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Keeping track 'a process' for middle schoolers

Ages & Stages: 11-14

By Kathleen Klein

We've all been through it -- a big school assignment that's forgotten until the morning it's due, the scramble for sports gear when it's time to leave for practice, homework that somehow disappears before it gets turned in.

Let's face it: Being organized is hard work, especially if you're a pre-teen. "It's a process," says Georgie Chaffin, head counselor at Seattle's Eckstein Middle School. "I tell parents to remember their middle school students are in the process of becoming."

As with many issues during the middle school years, parents will do best in the role of coach, helping their students set reasonable goals, take baby steps and celebrate the successes.

What's realistic to expect?

"A basic benchmark is that students should be able to find whatever he or she needs for a particular task, at the time it's needed," advises Camilla Calkins, learning resources coordinator at Lakeside School. That covers assignments and books needed for homework, as well as team uniform, water bottle and ball for tonight's game.

Work with your child to set goals that are "small and attainable," Calkins recommends. Focus on one goal at a time, even if it seems like five other things are screaming for improvement. The first step might be writing down all assignments in one notebook that is checked every night.

Have your child take the lead, coming up with ways to organize his stuff and time. "Part of the biology of adolescence is that they want to be more independent and self-directed," Calkins explains. "The minute an idea comes from outside, it is less likely to be taken on by the student because they don't own it."

Chaffin suggests that parents set up a system of rewards for the desired behavior. "Share the discussion about what's a reasonable consequence or reward. What motivates your child is the key," she says. For example, allow extra TV or video game time for a student who comes home every day this week with something written down for every class -- even if it's "no assignment."

Both Chaffin and Calkins caution that the responsibility rests with the student to get work done. Bailing out students all the time (such as bringing their forgotten items to school) robs them of the chance to experience the natural consequence of being disorganized and forgetful. "If I had it to do again, I'd let my child trip and fall more often," says Chaffin, the mother of two grown children. "Better to have that experience in the seventh grade than when they are a high school senior."

As you step back, provide a safety net. Ask your student what kind of support from you is most helpful. Monitor what's going on. Help them process mistakes and reflect on what they can do to avoid failure in the future.

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Look at progress reports together to see what needs improvement. Are assignments overlooked? Is homework done but not turned in? Perhaps daily work is easily handled, but long-term projects cause difficulty.

If your child's school provides an organizational tool, use it, Chaffin says. At Eckstein, each student gets a weekly planner at the start of the year, with room to jot down daily assignments and long-term projects. "It's not only helps students to develop organization skills, but it's also a great communication tool between school and home."

Help your child tailor an organizational system that works for him -- whether it's a prioritized to-do list, giant desk calendar, color-coded folders, or sticky notes in his study area.

Here are additional tips from Chaffin and Calkins:

- **Look at the big picture.** Your child can manage her time better if she realizes everything that's on her plate -- homework, household chores, music lessons or sports practice.
- **Set aside a regular time and place for homework.** Just like when they were younger, mid-schoolers still need structure and routine. A well-stocked study space avoids wasted time searching for supplies.
- **Use a planner or other organizational tool** where all assignments are recorded. Check it together.
- **Keep a family calendar** where everyone can check it -- whether it's on the refrigerator door or online. This helps avoid surprises.
- **Help set priorities.** Some students need help figuring out how to tackle a task list.
- **Use a timer to monitor time on task** and to keep study breaks from lasting too long.
- **Safeguard completed work by putting it in a separate folder** as soon as it's done. By the end of the next school day, that folder should be empty.
- **Break bigger projects into smaller steps with specific deadlines**, so long-term assignments are completed on time.
- **Prepare the night before.** Once homework is finished, pack up all school materials, musical instruments, sports gear, etc. Put it in the same spot so it's easy to grab the next morning.

Kathleen Klein, the mother of 11-year-old Catie, is a Web content consultant in business as Klein Info Design LLC.

Resources:

- *[The Organized Student: Teaching Children the Skills for Success in School and Beyond](#)* by Donna Goldberg and Jennifer Zwiebel (published by Fireside)
- *[Homework Without Tears](#)* by Lee Canter and Lee Hauser
- AOL offers a study kit that includes calendars and tips on time management and prioritizing www.aolatschool.com
- "Getting Organized During Middle School" by Ruth Peters, a clinical psychologist whose work appears on MSNBC www.ruthpeters.com
- Study Skills Tips -- Bullet point information on organization skills, time management and stress management from American Education Services www.educationplanner.com
- "Organization 101: Teaching Your Child How to Get His Act Together" Book chapter excerpted from *[The Middle School Years](#)* by Michele A. Hernandez www.twbookmark.com

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