

Why Early Instruction in Organization Matters

Jennifer Rosenblatt, Howard Abikoff, and Richard Gallagher

It is easy to look at a student who forgets to write down assignments, keeps a messy backpack, saves homework for the last minute, and fails to turn in work and think he will outgrow it. Many educators believe students like this require only a little time and maturity to develop more responsible habits. In fact, some students actually do change. But research shows that, for a significant proportion of students, these problems do not resolve on their own. And, as students move through the grades and meet greater organizational demands and higher expectations, the consequences of poor organization, time management, and planning (OTMP) skills become more and more serious.

The latest science on OTMP development reveals organizational deficits are not simply reflective of immaturity or a poorly developed sense of responsibility. OTMP behaviors are learned skills, and like any other skill set, they come more easily to some students than others. Instruction in OTMP can help sharpen the skills of students who are already off to a good start, and can provide critical support to those students who are struggling.

This is important, because the same OTMP deficits that cause a fourth grader to forget a permission slip or make an excuse for missing homework can lead to college dropout and limited employability later in life. As may be expected, deficits in OTMP functioning have been linked to poor academic performance in primary and secondary school. When students lose their homework, forget to write down assignments, or mismanage their after-school time, it is not surprising that their grades suffer. These difficulties continue, though, throughout life. Poor time-management skills are linked with lower college grade point averages and higher rates of dropout. Surveys show OTMP skills to be among the most important factors employers consider when making hiring decisions, as well as being a critical component of successful workplace performance.

The basic skills required for OTMP functioning do not change dramatically over time, but the implications of poor OTMP functioning do. While failing to complete an assignment may not have drastic consequences when it is a third-grade worksheet, it becomes far more serious when it is a college term paper or a report for work. Waiting until the last minute to do a middle school science project may result in a sleepless night and a poor grade, but waiting until the last minute to do a senior thesis or prepare for a job interview can be life-altering. The stakes for disorganization and

poor planning are greater as students grow older. So, for many students, deficiencies in OTMP functioning are major roadblocks to achievement of their potential.

Students who are given the support necessary to develop these skills early in life hold a great advantage over their peers. Basic lessons in tracking assignments, managing materials, and time and task planning can impart a foundation that sets students up for success at all stages of their lives. The third grader who can track assignments and organize her papers becomes the college student who successfully navigates the demands of a challenging course load. The sixth grader who learns to plan out the steps of a long-term assignment becomes the manager who can establish timelines and meet deadlines. Schools that offer formal instruction programs in OTMP offer a set of strategies that will help students manage increasing demands as they move through the grades, as well as provide a set of life skills that will serve students far beyond graduation.