How *Not* to Help Kids Get Organized:
5 Mistakes Parents and Teachers Make and How to Avoid Them
Jennifer Rosenblatt, Howard Abikoff, and Richard Gallagher

Are you trying to help a child who is struggling with organization, time management, and planning? Here are some common mistakes parents and teachers make followed by some smart strategies you can use to avoid these traps.

Mistake #1: Not getting involved. Many adults think organization is a child's responsibility, and that at a certain age, children should be left to develop organizational strategies on their own. This is true to a point: if a child has shown that he is able to organize well, feel free to give him the space to create his own organizational routines. But research shows for many kids organization does not come naturally. It is a skill that needs to be taught.
Instead... Recognize that if students are struggling with organizational skills, they need your help, regardless of age.

Mistake #2: Chalking it up to laziness. Often, the disorganized student gets labeled as lazy, irresponsible, or apathetic. The truth is that organization is a skill, just like math or reading, and like these subjects, some students need extra help to reach mastery. Seeing these skills come more easily to their peers, and receiving repeated negative feedback can cause many students to give up, making them appear – and even believe themselves to be – lazy.
Instead... Encourage students to see organizational problems not as character flaws, but as learned skills that are a bit more challenging for them. Let them know that you are there to help them with learning these skills. You might consider asking students skilled in organization if they could provide organizational suggestions for those who are struggling.

Mistake #3: Focusing on the negative. Students who struggle with organization get a lot of negative feedback: "You need to take some responsibility." "What's so hard about using a folder?" "You're never going to get away with this when you're older." This is often done with the intention of helping students understand the importance of organization, but if this was all students needed, their problems would not persist. Most kids who struggle with organization already have had years of negative feedback, and would gladly turn things around if they could.

Instead... Help motivate students by focusing on the positive. Let them know when you see them trying, even if they fail. Encourage them to keep it up and let them know you'll be there when they need you.

Mistake #4: Trying to change too much at once. Becoming organized is a big task. It involves learning to consistently track assignments, developing a good system for storing papers and other materials, managing time effectively, and planning for long-term projects. Each of these areas may be a big challenge for a student, and expecting her to change all of these at once is unrealistic.

Instead... Pick one action to start with (e.g. writing down assignments correctly) and work on that until the student has mastered it. In the meantime, try not to focus too much on missing papers or poorly managed time. Most students will build skills.

Mistake #5: Waiting for an improved report card to give praise. Given the large number of skills involved in organization, and the frequent history of negative feedback common among students who struggle, it is easy for students working on their organizational skills to lose motivation. Commonly, they hear negative feedback every time they make a mistake, but do not get positive feedback until they bring home a good grade on their report cards.

Instead... Praise every little step along the way. If a student used to forget to write down any of her homework, praise her when she correctly writes down half. Praise should be a daily event. Work on noticing even the smallest improvements. Every improvement you praise means more improvements down the line.