8 Tips for an Organized Backpack
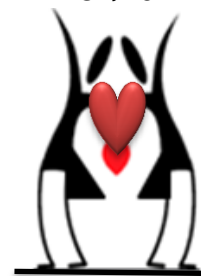
The school year is underway and habits are being developed and practiced! But are they the best habits for your child? Good work habits should begin as early as kindergarten but it's never too late to start. Be sure your child is developing the critical skill of personal organization in managing their supplies at school and at home.

Begin by examining what is working well for your child and what needs some adjustments. There *is* a solution for missing homework, disappearing sweaters, and the mad scrabble out the door every Monday morning! It hides inside your child's backpack.

#1 Find a backpack that matches YOUR child's needs.

Organizing a backpack begins with finding the right one.

● Small child or one still-developing their motor skills? Choose a backpack that fits your child, 4th grade and up may choose a backpack with wheels.
Wrestling with the wrong-sized backpack is an unnecessary daily struggle that is easily solved with all the choices available today!

● Easily frustrated child? Choose a backpack with Velcro and fewer pockets. Getting one with "all the bells and whistles" can actually work against your child developing organizational skills – set a goal for that fancy backpack and let them grow into that kind as they improve with keeping their backpack organized.

#2 Start with an empty backpack.

Brand-new backpack? You're ready to start. But if your child's old backpack still matches your child's needs, empty it out and start fresh.

● Have your child sort everything in it into two piles. One is for school supplies (papers, pens, highlighters, etc.) and the second one is for miscellaneous items that go back and forth from school each day – lunchbox, sweater, etc.

● Everything else that is in the backpack that does NOT belong in Pile #1 or #2 is removed and kept at home or goes in the trash. It's hard to stay organized if you are fishing around through a backpack with several toys, stuffed animals, an extra box of crayons, and last week's snack trash rolling around in the bottom! Less clutter = better organization.

● Finally, remember to have them shake the backpack over the trash can to get out all the crumbs and crumpled-up papers.

#3 Sort and group the school supplies.

● Help your child sort school supplies into **clear categories**. For examples, put pens, pencils, crayons, markers, and highlighters together in a "Writing Tools" category. Store these supplies together in a **clear vinyl** zipper bag big enough to *comfortably* hold it all. If the
zipper bag is crammed full of writing/marking supplies, it is much less efficient for your child to actually *use*. A lot of time is wasted in hunting through the bag for one item while the teacher has gone on with directions. (This is a clear recipe for frustration for many children who have trouble remembering what they are looking for while also listening to multi-step instructions on a worksheet. It's better to subdivide a category into two pouches, with room to easily find things, than to overfill one pouch.

●For older students, if they don't already have subjects color coded, have them color code their major subjects with a color-code system <u>that makes sense to them</u>. They will use that color code to buy folders and/or spiral notebooks that will match. For instance,   yellow might represent all things (including folders/spirals/textbooks) related to science because they study   space (the sun) in science. Perhaps green fits science better in their mind because they study plants, ecology, and Biosystems in science. Whatever color they assign to a subject *must make sense to them* since it is the color itself that will represent each specific subject area from now on. Color coding helps them locate or store ALL materials for that subject *at a glance*. Be sure to color-code the textbook's book cover to match!

#4 Map out the backpack.
"A place for everything and everything in its place."

●Next, assign each category to its own compartment or pocket in the backpack. One big compartment can hold books and another all folders and spiral notebooks. Choose a smaller pocket for the clear zipper bag holding writing tools. Be sure to assign a compartment (or two) for things that may change from day to day, too, like tomorrow's snack or lunch, notes to the teacher, a sweater labeled with your child's name, etc.
●Once everything is tucked into its own place, help your child draw a picture of their backpack, labeling "what goes where" with a picture or word. This backpack "map" will remind your child where the homework paper goes once they've finished the night's assignment, as well as remember where to put the new homework paper as soon as the teacher gives it to them. Papers should never just be stuffed into the backpack – <u>every paper has its place</u>. Help them to remember this by teaching them the **"Backpack Law"** and to repeat it to themselves whenever they pick up their backpack: **"A place for everything and everything in its place!"**
●Have your child practice using their map by emptying out their backpack and then putting everything back in its place several times. The goal is to get everything – sweaters, lunch/snack, and school materials – back into their own assigned compartment or pocket without mistake. Keep a copy of the map in the main front pocket of the backpack, plus another one at home until the backpack arrangement is memorized.

