

# A+ for Organization

Stay on top of back-to-school paperwork and schedules with these simple tips.

BY NANCY MANN JACKSON



As the summer winds down and the first day of school looms, many parents feel both excited and overwhelmed. The end of summer signals a return to school routines, but it also involves mountains of materials to manage and busy schedules to juggle.

“The summer is pretty relaxing because you don’t have the same time constraints and paperwork to deal with,” says Ronni Eisenberg, a speaker and author of 10 books on getting organized. “When school starts, all of a sudden you are deluged with paperwork from the school, teachers, PTA and clubs.” The new school year also marks the beginning of fall sports and extracurricular and church activities.

Rather than suffering through the chaos, try some or any of these steps to cut down on stress and add some minutes or even hours back into your busy days.

## DEVELOP AN ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEM

Before school begins, develop a system for managing what comes in and goes out of your home. Tonia Tomlin, a professional organizer and president of Sorted Out, LLC, in Dallas, recommends setting up a communications center near the door of your home—maybe in the mudroom, kitchen or office.



A communications center can be as simple as “in” and “out” buckets or wall-mounted hanging files; it doesn’t have to be elaborate. Include an area for incoming and outgoing “stuff,” as well as easy access to scissors, paper clips, pens and envelopes.

For younger kids, you might send a pocket folder to school each day, with one side for papers going to school and the other for papers coming home, recommends Jodie Watson, founder and president of Supreme Organization and the organizing expert and author of *Purge with Passion: Organizing Principles from a Christian Perspective*.

Thrivent Financial Facebook friend Kristi Jacobson Rietze has a bulletin board for each child in her hallway, where they hang important papers to be dealt with, including school, church and extracurricular schedules and information.



## Organizational App-titude

Do you, your older children and your babysitters all have a smartphone? If so, think about downloading an app that allows everyone to access the same schedules, get the same reminders and share other information. Professional organizer Tonia Tomlin of Dallas-based Sorted Out, LLC, recommends these apps for getting your family on the same page:

- **Cozi** is a popular online family calendar app that also offers shopping lists, meal planners and to-do lists.
- **Priorities** makes it easy to organize your to-do lists for long-term and short-term tasks.
- **Evernote** is especially helpful for saving online information, sharing notes and planning trips.
- **Scanner Pro** turns your mobile device into a portable scanner, allowing you to scan receipts, permission slips, itineraries or other documents and then email, upload to a website or simply save the scan.

Paper isn't the only thing to keep up with. Consider adding a bench, baskets or lockers to your communications center to hold sports equipment, library books and other items needed on the go. And always set out clothing and other items before bed so they'll be ready in the morning. When Thrivent Financial Facebook friend Sara Tinker Robertson's boys frequently couldn't find their school uniform belts and shoes each morning, she taught them to "put the shoes and belts with the backpacks every night after bath time," she says.

### CREATE A MASTER SCHEDULE

Juggling all the activities of a busy family can be as challenging as managing the information flow. In a recent survey of *Thrivent* magazine's reader advisory panel, more than 57% of respondents said activity schedules for multiple family members is the area where they need the most organizational help.

Thrivent member Dennis Williams of Lansing, Michigan, says his family keeps track of everyone's activities on a large wall calendar that is visible to all. "Everybody keeping their own schedule to themselves caused a lot of problems," he says. "If the schedules are on the calendar, then everyone is aware of when they can make plans that need to include other family members."

Eisenberg recommends assigning one color to each child, and using that color for his or her folders and information on the family calendar. Tammy Plate, a Thrivent Financial Facebook friend, uses a different highlighter color for each family member on her wall calendar "so we know who is going where and when," she says.

While a central paper calendar works best for some families, others prefer online calendars. Thrivent Financial Facebook friend Cindy Jackson says her family (two adults, a college student, a high school student and a middle school student) uses a shared Internet calendar accessible on their phones and computers. "Everyone can see the calen-


dar and add items," she says. "We can also note the people who will get reminders for each event."

### INVOLVE THE KIDS

While parents set the stage for an organized family, they can't make it happen by themselves. Help your kids learn to get organized now, and chances are higher they'll form these good habits for life.

"It takes more time to teach your children than it does to do things yourself," Watson says. "But as they get older, it will save time because they can have their things ready, clear the breakfast dishes and help out so that you're not doing everything."

Thrivent Financial Facebook friend Melissa Wiaduck's children have been responsible for their own school and extracurricular items since kindergarten. "Over the years, a few assignments and lunches have been forgotten at home, but they've learned the hard way to be responsible. They pack their own backpacks, remember assignments and pack sport bags."

Once your family gets accustomed to a more organized approach to schoolwork and schedules, you'll enjoy less stressful, calmer morning and evening routines. And by freeing up the time you once spent searching for lost papers or scrambling to get homework and other items into backpacks, you'll have more time to talk to your children and enjoy mornings and evenings with them. "Quality time has to be intentional," Watson says. "And the best thing about being organized is that you get more quality time with your family." 

Nancy Mann Jackson has written for CNNMoney.com, *Working Mother* and *Entrepreneur*.

