# Raising an Organized Child

**By Damon Korb, MD**

A third-grade student, Casey, wakes up in the morning and becomes a whirlwind of activity. She arrives in the kitchen wearing her pajamas, so her mother sends her back to her room to put on the clothes they had laid out the night before. Ten minutes later, after making Casey's breakfast, Casey's mother goes upstairs to find her playing, still in her pajamas. Casey's mom directs her to brush her teeth and get dressed, and yet does not entirely trust that any of her teeth will be brushed. Casey returns several minutes later. Her mother is already packing up her toast and eggs to eat during the ride to school. "How come your socks don't match?" Mom asks. "I couldn't find my other sock," Casey replies. With prompting, Casey puts on her shoes, while her mother makes lunch. Shoe tying and breakfast are delegated for the ride to school. No sooner than they get into the car, when Casey declares that she's forgotten her backpack and races back inside. They arrive to school five minutes late, the seventh tardy of the year. Still stunned, Casey's mother drives home when her cell phone rings. "Mom," says Casey, "I left my homework at home."

To many parents, this scenario may sound familiar. What parents must understand is that organized children do not suddenly appear – they are raised. The brain functions that enable organized thinking begin to develop during infancy and evolve through adolescence and into early adulthood. As children grow older, the tasks in life become increasingly complicated, and increasing sophistication in the organizational system of the brain is required to keep up with the demands.

### Organization of Cognitive Functions

An organized child has the neurodevelopmental capacity to encode and retrieve sequential and spatial observations and data and the ability to process multiple layers of information simultaneously. These types of brain functions enable them to perform daily tasks such as planning ahead, locating possessions, transitioning smoothly from one assignment to the next, and accessing prior knowledge. Of course the opposite is also true: dysfunctional organizational abilities lead to specific struggles. Thus, one can look at a child's consistent pattern of struggle and understand the neurodevelopmental origins of the dysfunction. For instance:

- Children with insufficient sequential processing skills tend to struggle with getting ready, completing assignments, and staying on task.
- Children who lack spatial processing skills often have messy rooms, misplace homework assignments, and take confusing notes.
- Children with faulty retrieval systems have problems with word finding and may complain of boredom because they have inadequate search functions in their brain. This prevents them from finding categories of information such as "What could I do on a rainy day when my friend cannot come over to play?"
- Children lacking the ability to multi-task are often unprepared, struggle with transitions, and procrastinate. Each of these types of organizational challenges can be specifically addressed. It is important to note that even at a very early age, there are many things that parents can do to help develop their child's organized brain. To start, parents can follow a few important principals:

### Consistency

Parents should be consistent. Beginning when children are infants, babies learn about cause and effect or that one action is paired to a response. So when an infant cries her cry of discomfort, her diaper gets changed; when she cries her cry of hunger, she is fed. As children become toddlers, they are introduced to rules which parents must enforce with regularity (e.g. before taking out another toy, clean up the last activity; always wash hands and flush the toilet after using the bathroom). These rules must be continually enforced, even if it takes years for the child to consistently complete the tasks on her own.

### Time Dependent Routines

Organized households tend to have set routines, and these routines should be implemented during a child's infancy. Common time dependent routines include regular sleep and wake times and standard meal times each day. As children grow older, these consistent routines can teach children how to anticipate their next action. For instance, by reminding the preschool student to use the bathroom before every car ride, they learn to initiate this act on their own. Likewise, establishing a set homework time trains the student to get to work before going out to play. Building on the first principle, time routines should be consistently enforced.

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### Placement Standards

Everything should have a place. When children are still toddlers, it is good to have multiple play areas, each situated in a distinct part of the house. Instructing children to keep appropriate toys in their designated spaces introduces them to the concept of spatial awareness. As children get older, they should participate in cleaning and not just rely on their parents to clean up after them. School-aged children should have regular backpack checks to make sure they understand spatial order. Tweens should be required to put away folded laundry, unload the dishwasher, and clean up after themselves. These strategies will help them to become more responsible about managing their materials.

### Expanding Sequences

Learning to do things that require multiple steps requires practice. Parents should think about the number of instructions they can give to their child and make a conscious effort to push them to remember more. Elementary school-aged children should be able to remember three-part instructions. Parents should try to chunk daily responsibilities into mini-routines which their child can learn to follow in the appropriate order. For instance, a bedtime routine includes using the toilet and then flushing, washing hands, brushing teeth, putting dirty clothes in laundry hamper, and then putting on pajamas. Similar, five-step routines can be created for leaving the house, getting breakfast, or any other time of the day.

### Practice Planning

Parents should stimulate their children with fun challenges and encourage them to think for themselves – this will increase their capacity for multi-tasking. Allow young children to exercise preparation by having them select their own clothes to wear and help pack their own gear for vacations. Any lesson learned from wearing a short-sleeved shirt on a cold day will help them to plan better in the future. Give older children responsibilities such as planning a weekly meal or an activity during family vacations. Do not over-schedule children and let them find their own way out of boredom. Learning how to conquer boredom is an important problem to solve. Finally, be sure to limit your child's passive activities, such as video games and television. Interaction with most forms of media does not require active thinking so it will not stimulate your child's organizational systems.

Organization is not just about accordion folders and three-ringed binders. Better than teaching children techniques, teach them what it means to be organized. Help them to understand time, order, consistency, location, and problem solving so that they can create their own organized worlds and grow up empowered as independent adults. When the organizational abilities of a child are nurtured, a more competent young adult will emerge.

*If you have ideas to share about raising an organized child, please visit the discussion page for the Center for Developing Minds at Facebook.com.*