to make, making a list of items to buy at the store, determining the amount of time each dish takes to make, determining when you plan to eat, etc. Have your child write on the calendar the activity and the date due, then determine what intermediate steps are required and when they will be done, e.g. trip to the library to do research and obtain books.
5. Ideally, each subject should have a separate folder or pocket in a binder.
6. Show your child where to file handouts, homework assignments and other papers.
7. Supervise study time. This doesn't mean you have to sit with your child, but be aware of your child's study habits and be available if needed. Don't send your child "off to study." Make periodic checks on your child's progress. A good rule of thumb is that for every consecutive grade in school, your child should be doing ten minutes of homework. That means that an average fourth grader should be doing about 40 minutes of homework at night and the average middle school child can expect to spend about 70-80 minutes doing homework. If your middle schooler is spending several hours every night on homework, it is time to ask for a conference with the child's teacher or teachers.
8. Prepare the binder and backpack with your child each evening after homework is completed and before your child goes to bed. File papers and organize. Some children complete the homework assignment but forget where they put it and then cannot find it to turn it in the next day.
9. Identify a regular location for your child's backpack, school papers, notes from teachers, etc. This will help reduce morning confusion and forgetting items at home.
10. Although good parents will often go out of their way to bring forgotten lunches, assignments or books to school so that their children are not disadvantaged academically, it is extremely important to make the child be responsible for making sure that he or she has all of the items needed for the day. Perhaps a compromise might be that a parent, if it is convenient, will
11. bring a forgotten item once in a two-week period--after that, the child must simply go without.

This may take restraint and practice on the parent's part, but it is important to stick to your guns on this one!

It may take some time before the routine is firmly imprinted on your child's mind. Begin with small steps. Small rewards or privileges used sparingly may provide an incentive for your child to follow through. Good luck!