

Raising an Organized Child in a Blended Family

BY SUZANNE J. GELB

With the increasing number of children being raised in blended families, one thing's for sure—daily life in these households can get pretty complicated as parents juggle all the schedules and try to meet children's needs

It is possible to organize your blended family so that everyone's on the same page. A great place to start is to teach your children to be organized using the tips that follow. Organizational skills enhance a child's ability to plan, focus, and get things done.

- **Model organized behavior.** There are many things you can do to bring order to your child's life. For starters, you can adopt sound time-management habits and make order part of your life. This will show your child that you're not just requiring him or her to be organized, but you're living an organized life as well.

Actions speak louder than words, and the benefits of modeling organized behavior can be far-reaching—especially for children who face many new changes resulting from a parent's remarriage and the need to adjust to a blended family.

- **Schedule family time.** Be sure to organize your busy day to include time with your blended family. Commit to sharing at least one family meal a day. This means no television, texting, or phone calls—just time to have dinner and enjoy each other.

Ideally, families should also spend time together on weekends. Plan fun activities that everyone can look forward to. Keep in mind though, sometimes children want to spend time just with their biological parent. Be sure to schedule that quality time as well.

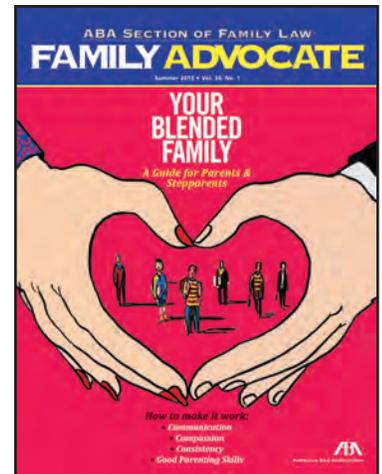
- **Create a parenting plan.** This is another effective way to help your child be organized. It includes setting up a cooperative home environment with reasonable rules and consequences for noncompliance.

You and the stepparent must work together to implement the parenting plan and present a united front. Otherwise, your child may play one of you against the other. This could translate into chaos, instead of organization at home.

Since one of the most difficult changes for children in divorced families is living in two homes, switching back and forth, sometimes as often as every few days, it's a good idea for parents to have the same rules in both households. Consistency with issues such as homework, bedtime, and discipline reduces the changes children need to adjust to. Less change means less disruption, paving the way for more organization.

- **Give clear instructions.** Teaching children to be organized includes communicating clearly how you want them to behave. Otherwise, they're not likely to comply. You will end up nagging, and they will simply tune you out.

As one mother says, "I'm tired of nagging my eight-year-old to get things done. This is especially rough on Saturday mornings when Sam has to be out the door on time, with everything he needs to spend the weekend at his dad's." Another



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frustrated father complains, "I'm fed up with telling Kim, ten, to shape up. She leaves clothes on the floor, can't find her homework assignments, and forgets her school books at her mom's house."

Nagging doesn't work. Instead, give your children clear instructions about what you want them to do. Tell them when and how to carry out these instructions and what the consequences will be if they don't comply.

Here's a look at how Sam's mother can replace nagging with clear instructions. One Saturday morning, as she scrambled to pack things Sam needed for his visit to his dad's, she got angry when she saw him playing a video game instead of getting ready. Moments before, she'd told Sam, "Get ready. Your dad will be picking you up soon."

The fact is, this mom didn't give Sam clear instructions. Knowing he loves video games, she needed to say, "Before you play a video game, you must get ready to visit your dad. If you don't, you can't take your video game with you today." Sam knows "get ready" means get dressed, eat breakfast, brush teeth, and feed the fish (his morning chore).

To create a stress-free Saturday morning routine, Sam's mom must help him prepare whatever he can the night before, including packing his things. This will free up valuable morning time so Sam can get off to a great start.

- **Establish routines to help with transitions.** Daily routines, in the morning and at bedtime, benefit children of all ages. This type of organized schedule turns chaos into calm. This is especially important during transition times when children may be upset because they don't want to stay with or leave a parent ("I want to stay at Dad's" or "I don't want to go to Mom's"). When your home environment is calm, then during transition times you can give your children a safe space in which to express their feelings and needs.

- **Make an organizational chart and calendar.** Another way to foster your children's organizational skills is by creating a chart, which lays out daily tasks and the consequences for noncompliance. Items on the chart could include packing the backpack at night for the next school day, wakeup time, mealtimes, study time, TV time, and bedtime.

If children know, for example, that each afternoon they must do homework right after their snack, and that there'll be a consequence for not doing so, they're likely to get their homework done. These routines cultivate responsibility and independence.

It also is useful to create a master calendar, which contains important dates, family events, and tests, for example, and due dates for projects. This is a great organizational tool for blended families, and is posted where children will see it, such as on the refrigerator. Assign each child a color and then use it to note his or her events on the calendar.

