



ADHD Center · 30 North Michigan Avenue, Suite 908 · Chicago, IL 60602
www.addcenters.com

The Disorganized Child Strategies For Helping Children With ADHD Stay Focused

Peter Jaksa, Ph.D.



Every parent of a child with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD, sometimes called ADD for short) has learned through painful experience that poor organizational skills come with the territory.

Difficulty organizing tasks, items and activities are usually evident from an early age. As

the child grows up, these symptoms translate into chronic problems with forgotten or lost homework assignments, clothing and possessions buried in piles of clutter, and difficulty maintaining any consistent routines. It's often said that the only consistent thing about children with ADHD is their inconsistency.

All children need structure, but children with ADHD need it even more. Families living with ADHD know that trying to keep such a child organized is a source of frustration bordering on hopelessness—even though there is hope. The first part in the quest for organization is to help an ADHD child overcome a natural aversion to it. The second involves finding the right tools for meeting the specific needs and goals of the child. The third, perhaps most crucial part of the equation, is making a long-term family commitment (think *months* and *years*, not weeks) to using the required systems and strategies.

OVERCOMING THE RESISTANCE

Unless a child can see meaningful benefits to becoming organized, the battle is lost before it even begins. For most people, organizing is not a fun activity: It takes time and effort, and at some point all routines become boring. If there's one thing children with ADHD have a low tolerance for, it's boredom.

On the plus side, all children are motivated to succeed, even when they pretend otherwise. By maintaining an enthusiastic and encouraging approach to getting organized, and making a child feel like a participant rather than a victim in the process, there's a good chance he or she will agree to at least give it a try.

Because helping an ADHD child buy into a system of organizing involves identifying specific goals that are important to the child, ask questions. Ask what items or activities the child wants to organize. Talk about the problems organization can prevent, and what benefits will come from it. Watch for how often poor grades are due to lost or late assignments, and keep track of how much arguing is going on about the messy room problem. Monitoring and discussing the frequency of how often disorganization causes problems can help improve the child's awareness of the situation and become inspire a change in behavior.

It's incredibly important to keep a positive attitude and stress the benefits, benefits and more benefits. Nagging a child about being disorganized leads to avoidance behavior, not compliance. Providing incentives (for example, a larger weekly allowance) for following the system is perfectly fine and strongly motivating.

WINNING THE BATTLE OF THE MESSY BEDROOM

In the modern history of parent-child relationships, few verbal exchanges have sparked as much complaining and arguing as “clean your room.” The goal for managing clean-your-

room conflicts with ADHD children is to help them use a system to find what they need when they need it. While parents have to be realistic about what a child can handle, they needn't put up with utter chaos either.

An ADHD child's room needs to be organized into logical sections. By placing the bed perpendicular to a wall, rather than against it, the room is divided into halves. One half of the room can then become the designated area for doing schoolwork; it has a desk and small shelf for reference books and school supplies. The book bag, assignment notebook, textbooks, notebooks and assignment sheets go here—and *only* here.

A second section of the room can be designated as a play space, with storage for toys and hobby materials. A third spot, organized around a dresser and closet, would be reserved for clothing and getting dressed, with labeled sections dedicated to specific items: a sock and underwear drawer, a shorts and T-shirt drawer, a sweater drawer, and so on.

The golden rule for maintaining order in a child's room is that everything has a place where it belongs. Things that don't have a place (or don't get put there after being used) are guaranteed to end up in the ubiquitous pile of clutter, which in many ways is the representative symbol of ADHD disorganization. If there's no room for an item to have its own place, it belongs in the basement, attic, storage shed or recycling bin—anywhere but the ADHD child's room.

THE POWER OF ROUTINES

All children benefit from learning routines to promote consistent behaviors. An extensive review of 50 years of psychological research, published in *The Journal of Family Psychology*, shows that even infants and preschoolers are healthier and exhibit better-regulated behavior when there are predictable routines in the family. For the ADHD child, routines are indispensable. They make daily activities manageable by allowing a child to focus on one thing at a time.

