

HELPING YOUR CHILDREN GET IT ALL TOGETHER

By Mary Marsh

Lost homework, lost shoes, forgotten meetings, lost library books, floor of child's bedroom completely missing, and announcement of the need for 2 dozen cupcakes 5 minutes before the school bell rings...sound like your life?

We are living in a fast paced society, with ever increasing demands on our time and energy. Adults aren't the only ones finding it difficult to keep track of it all. As our children grow, they get involved in more and more activities, and all too often, it becomes just one more thing for parents to keep track of. Every group has their own handout on rules, calendars of events, etc. Instead of the paperless society promised us with the improved computer technology, the result seems to be an increase in paper---after all, it's so much easier to produce now.

Keeping Track of It All

Help your children learn to keep track of their own commitments. It will be easier on you and will be good for them:

- **Files aren't for adults only:** Show your children how to set up a file system, with files for all the various activities and areas of interest with your child. There are a lot of inexpensive open file boxes designed to hold filing folders and these are much better than filing cabinets. Keep it out and accessible and then show your child how to drop all those papers into a file instead of a pile.
- **In/out box:** Set up an in/out box by the door of your child's room. If you don't have a good desk space, purchase one that can be mounted on the wall or door. Put in mail, phone message, tonight's homework. Have your child put in notes, reminders, calendars that you need to be aware of. Use the out box for paperwork that is ready to be sent out the next day.
- **The calendar:** Keep one master calendar for the whole family. Everyone should be sure to mark their activities, meetings, rehearsals, games etc...on this

calendar. Hang it near the main phone, then when someone calls, you have a ready reference.

- **Check lists:** Instead of spending time spinning wheels figuring out what to do, teach children to sit down and make a list, for the day, for the week, even for the month. Then keep the list on the bulletin board where it won't be lost.
- **Pocket calendar:** For children who are involved in several different activities, have them keep a small calendar with them. Encourage them to copy important dates off the main family calendar so they'll be able to know when conflicts arise. Your child's coaches, activity leaders and teachers will appreciate this as much as you will!
- **Keeping track of money:** Getting a ledger and teaching your child how to do her own bookkeeping is an important way to encourage careful and thoughtful spending and saving practices. Ask your bank about kid's savings programs, some banks give incentives to children for opening their own account.

Keeping Things Picked Up

Sometimes it isn't a lack of effort, but a lack of organization that is keeping things such a mess. Give your children a few tools to help them keep their things in better order.

- **The importance of the garbage can:** Always make sure your child keeps a garbage can in the room. They will toss garbage whether it is there or not. While you're at it, start teaching children the value of throwing things away!
- **Hooks not hangers:** Children don't use hangers. A few well-placed hooks on the wall will help keep clothing and jackets up off the floor. If you find this unsightly, put them inside the closet.
- **Magazine/comic book boxes:** These can be made from old cereal and cracker boxes. About 6 inches from the bottom, cut the top off at an angle. Cover in contact paper to make attractive and stronger.

- **The library book shelf:** Designate one box, shelf or basket for all library books. Our library also gives us a computer printout of the books we have and the dates they are due. This is kept posted by the shelf. Any one can check and see when their books are due.
- **The pocket emptying jar:** Have your child keep a jar or bowl on his desk or dresser. When the pants come off, the contents of the pockets go into the jar.
- **Plastic garbage can for outdoor toys:** A clean plastic garbage can with a lid is a terrific way to store outside toys. In the winter, bring the can into the garage to keep it from cracking in the cold.
- **The year-end book:** Throughout the year your child should have one designated spot for all completed work. A big, flat box works well. Any completed and graded school work gets tossed into this box. At the end of the school year, go through it all--the art, the writing samples, the science reports. Choose a few representative samples. Three hole punch them and then use brightly colored yarn to tie together into a book or put into a binder. Now toss everything else.
- **Hang it up:** Model airplanes, origami, artwork---all those little things that get stuffed into a box or scattered on the floor---hang them with fishing line from the ceiling. This makes the room personalized and keeps things out of the way.
- **Legos:** So far, the best idea I have seen to keep Legos, K-nex, Erector and other similar types of toys organized is the big-box/little-box system. Find several small containers that can be closed. Into these go the various types of pieces. Baby food jars or yogurt containers with lids, even film canisters are good for those hundreds of tiny, tiny things. If the little containers are not transparent, you'll have to label carefully. Keep these in one larger box. For younger children, who are not so particular about individual pieces, a large flat box is the best container. This way all the searching can be done without having to dump all the pieces on the floor.

Time Management

The ability to use time wisely is not something we are born with. Help your children learn how to use time efficiently; it will be a skill they will use their whole lives.

- **Get it together the night before:** Before bed, gather everything that will be needed in the morning. Pack

lunches, homework, permission slips, etc. and have them ready. Put everything into a backpack, except the lunch. Mornings will be a breeze when all your child has to do is grab the pack and the lunch and fly out door.

- **Routines:** Get them into a routine. Morning---get up, get dressed, eat breakfast, brush teeth, put on shoes. Day after day, have it go in the same order. Routines are comforting and can really make a difference in how easy it is to get children out the door everyday.
- **Every child needs a desk:** If they have a spot to call their own, children won't spend their time gathering supplies and clearing a space when it is time to work. Even if it is just a small table, or a board set across two filing cabinets, put a jar of pencils and a small stack of blank paper on it and teach your child to keep it cleared off!

Our children are busy---they have developed interests and love to be involved with life. In general, this is a good thing. However, if we don't teach them that this active life takes some work to keep track of, that someone has to do the remembering, we are doing them a disservice. Keeping track of commitments and being able to keep things organized and together, are valuable skills that our children need to learn.

One final thought: If you find that even after all this, you or your child still feel like it is all too much---maybe it is. Just like with adults, forgotten promises and sloppy work are often signs that a person is overwhelmed. Reconsider your priorities and find a way to cut back. There is a lot to be said for having a bit of time for doing absolutely nothing.

Mary Marsh is a freelance writer, educator and mother of three (9, 6 & 3) who lives in Davis. After ten years in the Early Childhood profession, she has recently chosen to stick close to home and explore the many wonders, delights and challenges her own children have to offer.

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