

## AS SCHOOL STARTS, CHAOS OFTEN STRIKES HOME

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**By Jamie Engle**

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Many parents and children dread the beginning of the new school year when, “Where’s my (fill in the blank)?” becomes a too-often-heard phrase. When a child is disorganized, parents and children get frustrated. Co-authors Martin Kutscher and Marcella Moran (“Organizing the Disorganized Child,” Harperstudio, August 2009), say they believe the problem lies in mismatched organization skills and strategies.

“In my psychotherapy practice, most of my patients are disorganized students,” Moran said. “When I first meet with the family, the parents are usually frustrated because their child is not successful in using the organizing strategies they’ve introduced to him/her. On the other side, the child is annoyed that his/her parents are not acknowledging that these organizing strategies of the parents do not work for him/her. Everyone is aggravated.”

Moran said once she starts to explain the concept of individual organizing styles and the strategies associated with each style, the attitude in the room seems to change.

“All parties are eager to learn about these different organizing styles and the strategies associated with them,” she said. “Guilt-ridden parents start to feel a sense of relief that their child’s disorganization is not a reflection on their parenting skills. Subsequently, the child feels validated by the knowledge of having an individual organizing style which seems to confirm that he’s not lazy – he just wasn’t using the appropriate organizing strategies.”

In their book, Kutscher and Moran give a set of questions that help parents and children identify the child’s organizing style. Three organizing styles are identified: visual (Did you see my backpack?), spatial/cozy (Do you know where I put my backpack?) and chronological/sequential (Do you know when I last had my backpack?). Once the style is determined, the correct organizing strategies can be incorporated. Also provided is a list of home and school supplies to facilitate organization and tips for keeping children organized. Some children might have a combination of organizing styles.

“A common combination style is visual-spatial,” Kutscher said. “These children will like puzzles, have a great imagination, be sensitive to their feelings, and have a poor sense of time. These are the children who are so often labeled ‘disorganized.’”

Parents should be prepared to adjust organizing strategies.

“If the child tells the parent that a technique is not working, the parent needs to listen and talk with the child about different aspects of the technique that he/she liked and disliked,” Moran said. “From this conversation, parents should be about to tweak the strategy to fit

the needs of the child. Never try to force a technique that is clearly not working for your child.”

Kutscher and Moran’s passion for organizing students began with their own children.

“I’d watch my son be unaware of deadlines as they came and went, along with his difficulty planning, starting, and finishing assignments,” Kutscher said. “We’d work for hours doing a project, and then he’d forget to hand it in!! I could see it was not lack of effort or laziness ... it was disorganization. Seeing my own child — who I knew really cared — shoot himself in the organizational foot led me to understand deep down that organization is a skill that just does not come naturally to some people.”

For Moran, it hit home when her daughter was only 6 years old.

“I have a child who was incredibly disorganized. Through the years, I watched her struggle to understand multistep directions, organize her thoughts, and try to keep tabs on anything she touched,” she said. “When she was about 6 years old, she was crying hysterically because she didn’t know how to ‘start’ to clean up her messy room. After doing some typical ‘counseling’ investigating, I realized that she truly had a different organizing style than mine. My ‘Aha!’ moment led to me recognizing that she also needed her tasks specified and chunked into smaller segments for them to be more doable and less overwhelming. My little girl was successful in cleaning her room. For me, this was a humbling lesson and a new beginning of learning more about organizational styles and strategies.”

Easy to read and understand, “Organizing the Disorganized Child” teaches parents how to identify the child’s organizational style, organization skills and strategies that fit the style and how to apply them.

### **Places to start**

Lorraine Brock, owner of “Get Organized!”, offers solutions to improve the overall flow and organization of preparing for school.

For school lunches, Brock suggests a pre-printed list of acceptable main entrées, snacks and desserts posted on the inside of the pantry door, so children can choose what they want. Brock also suggests buying in large quantities and on Sunday (or whenever convenient) pre-bagging appropriate serving sizes for the whole week.

“Pre-bagging makes it as convenient and easy as possible,” she said. “By having children use the list, you are teaching them to do something for themselves and lightening the load in the mornings.”

Brock also recommends using door hangers, hung on the door used for exiting the house, for last-minute reminders.

“At stores and on the Internet, you can find wipe-off door hangers like the ‘Do Not

Disturb' signs used in hotels," she said. "They come in wipe-off style or with sticky notes. Write the last-minute reminders, like 'got your lunch?', and hang it on the door knob. As the child touches the door knob to leave, they also touch the door hanger and can read it for last-minute reminders. This works well for adults too, when they don't want to forget something as they leave the house."

Pre-matching clothes in outfits – not by group – can also save time.

"When you pre-match outfits, you know everything matches, and your child doesn't have to waste time looking for a match," Brock said. "You can pre-match once a week, perhaps when putting clothes away. Another way to organize clothes is by type, so that school clothes are together, play clothes are together and church clothes are together, maybe with each group being assigned its own hanger color."

Brock said to also clean out the closet before school starts, purging the clothes that no longer fit, are stained or no longer worn by the child.

At her own house, Brock has a shoe organizer at the house's entry point for shoes worn every day.

"We created a habit of putting shoes on the organizer before entering the house," she said. "That way when we leave, the pair of shoes – both shoes – are right there. One day, we were leaving for school and my son went to get his shoes, which were not there. He realized he had left them at a friend's house. Because the shoes were not on the rack, we didn't have to waste time going back into the house to look for them."

Brock also suggests putting teachers' e-mails and phone numbers in your phone right away.

"That way, you can access them easily when you need to contact the teacher, but also, when they call you, their name will show up on the phone. It's a safety tool and organizing tool."