

## The WISER Family Column

# Thinking Organized



| BY RHONA M. GORDON |

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What do you do with a child who just can't keep up with her things? When she constantly forgets homework and commitments? When she puts everything off until the last minute? What mom hasn't heard something like this (delivered with appropriate whine)? "Mom, I need to make a poster by tomorrow or I'll get a zero!"

Some students, even those who are very bright, just can't seem to get it together. Lost items, forgotten paperwork and last minute requests cause chaos for the whole family. Sometimes these children have trouble preparing for exams, keeping information in memory, and expressing their thoughts clearly. Many professionals have labeled this group of difficulties "executive functioning weaknesses."

Executive functions are a set of skills needed by each individual to set goals, organize a plan to meet those goals, and effectively complete activities within a given time frame. A person uses executive functions to create modifications to the plan when circumstances require change and to navigate through daily life. Luckily, executive functioning skills can be taught. Here are a few strategies to try:

**Material Organization:** An efficient student properly documents and monitors assignments and keeps up with books, papers and supplies. To help your child organize her schoolwork, try these tips:

✓ **Backpack:** Take every single thing out of the student's backpack. Go through any loose papers and file in the proper binder. Praise the child for completed homework and papers that have been filed correctly.

✓ **Assignment Notebook:** Every student must have a place to list assignments. Check this notebook daily until the skill becomes routine. If a student needs additional help, ask a teacher to sign the assignment notebook at the end of the day to ensure the student's proper documentation.

Color coding is an effective way to help your child organize her assignment notebook. Here is one suggestion:

- RED = Test or quiz
- BLUE = Long-term project
- BLACK = Nightly homework
- GREEN = Fun activities

**Time Management:** To make your student more aware of the passage of time, use a monthly calendar to write down obligations, extracurricular activities and other events for both the student and the entire family. This way the student learns that even adults must plan ahead.

Another important component of time management is breaking down long term projects. For example, to study for a test the student might spend a weekend making flash cards, a night completing an online quiz and another night being quizzed by a parent.

**Memory:** Students are required to memorize information from a variety of subjects. Often, the disorganized learner crams the night before an exam. If the student does not understand the material or relate to it in a meaningful way, the ability to remember will be diminished. Try introducing a few new memory strategies:

- Acronyms, such as "HOMES" for the Great Lakes (Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, Superior)

- Acrostics, such as "Please excuse my dear Aunt Sally" stand for Parentheses, Exponents, Multiplication, Division, Addition and Subtraction and help students remember the mathematical order of operations

- Rhyme and rhythm. Who can forget, "In fourteen hundred and ninety-two...?"

Remember, repetition is crucial to getting information stored in memory.

**Written Language:** Writing clear and organized documents can be a difficult task for the disorganized student. In order to improve a student's writing, try the following strategies:

- Begin by brainstorming for topics. Help your student define a main idea or thesis that both meets the criteria and is within her ability. Jot down specific questions that will be answered in the writing.

- Help your student write an outline or make a web map detailing the main points to be discussed. Many times, the questions asked during brainstorming will become the key points of the essay and can easily be organized and expanded upon in the outlining or web mapping step.

- Teach your student to structure each body paragraph using the S.E.E. system.

- **S:** First, make a **Statement**, a main idea.

- **E:** Next, give **Evidence** from text material or research.

- **E:** Finally, **Explain** how the evidence supports the initial statement.

- After writing, be sure the student saves time for a "final check." This can be a careful proofreading first by the student, then by a parent or trusted friend.

Whether in the school or home, practicing organizational strategies helps the student at the root of her problem. A student who adopts these techniques finds that her grades improve, written work becomes easier and self-esteem escalates. Establishing systems to improve executive functioning skills gives your child a firm foundation for a successful academic career, as well as instilling strategies that will be used for a lifetime. ❖

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*Washington Independent Services for Educational Resources (WISER) members work to improve educational services and promote child advocacy by providing resources to children and parents. Please visit [www.wiserdc.com](http://www.wiserdc.com) or call 301-816-0432 to find a specialist to work with your child and family. Rhona M. Gordon, M.S., CCC/SLP, a member of the WISER group, is an ASHA certified speech and language pathologist and an organizational specialist with over 25 years of experience. In addition to helping hundreds of students start "Thinking Organized" in her private practice, Rhona serves as a consultant to public and private schools, and conducts seminars for parents, teachers, therapists and school administrators. She can be reached through her website, [ThinkingOrganized.com](http://ThinkingOrganized.com) or by phone at 301-986-1503.*

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