

Connecting for high potential

Your Tear and Share Guide

NAGC receives similar questions from teachers and parents; however, rarely is there an opportunity to explore how the “other side” might face the issue. Interestingly, both groups benefit from the same information even though they look at it from different perspectives and have different roles to play in helping gifted children reach their potential. Our ongoing goal is for teachers and parents to develop a broader understanding of their students' potential and thus create stimulating learning environments.

THIS MONTH'S TOPIC:

**“This child is a classic 'absent-minded professor.'
How can she or he ever learn organizational skills?”**

A TEACHER VIEW

If I've asked Lynn, “Where's your homework?” once, I've asked her a thousand times this marking period. Sure, that little shrugged response is starting to drive me crazy, but the real concern is Lynn's plummeting grade. I know she understands the material better than most students in the class, and we've discussed the connection between her choices and her grades, but I can't seem to convince her to get organized and finish her assignments. To be fair to everyone, I have to evaluate observable student performances when I assign grades – I can't just take her word that she knows the material, or has done the work.

I know she'll be shocked when she opens her report card and sees a “C.” More importantly, I expect that her parents will want some answers as well. However, Lynn holds the keys to why she just can't seem to get the work turned in and I'm not sure how to help her open the door.

A PARENT VIEW

My second grade son's desk at school is such a jumbled mess that by the time he finds the right book, he's a good 5 or 6 minutes behind the other kids. It's as though he's in a different time and space. He can't seem to keep track of his pencils, ruler, scissors, worksheets – His teacher says that even asking him for a clean, unwrinkled piece of paper often stops him in his tracks.

The confusing part is that he's obviously smart. On the one hand, his memory for facts is phenomenal (he's the one who points out the inconsistencies in every little thing I say), but he's also the child who can't remember to bring home his assignments.

His behavior is disruptive to our family. School evenings are spent arguing about homework and getting ready for the next day, and mornings in our house are simply a nightmare as we try to get him out the door in one piece. He just doesn't plan ahead.

Anyone who has avoided the temptation of eating a freshly baked cookie right before dinner realizes that self-regulation and delaying gratification can be difficult to master. Although some children are willing to learn the “rules of the game” and find a way to succeed within a system, others flounder in a sea of disorganization and lost time. With some careful detective work and a healthy dose of communication, families and teachers can help a child better understand the value of organizational skills and how to put them into practice on a regular basis.

The good news is that organized people are made, not born. Skills like being able to prioritize, keep possessions in order, plan ahead, and manage time, are learned over time and by example! It's not magic. The tough reality is that parents and teachers must think about the examples they set, as well as the opportunities they provide for children to become adept at managing themselves. Children need good role models, not just once in awhile, but consistently. After all, perfecting a skill takes lots of practice.

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1. STEP BACK AND GET A WIDER VIEW

According to many classroom management experts, all behavior is functional (i.e., it serves a purpose) and is shaped by social interactions. To gain further insight into a child's behavior patterns or goals at school and home, ask:

- When disorganization or time management issues occur, what events precede it?
- What is the usual response or consequence to disorganization or unfinished work?
- Is there a context or subject in which disorganization typically occurs?
- Do behaviors change at different challenge levels (e.g., difficult, easy)?
- To learn more about Positive Behavior Support and how to shape these behaviors for more favorable outcomes, visit www.apbs.org/PBSTopics.htm.

Bright children often try to rationalize themselves out of situations. "Why bother," they ask, "This homework is dumb, anyway." Be ready with at least one solid, compelling reason. Think creatively. Think long term. Think like a mix of stand-up comic and defense attorney. Why does that homework need to be done? [Hint: Make it fun. Use 'serious-fun' with the answers.]

There are many styles and levels of organization. Each person must discover what works for him or herself. For example, most of us have figured out that hours spent trying to find things we've lost are wasted, so we try to maintain some order in where we put them. During times of stress, whatever "system" we've used can fail. Is stress an issue in your home?

2. WHEN IS A PROBLEM MORE THAN JUST A PROBLEM?

- Losing assignments, lack of attention to detail, incomplete work, and a general struggle with organization are all red flags in a classroom setting. With their breadth of experience with young people, educators are pretty good at spotting behaviors that may impede academic progress and vary widely from those that are typical at a developmental level. Nevertheless, additional expertise and evaluation are needed to help determine if the cause of a child's organizational struggles is fueled by the intensity and enthusiasm sometimes associated with gifted children or if there are additional clinical issues present like ADD/ADHD.
- For a helpful checklist, read "Before Referring a Gifted Child for ADD/ADHD Evaluation" at www.sengifted.org/articles_counseling/Lind_BeforeReferringAGifted-ChildForADD.shtml

- Is your child late for things she or he wants or likes to do? For example, does she or he show up on the hour for a favorite TV show? On again/off again self-regulation may point to lack of interest in the task at hand.
- Is disorganization contributing to underachievement? Include your child as an active part of the solution, using two questions to help frame different tasks: "How can I prepare to do my best work" and "What is the right amount of organization to get this done?" (or, how much disorder can I tolerate and still accomplish what I am supposed to do?)
- Try the suggestions listed under "Organizational Skills" on the NAGC website at: <http://www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=968>
- Find more strategies in *The Organized Student: Teaching Children the Skills for Success in School and Beyond* (Goldberg, 2005).

3. MAKE A PLAN

- When you help students and families map out long-term goals and career aspirations, you also open the door for short-term strategies and increased communication. Focusing on specific progress toward shared goals rather than deficits gives the child an active role in the development of self-regulation skills.
- For more on strategic goal setting with gifted students, read "Making a Difference" by Del Siegle and Betsy McCoach at www.gifted.conn.edu/siegle/Conferences/NewJerseyUnderachievement.pdf

- Be proactive. Weave examples into conversations of when and how being organized has saved the day. For example, think of the unforeseen consequences described in the short fable that begins "For want of a nail" and ends with "the kingdom was lost." There are more ideas in the "Self-Regulated Learning and Academically Talented Students," which is on the CHP page, located in the "Parents" area of the NAGC website.
- Stay flexible and adaptable. The most helpful systems serve as scaffolds to reach higher levels.

Organizing is what you do before you do something, so that when you do it, it is not all mixed up.
- A. A. Milne