Not every activity needs to be (or should be) turned into a routine, the use of which is most important for accomplishing essential tasks and keeping daily life manageable. Due to symptoms of high distractibility, physical and mental restlessness, and a low tolerance for boredom and frustration, completing school assignments on a daily basis places huge demands on an ADHD child's ability to self-regulate. A regular time for homework provides the structure needed to achieve consistent effort and results.

But sometimes, even the best planned routines don't go as planned. The usual scenario: Parents enthusiastically start the process, only to throw in the towel because "the routines just aren't working." Children resist. Parents get frustrated. Chaos resumes.

To make a system of organization truly effective, for it needs to be viewed as a way of life. Progress is often slow and incremental. Success is measured in months and years.

The work is hard and at times can become extremely trying but, for a child, the benefits will last a lifetime.

HELPING A CHILD MANAGE CLUTTER

- Assign every object in a child's room a designated "home" location.
- Establish a daily, five or ten minute routine for a child to tidy his or her room, during which time all toys, clothes and books are returned to their homes.
- Every few months, help your child sort and purge unneeded possessions. (Rarely used items that are keepers should be placed on shelves or in storage.)
- Provide reminders, gentle pushes and supervision, but don't do the child's work.
- Be positive and supportive, not critical. Staying organized is harder for kids with ADHD than for most children. Frustration and discouragement are effort killers.

THE "GET OUT THE DOOR" MORNING ROUTINE

- Rise and shine at a set time and head straight for the bathroom.
- Wash face, comb hair, brush teeth, etc.
- Get dressed with the clothing that was picked out the night before.
- Eat a healthy breakfast (with the TVs and computers turned off).
- Put on a coat and grab the school bag, which should be waiting by the door.
- Be walking out the door at an established time.

THE HOMEWORK ROUTINE

- Since most children with ADHD need a mental break after school, allow at least 30 minutes to an hour of downtime for playing or watching TV.
- Establish a regular place and time for doing homework
- To help with the transition to doing homework, give the child a 10 minute warning.
- Help the child review the assignment and make sure needed materials are handy.
- Allow the child short breaks as needed. Getting up and walking around for a few minutes reduces restlessness and can work wonders in clearing the mind. (But be watchful and ready to redirect the child's focus or answer questions as needed.)
- Praise the efforts, not just the results. (Do this a lot!)
- Check the completed work.
- Gather all assignments and supplies needed for school the next day. Put everything in the school bag and place it by the front door.
- Do something fun and relaxing together after homework is completed.

THE DINNER ROUTINE

- Whenever possible, schedule a regular family dinnertime.

- Have the child assist in preparing the meal, and cleaning up after it, by assigning age-appropriate tasks.
- Keep dinner conversation pleasant. Save discussions about work, school or family problems for another time.
- Keep the TV off.

THE SCHOOL NIGHT BEDTIME ROUTINE

- Cue the child five or ten minutes before the start of the bedtime routine.
- Turn off the TV or computer. Put away toys.
- Allow the child to have a healthy snack, if hungry.
- Select and lay out all clothing for the next day
- Bathe, brush teeth, put on pajamas and get into bed.
- Read a book together or talk. (The goal is for the child, and the parent, to unwind from the day.)
- Good night kiss. Lights off. Sweet dreams!

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About The Author

Peter Jaksa, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist with over 30 years' experience working with children, adolescents, and adults with ADHD. Dr. Jaksa is the author of numerous articles and columns about ADHD, including articles published in **ADDitude Magazine**, **Attention Magazine**, **Organize Magazine**, and **FOCUS**. He has provided interviews to national publications and news organizations including the **Wall Street Journal**, **CNN**, **U.S. News & World Report**, **Chicago Tribune**, and **Men's Health Magazine**. He has presented at national conferences to health care professionals, educators, and the general public. Dr. Jaksa is a contributing writer for **ADDitude Magazine** and a member of the Scientific Advisory Board. He is the author of *Life With ADHD* and co-author of *Real People, Real ADHD*.