

HOW TO GET MORE ORGANIZED

Most kids generate a little chaos and disorganization. Yours might flit from one thing to the next — forgetting books at school, leaving towels on the floor, and failing to finish projects once started. You'd like them to be more organized and to stay focused on tasks, such as [homework](#). Is it possible?



Yes, it is. A few kids seem naturally organized, but for the rest, organization is a skill learned over time. With help and some practice, kids can develop an effective approach to getting stuff done. And you're the perfect person to teach your child, even if you don't feel all that organized yourself!

Easy as 1-2-3

For kids, all tasks can be broken down into a 1-2-3 process.

1. **Getting organized** means a kid gets where he or she needs to be and gathers the supplies needed to complete the task.
2. **Staying focused** means sticking with the task and learning to say "no" to distractions.
3. **Getting it done** means finishing up, checking your work, and putting on the finishing touches, like remembering to put a homework paper in the right folder and putting the folder inside the backpack so it's ready for the next day.

Once kids know these steps — and how to apply them — they can start tackling tasks more independently. That means homework, chores, and other tasks will get done with increasing

consistency and efficiency. Of course, kids will still need parental help and guidance, but you probably won't have to nag as much.

Not only is it practical to teach these skills, but knowing how to get stuff done will help your child feel more competent and effective. Kids feel self-confident and proud when they're able to accomplish their tasks and responsibilities. They're also sure to be pleased when they find they have some extra free time to do what they'd like to do.

From Teeth Brushing to Book Reports

To get started, introduce the 1-2-3 method and help your child practice it in daily life. Even something as simple as brushing teeth requires this approach, so you might use this example when introducing the concept:

1. **Getting organized:** Go to the bathroom and get out your toothbrush and toothpaste. Turn on the water.
2. **Staying focused:** Dentists say to brush for 3 minutes, so that means keep brushing, even if you hear a really good song on the radio or you remember that you wanted to call your friend. Concentrate and remember what the dentist told you about brushing away from your gums.
3. **Getting it done:** If you do steps 1 and 2, step 3 almost takes care of itself. Hurray, your 3 minutes are up and your teeth are clean! Getting it done means finishing up and putting on the finishing touches. With teeth brushing, that would be stuff like turning off the water, putting away the toothbrush and paste, and making sure there's no toothpaste foam on your face!

With a more complex task, like completing a book report, the steps would become more involved, but the basic elements remain the same.

Here's how you might walk your child through the steps:

1. Getting Organized:

Explain that this step is all about **getting ready**. It's about figuring out what kids need to do and gathering any necessary items. For instance: "So you have a book report to write. What do you need to do to get started?" Help your child make a list of things like: Choose a book. Make sure the book is OK with the teacher. Write down the book and the author's name. Check the book out of the library. Mark the due date on a calendar.

Then help your child think of the supplies needed: The book, some note cards, a pen for taking notes, the teacher's list of questions to answer, and a report cover. Have your child gather the supplies where the work will take place.

As the project progresses, show your child how to use the list to check off what's already done and get ready for what's next. Demonstrate how to add to the list, too. Coach your child to think, "OK, I did these things. Now, what's next? Oh yeah, start reading the book" and to add things to the list like finish the book, read over my teacher's directions, start writing the report.

2. Staying Focused:

Explain that this part is about **doing it** and sticking with the job. Tell kids this means doing what you're supposed to do, following what's on the list, and sticking with it.

It also means focusing when there's something else your child would rather be doing — the hardest part of all! Help kids learn how to handle and resist these inevitable temptations. While working on the report, a competing idea might pop into your child's head: "I feel like shooting some hoops now." Teach kids to challenge that impulse by asking themselves "Is that what I'm supposed to be doing?"

