

Kindergarten to college: Here's your back-to-school organizational plan

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School is about to begin, so before the mad rush of lunches, artwork and papers begin flooding your home again, it's best to have an organizational plan. Our advice? Match your organizing scheme to your kids — a first-grader with an artistic side is going to require a different approach than a high schooler with college applications and advanced math to contend with. Keeping in mind the stages each family passes through as children advance through school, we got a little expert advice and devised a plan for each age group.

"When I think about organizing different age groups, the general way I think about it is: Little kids need help managing their things, older elementary school kids need help managing their time, high school kids need help learning how to manage responsibilities," said Heidi Solomon, a certified professional organizer and founder of Boston-based P.O.S.H./ Professional Organizing Services by Heidi.

Consider the plans below a starter guide to organizational sanity for each age group — pick and choose what works to suit your house and family.

Preschool

The goal: Teach small chores such as putting away toys, manage the art projects.

•**Tame the artwork.** "It's important to identify where it will be stored and displayed before it takes over the house," Solomon said. "I recommend selecting an area of the house where it will be displayed, and then rotating out the pieces as more come in. Some can be framed, some can be loose — but the idea is that the amount of space consumed is limited to one or two areas of the house." The Personalized Art Portfolio (\$19.95 at onestepahead.com) can store oversized masterpieces in nine compartments so you can divide their work by age, year or subject.

•**Tidy the art supplies.** These tend to multiply. But the Closetware Over-the-Door 24-Pocket Shoe Organizer (\$14.99 at bedbathandbeyond.com) is an easy way to keep everything in place, suggested Jill Annis, of Simply Organized in Madison, Wis.

•**Hook 'em early.** Install low hooks so little ones can learn to hang up their jackets and backpacks, said Lisa Zaslow, founder and CEO of Gotham Organizers in New York. The Land of Nod Birdwatcher Wall Hooks (\$21.95) come in a set of three and don't look so childish that they can't be used throughout your child's grade school and teen years.

Grade school

The goal: Learn time management by using a calendar and clock, foster independence with basic responsibilities like making their own lunches, make places for sports equipment and homework.

•**Tie them down.** Being able to track everyone's schedules at a glance will keep you on top of all of your family's activities. Whether you use an old-school wall-mounted calendar with spaces for each family member or an electronic version linked to your smartphone, assign a different color for each person to make it easier to see who's where when, Zaslow said. Transfer the information from schedules, invitations and fliers to the calendar and toss the papers.

•**Create a lunch station.** Reserve one cabinet, drawer or shelf in your kitchen solely for school lunches so that everything is in one place. This should contain napkins, lunch bags or boxes, orphaned flatware (grab these at thrift stores), easy to-go snacks and reusable water bottles. Everything but the perishable ingredients should be stored here, Zaslow said. Consider corralling perishables for lunches in one spot in the fridge, if you have room.

•**Catch everything as it comes in.** Don't drag everything into the house. Even if you don't have a mudroom, add a storage bench in the entry of your home, which should have room for backpacks, sports bags and bins for hats and gloves, Annis said. She recommended the Martha Stewart White Storage Bench with Seat (\$49.98 at homedepot.com), which has spots for everything.

High school

The goal: Help create systems to monitor long-term deadlines and work, then turn them over to your student! Make a place for heavy-duty work to get done without distractions.

•**Make it manageable.** Schoolwork will require them to manage deadlines beyond doing tonight's homework. Help your teen manage his time with a wall calendar system. The Pop Art Dry Erase Calendars (\$19.99 at containerstore.com) won't mar your walls, which is a good thing, since before you know it, your child will be leaving for college, Zaslow said.

•**Organize their work.** There will be a lot of papers coming home daily, and your high school student will need to keep track of them all. The Open-Top File Boxes (starts at \$4.99 at containerstore.com) can be labeled with class titles. Learning to establish an organizational system will be a necessary skill throughout life, so foster it now.

College

The goal: Help organize the stuff in that dorm room, add amenities that foster organization and scheduling.

•**Give them a lift.** You have to look for storage ... anywhere you can find it. Use Extra Tall Bed Risers — Adjustable Height (\$19.78 at dormco.com), which can add up to 8 inches to under a dorm bed so everything from suitcases to laundry baskets can be stored there, Annis said.

•**Take notes ... out of the classroom.** Even if your teen has everything on his phone, it helps to have it all laid out on his wall so that he gets a big-picture schedule — and he sees it as soon as he rolls out of bed, Annis said. This Chalk Calendar Wall Decal (\$69 at pbteen.com) sticks on the wall and peels off at the end of the year sans surface damage.

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