- **Assign chores to help children feel part of the family.** Get all children on board with chores, whether they live in the house full-time or visit for the weekend, spring break, or for longer periods during the summer. As children help around the house, they feel a sense of pride and belonging. This is especially important for visiting children. After vacuuming while visiting his dad, Sam proudly tells his stepsister, "My chores help our house run smoothly." By doing chores, children learn life skills, such as good work habits and being responsible. As they master new tasks, they feel competent, which boosts self-esteem.

Despite the benefits, many parents battle with their children to get chores done. The key here is for parents to guide their children with discipline. This includes applying reasonable consequences if children don't do what they're told. They soon realize that cooperating is better than arguing. This means more peace in blended-family households.

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• **Equip your children to plan, focus, and get things done.** Children thrive on order. When they keep their belongings in designated places in their room, for example, they can find what they need and put things back where they belong. As children realize they're capable of being organized, their confidence increases.

The blended-family situation can pose challenges when it comes to designating places for belongings. Sometimes living space is tight, and children share rooms. If so, designate an area in the bedroom that belongs to each child. This is where they keep their books, toys, and other belongings, trusting that no one will touch their things. Children who are used to having their own room may take time to adjust to the shared space.

Here are some age-appropriate examples of how to foster organized habits.

1. **Young children need shelves they can reach.** This makes it easy for them to locate their things and put them away.
2. **School-age children should have a designated area for homework.** The desk surface must be big enough to spread out papers and books. Supplies, such as pens, pencils, and paper, should be available. After use, these items must be put away.
3. **Middle-school-age children need a daily planner to keep track of what must be done.** Children should empty their backpacks nightly, and refill them with what they need for the next day. This teaches them to plan ahead and start the day organized.

• **Teach time management.** When children learn to manage their time, they develop good habits that can help them throughout their lives. Sometimes, however, if children have not been taught time management, they develop a bad habit—procrastination. This problem has many parents at their wits' end. For example, 11-year-old Lynn protests to her stepdad, "I don't want to do homework now, I want to watch TV"; Ted, 13, tells his mom, "I have lots of time, I'll take the garbage out later."

Here's how Lynn and Ted's parents can nip these stalling tactics in the bud. First, Lynn procrastinates because she hasn't learned to prioritize. Her parents need to make rules and explain that failure to comply will result in consequences ("No television until your homework and chores are done. If you don't cooperate, you can't watch TV at all tonight.") With this in place, Lynn is likely to be more productive.

Ted postpones doing things because he doesn't see any urgency ("I'll do it later."). Ted's parents should emphasize that not doing what's expected will have consequences ("You must take out the garbage after dinner, or you'll lose phone privileges for tonight."). This approach typically motivates children to behave responsibly.

Some children put off doing things because they're perfectionists ("I'm afraid I'll mess up."). One way for parents to address this is to reassure their children, "Your best is good enough." Other children may drag their feet because a task is daunting ("I have so much homework, I don't know where to start."). These children should be encouraged to break down homework into small tasks and estimate how long each task might take. They can then plan a realistic schedule and start doing their homework.

You might want to reflect on whether your children see you procrastinating. Do you let laundry accumulate, for example, or put off reorganizing your closets? Your children will copy what you do, so make sure you're not procrastinating.

• **What to do when things go wrong.** Even though organizational skills contribute to positive behavior in children, which in turn promotes harmony in blended families, things don't always go smoothly—like when Lori's dad forgot to send the 10-year-old's homework with her, or when Tom, 12, leaves his trumpet at his dad's house.

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His dad (still angry about the divorce) left the trumpet in the garage for his ex-wife to pick up, and she had to drive quite a distance to get it.

If you experience similar situations, no matter how frustrated or angry you may feel, don't badmouth the other parent in front of your child, and don't lose your cool with your child. Set aside any strong feelings and deal with them later in private.

As to Lori's homework, her mom should teach her to put her homework in her backpack at night, and place the backpack where it will be accessible in the morning. She needs to explain that, "Although it looks like Dad forgot to send homework with you, it's not his responsibility." Tom's mom should tell him, "At night, lay out everything you need to take with you the next day, including the trumpet." Both children need to be told what the consequence will be if they forget things at the other parent's home.

- **Praise your child**

Children of all ages enjoy praise and encouragement. When your children make an effort to be organized, tell them you appreciate this. If you're building rapport with your stepchildren, praise can increase your chances of success.

Children are motivated to improve when their small accomplishments are recognized, so applaud these efforts. Don't limit your praise only to when they win or are the best. Otherwise, they may feel like they have no worth, unless they come in first. While all children respond to being part of a blended family in their own unique way, when it comes to receiving praise, children enjoy similar benefits—a boost of confidence in knowing that they can achieve their goals.

- **Benefits of raising an organized child**

The move from a single-parent family to a blended one can be challenging, especially because children thrive on routines and stability. Now they have to deal with changes to routines and rules, and adjust to new people in their lives. But as you model organized behavior and teach your children to be organized, their confidence grows. They feel happier and more secure in their blended family. FA

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