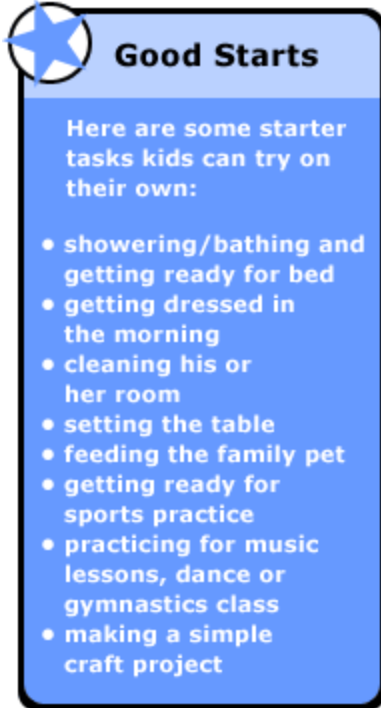
Explain that a tiny break to stretch a little and then get right back to the task at hand is OK. Then kids can make a plan to shoot hoops after the work is done. Let them know that staying focused is tough sometimes, but it gets easier with practice.

3. Getting it Done:

Explain that this is the part when kids will be **finishing up** the job. Talk about things like copying work neatly and asking a parent to read it over to help find any mistakes. Coach your child to take those important final steps: putting his or her name on the report, placing it in a report cover, putting the report in the correct school folder, and putting the folder in the backpack so it's ready to be turned in.

How to Start

Here are some tips on how to begin teaching the 1-2-3 process:



Introduce the Idea

Start the conversation by using the examples above and show your child the kids' article [Organize, Focus, Get It Done](#). Read it together and ask for reactions. Will it be easy or hard? Is he or she already doing some of it? Is there something he or she would like to get better at?

Go for Some Buy-In

Brainstorm about what might be easier or better if your child was more organized and focused. Maybe homework would get done faster, there would be more play time, and there would be less nagging about chores. Then there's the added bonus of your child feeling proud and you being proud, too.

Set Expectations

Be clear, in a kind way, that you expect your kids to work on these skills and that you'll be there to help along the way.

Make a Plan

Decide on one thing to focus on first. You can come up with three things and let your child choose one. Or if homework or a particular chore has been a problem, that's the natural place to begin.

Get Comfortable in Your Role

For the best results, you'll want to be a low-key coach. You can ask questions that will help kids get on track and stay there. But use these questions to prompt their thought process about what needs to be done. Praise progress, but don't go overboard. The self-satisfaction kids will feel will be a more powerful motivator. Also, be sure to ask your child's opinion of how things are going so far.

Start Thinking in Questions

Though you might not realize it, every time you take on a task, you ask yourself questions and then answer them with thoughts and actions. If you want to unload groceries from the car, you ask yourself:

- Q: Did I get them all out of the trunk?
A: No. I'll go get the rest.
- Q: Did I close the trunk?
A: Yes.
- Q: Where's the milk and ice cream? I need to put them away first.
A: Done. Now, what's next?

Encourage kids to start seeing tasks as a series of questions and answers. Suggest that they ask these questions out loud and then answer them. These questions are the ones you hope will eventually live inside a child's head. And with practice, they'll learn to ask them without being prompted.

Work together to come up with questions that need to be asked so the chosen task can be completed. You might even jot them down on index cards. Start by asking the questions and having your child answer. Later, transfer responsibility for the questions from you to your child.

Things to Remember

It will take time to teach kids how to break down tasks into steps. It also will take time for them to learn how to apply these skills to what needs to be done. Sometimes, it will seem simpler just to do it for them. It certainly would take less time. But the trouble is that kids don't learn how to be independent and successful if their parents swoop in every time a situation is challenging or complex.

Here's why it's worth your time and effort:

- Kids learn new skills that they'll need — how to pour a bowl of cereal, tie shoes, match clothes, complete a homework assignment.
- They'll develop a sense of independence. The child who dresses himself or herself today at age 4 feels like a big kid. It's a good feeling that will deepen over time as they learn to do even more without help. From these good feelings, kids begin to form a belief about themselves. In short, "I can do it."
- Your firm but kind expectations that your kids **should** start tackling certain jobs on their own send a strong message. You reinforce their independence and encourage them to accept a certain level of responsibility. Kids learn that others will set expectations and that they can meet them.
- This kind of teaching can be a very loving gesture. You're taking the time to show your child how to do something — with interest, patience, love, kindness, and his or her best interests at heart. This will make kids feel cared for and loved. Think of it as filling up a child's toolbox with crucial life tools.