

HELP YOUR STUDENT TO START THINKING ORGANIZED

by Rhona Gordon Epstein

What do you do with a child who diligently labors over a page of math, and then “forgets” to turn it in? Or can’t find it in his backpack? Or left it at home on his desk?

Many children are labeled “lazy” and encouraged to work harder or study longer, when what they really need is better executive functioning skills. Executive function is defined as the mental organizational process where one can plan and sequence ideas or activities and then implement, monitor and revise them as needed. Key components of proper executive functioning skills include working memory, material organization and time management.

As a Speech and Language Pathologist, I am often confronted with bright students who are floundering in school or in everyday life. Many have diagnoses of ADD and Executive Function Disorder, but some students who should be functioning well are struggling. Frequently, these children also have difficulty with verbal and written language, reading comprehension, intellectual flexibility and daily social skills. Through many years of therapy, I have developed a program of intervention that teaches students compensatory skills to improve their planning and problem-solving - in other words, to start thinking organized.

The Thinking Organized program has been taught through individual and group therapy sessions, as well as in seminars to parents, teachers and students of all ages. As client and mother Robyn Wagman wrote, “It was never a question of working harder; it was finding a way to work smarter and more efficiently. Thinking Organized helped our child find the necessary strategies and skills to be a successful, life-long learner.”

Can Parents Help?

Definitely. When parents learn the strategies of Thinking Organized, they are better able to help their children use them on a daily basis. Parental involvement is

crucial for optimum results, and when the program is integrated at home and with school work, the resulting organizational habits become positively reinforced for a lifetime of Thinking Organized.

GETTING STARTED – SIX STEPS TO THINKING ORGANIZED

1 Material Organization: Develop a system for managing an assignment notebook, binder and homework, and then stick to it. Each school may have its own system for material organization, and the method you choose is not as important as enforcing it on a daily basis.

Have your student use different colors in his/her assignment notebook. For example, have the student put daily assignments in black, test and quiz dates in red, and long-term assignments such as projects or book reports in blue. Using color helps draw attention to work that is not part of the daily routine and to visually focus on the steps needed to complete lengthy projects.

For a student having trouble remembering to write his/her assignments in the planner, ask the teacher to sign off on the assignment notebook each day. Some teachers may have alternative methods for parents to monitor classroom assignments, such as newsletters, emails or websites, all excellent sources of information.

Encourage your student to find a buddy in every class in order to verify confusing homework assignments. If you have a fax, don’t be afraid to ask for copies of missing handouts or homework. Your goal is not only to train the student to be responsible for bringing home assigned work, but also to hold him or her accountable for completing it.

2 Time Management: Temporal

organization, being able to plan and execute tasks in a reasonable amount of time, is an important skill for academic success and essential for life management. The ultimate goal is for your student to accurately approximate the time a task will take and then divide the project into manageable pieces.

Practice breaking down long term projects by using a monthly calendar or the student’s planner. Map out each task that needs to be completed so that he/she will be finished with the project at least 3 days ahead of schedule. For example:

- Week One: Research materials online (or for a book report, read the book).
- Week Two: Gather notes and ideas. Begin to formulate an outline or web with the most relevant information.
- Week Three: Begin the writing process.
- Week Four: (At least 3-4 days before the project is due) Edit, revise and produce final project.

Breaking larger projects into smaller, more manageable tasks decreases frustration and teaches the sequential skills necessary for all time oriented challenges, both in academics and beyond.

3 Language Processing: Language processing is the ability to comprehend or understand what one hears or reads.

Note taking is an important way to process written information. Even a young child can learn the basics of this skill when the parent acts as note taker. For example, read

Improving Executive Functioning and Language Related Skills



**STEP 5: LEARNING STYLES:
NOTE TAKING, STUDYING**

**STEP 6: WRITTEN
LANGUAGE SKILLS**

STEP 3: LANGUAGE PROCESSING

STEP 4: MEMORY STRATEGIES

**STEP 1:
MATERIAL ORGANIZATION**

**STEP 2:
TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL ORGANIZATION**



MAYBE HE'S NOT JUST "LAZY"

a social studies book with your child. Stop at the end of each sub-heading to discuss and then write down the key points. It is helpful for the parent to do the writing in order to keep the child focused on the text material and not tire him/her with the writing process.

An older student can practice this skill by reading text material, and taking notes in the margin of the text. Alternatively, a student could add the salient points from the textbook in a different color to his/her class notes on the same subject.

4 Memory Strategies: It is important for the student to learn to store and retrieve information for tests, or simply to grasp the next step in a learning process. Memory strategies can be practiced in many fun and engaging ways.

