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## A Tutorial for Taming School Papers & Supplies

By Perri Kersch

It's 8:25 on a school night, and your 13-year-old is on the verge of tears because she can't find that "like, totally important" first assignment from her English teacher. You feel as if you're managing Grand Central Station with all of the paperwork you need to read and sign, file or return. And don't forget the heap of backpacks, instruments, books and lunchboxes strewn about the floor!

If you're starting to feel overwhelmed by the inevitable onslaught of "stuff" that walks through the door with your child at 3:30 p.m. every day after school, you're not alone.

Here are seven simple lessons to help you gain control and create organizational systems to keep the paper from piling up, help you coexist peacefully with the school "stuff" in your life, and teach your children lifelong organizational skills. Pay attention — there may be a pop quiz at the end!

### Lesson #1: Find a home for it all.

Create a "landing pad" for all of your children's items that come through the door. Backpacks should have a home (and let your kids know the floor is not an option!). Dump the backpack "black hole" daily and establish a place where your child stores assignments, schedules and notices. Vertical paper storage is best: magazine sorters, three-ring binders or a wall-mounted vertical paper organizer work well. Older children benefit from a small file box to file paper for individual courses and activities.

Books can immediately go to the homework area, and sports equipment needs a dedicated space in a garage or mudroom. Lunchboxes return to a designated kitchen area, and musical instruments go directly to a child's room or a family room.

### Lesson #2: Create a routine to manage paper.

It's easier to manage school-related items when it's done on a regular basis. Review homework and assignments each day. If you know about your children's assignments and due dates, you can help them prioritize and manage a schedule for completion. As children get older, they can manage this on their own calendar.

Papers to be signed or responded to should be kept in a designated area that parents or guardians check regularly. I use a red folder that stays in the kitchen, and I go through it weekly to make sure I'm keeping up with important documents from school.

### Lesson #3: Delegate responsibility.

I swore I wouldn't utter the phrase "I'm not your maid," but it has probably slipped out a time or two. Children need to take responsibility for managing their own paper and school materials when they come home each day.

As early as age 3, children should be able to put away their coat and hat and put their lunchbox in the kitchen. By second

grade, they should be able to empty their backpacks and, using the tools you've put in place, find a home for their schoolwork and paper.

### Lesson #4: Jot and pitch when possible.

Most paper does not need to be kept forever. Many papers your child brings home simply provide information that could be copied onto a family calendar. The same goes for invitations, sports schedules and school events. Once you note the important information on your calendar, pitch the paper and avoid the piles.

### Lesson #5: Start a family management binder.

Create a binder of important family information and schedules and keep it near your "landing pad." The binder might include school contact lists, sports schedules that include team contact information, special events at your child's school, babysitter contact information, and any other paper you need to keep with relevant information about your family or home.

### Lesson #6: Get creative with art projects.

I used to cherish every scribble my children made in preschool until I realized I'd be adding a wing onto our home if I continued to keep their "art" at that rate. Now I display artwork in a specific area in the playroom and rotate it every few weeks.

You also can use artwork to wrap gifts or make cards for friends or family members. Keep a few cherished pieces each school year and store them in a portfolio (found at most art supply stores).

Consider hosting a "gallery night" where your children display their artwork around the house. Serve grape juice, cheese and crackers, and take pictures of your children in front of their masterpieces. Save a few favorites; recycle the rest.

### Lesson #7: Make a homework zone.

Designate an area of your home as the homework spot, and keep it well stocked with project and school supplies. When your kids are working, they'll be able to focus on the task at hand and won't have an excuse to jump up every five minutes to look for something they need. Keep an inventory of items so you won't be caught empty-handed the night before a big assignment is due.

Be sure to communicate with your children about their stuff and allow them to participate in setting up systems.

Organization is a life skill. Teach your children to take part in the process early, and they'll be pros by the time they leave for college. ■

Perri Kersch owns Neat Freak Professional Organizing in Chapel Hill. When she isn't organizing for others, she's picking up the paper trail created by her own 3- and 6-year-old children. Visit her Web site at [www.neat-freak.com](http://www.neat-freak.com).