#5 Use a luggage tag checklist
Remove the address label from a clear luggage tag to help your child keep track of their stuff. Using the examples below, create a list appropriate for your own child.

●Use a red marker to write the first half of the checklist and label it "To School" and list what your child needs to bring to school each day in the backpack.
●Use a blue marker to write the back half of the checklist and label it "To Home" and list what needs to come home from school each day with your child.
●Fold in half (with the writing to the outside) and slide the lists into the luggage tag. Attach it to the zipper tab of their backpack and show your child how to use the checklists as a guide each day at the end of school and then again after homework is completed that evening when packing up for the next day at school.

Print the lists on a 2 x 3½ inch piece of index card (the size of a business card.)
Be sure to include the "check boxes" to visually separate the items so your child can read them quickly!
Example checklist for younger students: *Example checklist for older students:*

↑ Fold			↑ Fold	
To School	**To Home**		**To School**	**To Home**
Do I have:	*Do I have:*		*Do I have:*	*Do I have:*
☐ Completed homework?	☐ Homework assignments?		☐ Homework/books?	☐ Books & homework materials?
☐ Lunch/lunch money?	☐ Lunch box?		☐ Lunch/water bottle?	☐ Water bottle?
☐ Binder/ notebooks?	☐ Binder/ notebooks?		☐ Binder/planner?	☐ Binder/planner?
☐ Books?	☐ Books?		☐ School ID & phone (charged)?	☐ School ID & phone?
☐ Gym clothes?	☐ Dirty gym clothes?		☐ School laptop (charged)?	☐ School laptop?
☐ Daily planner?	☐ Daily planner signed?		☐ House key?	☐ House key?
☐ _____	☐ Graded work/ teacher's notes?		☐ Afterschool activity stuff?	☐ Jacket, boots, dirty clothes, etc.?
☐ _____	☐ _____		☐ _____	☐ _____
☐ _____				

#6 Make and use a school-2-home-2-school folder.

Your child's portable & personal file cabinet!

- ●This folder is for all the papers the teacher passes out but may not have collected yet. Remind your child that this folder goes back and forth to school each day – just like they do.
- ●Your job is to check that folder <u>with</u> your child each evening, sign the forms that need to go back, and remove anything that doesn't. Your child's job is to then put the folder back in its compartment in their backpack for the next day. This is also the place that finished homework gets filed each evening – if it's filed as soon as it's finished and checked, then homework always gets back to school on time!

#7 Manage the textbook situation.

Grabbing the right textbook can sometimes be the largest stumbling block to successful homework for older students.

- ●If your child has serious problems with backpack mess, it may be due to carrying too many textbooks. If your child constantly tends to forget to bring home the correct textbook (or any textbook at all) for homework or study, you may be able to check out an extra set to borrow for the year. Talk to your child's teacher(s).
- ●Otherwise, be sure that the checklist luggage tag includes "textbooks" as an item to ensure your child gets their daily, school-use textbook back into their backpack for use the next day.

#8 Schedule a regular time to do a backpack check-in.

Getting organized is one thing. *Staying* organized is another!

- ●To keep your child's backpack working for him, schedule regular "backpack check-ups". This is the time for them to get rid of the new crop of crumbs and tissues or paper scraps. You can do this every Sunday evening, every two weeks or monthly. The important thing to do is to do it!
- ●Keep in mind that kids need a lot of practice before they can do something on their own but they DO need a coach. Remember - you are ***<u>coaching</u>*** your child on organizational skills – not doing it *for* them.

Kindergarten may be the perfect age to start learning this essential skill, but it's never too late to get started!

Want to see these organizational strategies in action? Check out this video:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=5&v=hzJjhu9qrIM