With your younger child, practice using categorization while grocery shopping (name 5 green vegetables), or classification while driving (how many mini-vans or pick-up trucks can you find?) It's always fun to run an obstacle course or go on a treasure hunt. Create directions for the

child to follow starting with two or three at a time, and increase them after the student accurately completes three sequential moves without assistance. When a child has difficulty, you can use a pictorial representation to aid his/her memory.

A good example of a project to help an older student develop his/her memory skills is to learn the location of states on a US map. Practice these memory strategies:

- **Categorization:** Begin with where you live and the states around you. Break the map into categories, with no more than 7 items in a category. For example, 7 Northeastern States, 7 Mideastern States...
- **Visualization:** Use clues like "Florida looks like a boot" to help students "see" the material.
- **Mnemonics:** Find the first letter for each state to create a word, such as COW which represents California, Oregon, Washington.

5 Effective Studying Strategies:

In order to provide a systematic, step-by-step approach to studying, it is important to discern your student's optimum learning style. Some people really do focus better with music and noise in the background, whereas others require absolute quiet.

As you determine your student's learning style, you can help teach studying strategies that work. Take for example, teaching spelling words, even to young children. If your student is a visual learner, have him/her create index cards with one word per card. A kinesthetic learner, one who learns best when movement is involved, could lay the cards on the floor and jump from word to word, spelling each one along the way. An auditory learner could tape record the spelling words. Finding methods that work can require some trial and error, but a student that has learned how to learn has acquired a lifelong tool in the goal of organized thinking.

6 Focus on Written Language: Effective writing requires a student to utilize many intellectual skills and can be a challenge for the disorganized thinker.

However, parents can introduce strategies to improve a student's writing, even at the youngest ages.

For a young child, choose an object and ask him/her to describe it in detail. You'll need to give prompts at first: tell me the name of the object, its color, how it feels, is it rough or smooth, what is it made of, what does it do, what can I use it for, who would like it, where could I buy it... In this way, a student learns to use directed questions to clarify and detail his/her descriptions.

Next try using two objects, and ask the student to compare and contrast as much as possible. Make two columns, one for "Same" and one for "Different" and list as many characteristics as possible in each one.

An older student may benefit from structured language techniques such as the S.E.E. method used for Expository Essays (writing for the purpose of proving or explaining something). The outline provides a systematic way to structure a written assignment:

S = STATE the situation or problem

E = EVIDENCE – give examples or quotes to support the Statement

E = EXPLAIN how your evidence proves your point

Using a checklist for grammatical errors, breaking down the writing into manageable parts and visualizing the finished layout of a written assignment are other strategies that will help an older student become an effective writer.

If Thinking Organized seems like a daunting task, remember that help is available. Therapists and tutors offer academic support, as well as practical strategies for mental and physical organization. ThinkingOrganized.com provides a distance consultation service, which can help you get started and answer questions along the way. Seminars have been another effective training tool, and a great way to share costs and knowledge.

Whether implemented in a formal therapy session, or at home with Mom and Dad, Thinking Organized helps many students

FOLLOW UP

After some practice, most students are able to use the strategies independently. First weekly, then monthly set a time to evaluate your student's progress and determine the level of future monitoring. Through reinforcement and repetition, students secure the skills they need for a lifetime of Thinking Organized.

at the root of their problem. With better executive functioning skills, grades improve, written work becomes easier, and self-esteem escalates. Thinking Organized establishes a firm foundation for learning success, as well as instilling organizational, communication and flexible thinking strategies to be used for a lifetime.

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- Member, American Speech and Hearing Association (ASHA)
- Member, Maryland State Speech and Hearing Association
- Member, Washington Independent Services for Educational Resources (WISER)

Joined by a team of speech pathologists and tutors, the group diagnoses and treats children, adolescents and adults presenting with expressive and receptive language disorders, language processing, and memory difficulties. Thinking Organized specializes in problems relating to executive function, attention deficit disorder, cognitive communication, organization and time management.

TAKE THE STUDENT'S QUIZ, AND SEE HOW MANY CHARACTERISTICS YOU RECOGNIZE.

	YES	NO
Do you have trouble finding things in your backpack, locker or desk?	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you ever completed homework but forgotten to hand it in, or lost it?	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you have difficulty remembering when things are due?	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you have trouble planning time and scheduling homework?	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you have trouble prioritizing tasks?	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you have difficulty beginning tasks?	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you tend to procrastinate?	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you frequently stay up late at night finishing a project or studying for a test?	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you have problems maintaining attention in class?	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you have trouble identifying important parts in a reading passage?	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>