“You can’t just carry everyone else’s hopes and fears around in your backpack and expect to stand up straight.” ~David Kirk

The Organized Student
Transform your middle-schooler from a backpack pack-rat to a planning pro.

As a middle-schooler your teen will be expected to take greater responsibility for schoolwork: daily assignments, tests and quizzes, and long-term projects. This comes at a time when their focus may be more on friends and socializing than worrying about whether they’re ready for a math test on Friday. How can you help her make sense of it all so he/she can focus on learning?

✓ Make time to discuss getting organized. Call a family meeting or initiate a discussion at the dinner table when the entire family is present (older sibs can share some been-there-done-that advice and empathy). Entice your preteen with his/her favorite snack or meal!

✓ Ask about the organizational system used in advisory. Some teachers ask students to use certain organizational methods while other teachers assume students have a system in place. Ask your teen which of their teachers requires a notebook or folder.

✓ Enlist your teen’s help. Don’t insist that they get organized your way. The idea is to help them discover a way that works for them. Too much “guidance” from you can cause conflict. Offer some options (better yet, brainstorm some ideas together), and let them analyze the pros and cons of each.

✓ Come up with a plan. Consider some combination of these strategies:

- A clean start. Take a look at your teen’s desk or workspace. Is it covered with all of last year’s papers or artwork left over from fourth grade? If so, purge!
- Check their Komachin planner. Help teens prioritize by looking at the week’s schedule together. Have them write in practices and appointments to support the use of the planner at home.
- The right paper-tamers. Aside from the planner or homework notebook, your teen needs some way to corral the loose papers they carry back and forth to school each day. Inexpensive folders can be used for homework or to file away papers they may want to keep for later.
- Great gadgets. Help your teen organize their advisory notebook or file-folder system. Pick up tab-dividers, post-it tabs, and book flags for them to use in class. Give your teen a pad of sticky notes, and encourage him/her to post special reminders on mirrors, doors, and elsewhere. Give your child a stapler, a three-hole punch, and big binder clips.
- Daily duties. For some teens, a 30- to 45-minute work session every day is essential — no matter what homework the teacher has assigned. If he insists he has nothing to do, give him/her the newspaper to read and write about.

✓ Stay Positive. Once you’ve got a system in place, keep touching base. If things get sloppy again (which should not surprise you!), don’t pass judgment. Just help them get back on track without comment. It takes time to learn this, along with a healthy dose of patience and persistence from you.

✓ Clean out the backpack regularly. Have them do it, say, every Sunday. Don’t do it for them, but sit nearby. If you come across a test they did poorly on, don’t comment. The session will revert from backpack cleaning to grades and very likely go downhill from there.

✓ Keep a family calendar. Along with soccer practice and Mom’s book club, keep track of big tests and the due dates of special projects. Seeing the bigger picture will allow you to help your teen plan his/her time more effectively.

✓ Call for reinforcements. If you’ve tried everything and your child still resists, email your teen’s advisor and enlist their help. Your child may respond better if your role changes from coach to cheerleader.
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**Become an Organizational Ninja**

Keep your backpack in good shape and keep the inside organized. If you keep your backpack clean, you won’t have to organize it as often.

- Make sure to only put things that you need for that day in your backpack. Carry your reading book, every day.
- Keep a pencil pouch or a zip-lock baggy to keep all the loose pencils from floating around and breaking.
- Your binder should have tabs labeled for each subject. The front section should be labeled ADVISORY (for school notices).
- Schedule a time when you get to do all of your homework. For example: relax for a half hour or so (play X-box or text, grab a snack) then have accessible any papers to do your homework. For many, doing the hardest to easiest helps so you can get the hard stuff out of the way first.
- When developing a new system, try it for 2 months to know if it works well for you.
- To keep your bag clutter-free you can do a full clean out of your bag every week and a mini clean out every day.
- It is also good to have a duffel bag for your gym or practice clothing and shoes so it doesn't stink up your bag.
- Don’t put personal items in your binder. Besides the potential for being distracting to you or others, it is visual clutter.
- If you have after-school activities that might conflict with a homework schedule, plan around them by using a dry-erase board at home to write down all of your obligations for practices, volunteering, etc.
- Ask your teacher(s) for help. Chances are there is at least one other student wondering the same thing but too shy/afraid to ask. If the teacher sees that you’re usually a well prepared student, they’ll give you a hand.
- Keep your reading book in a small compartment in your backpack; carry it with you 24/7.
- Make sure your backpack isn't too heavy. It shouldn't be any more than 10% of your body weight.

*You may think that you have a nice, clean, organized backpack. Well, test it. Take a stopwatch and name a random thing in your backpack. Don't think about the easiest thing to get to. The first thing that comes to your mind is what you need to find. Time yourself as you do it. If it takes you 30 seconds or more, then you don’t have a very clean and organized backpack.*
Set the Stage for Success at Home

**Step 1:** Set up a homework area supplied with common items such as paper, pens, white-out, and so forth. Pick an area that is visible to the main area of the house, but away from distractions such as television or high traffic areas. Provide a shelf for books and a bulletin board for reminders.

**Step 2:** Create a routine for homework that is followed each night. Enforce a minimum amount of time spent on schoolwork on a schedule that suits your family's lifestyle. When no school assignments are available, have your student practice important skills, do some reading, or complete a writing project.

**Step 3:** Get a large calendar. Post it in a visible spot. Use it to make notes about appointments, assignments and intermediate steps for large projects.

**Step 4:** Set up a specific place to put completed assignments and other supplies for the next day. Make sure your student gathers everything needed for the coming day before going to bed.

Set Up Success at School

**Step 1:** Help your student set up a filing system using folders or notebooks for each class. Teach him/her to put all notes, papers, worksheets, graded tests and other materials into the filing system when finished with them.

**Step 2:** Create a folder for current assignments, worksheets and study guides. Encourage your student to put each day's work in it for transport home and completed assignments in it for transport back to school.

**Step 3:** Help your student organize their advisory notebook or file-folder system. Pick up tab-dividers, post-it tabs, and book flags for them to use in class. Give your teen a pad of sticky notes, and encourage him/her to post special reminders on mirrors, doors, and elsewhere. Give your child a stapler, a three-hole punch, and big binder clips. (For ADD-friendly products, log on to addconsults.com/store, and click on "Get Organized!")

Provide Parental Guidance

**Step 1:** Check the student's planner frequently. Make sure assignments are written down. Look for teacher signatures if that tool is being used. Encourage them to keep a daily to-do list, and teach them to prioritize by dividing tasks into two groups: Important (do it now!) and Less Important (do it anytime). Go over the next day's schedule together every night.

**Step 2:** Monitor the filing system. Check your student's backpack, locker and room for misplaced papers that should be filed. Have the student file them correctly before indulging in recreational activities.

**Step 3:** Keep an eye on grades for each class. Watch for missing assignments or consistently low test scores. Consult with the child's teacher to develop strategies to deal with problems before the report card shows a failing grade.

**Step 4:** Develop a step-by-step plan to complete large projects with due dates for each step before the project is due at school. Monitor progress on the project and follow through on the plan frequently.