

The Importance of Fresh Starts

by Shara Bumgarner, Head of School

With the new school year just around the corner, parents and students are looking to start off on the right foot with ambitious goals of staying organized. Kids enjoy picking out new backpacks and school supplies, and many parents will be motivated to clean out closets and drawers as they purchase new school clothes and get rid of ones that no longer fit. Some families will get really organized and set up a well-stocked homework station so everything is ready when school starts. As the countdown gets closer, parents may even reestablish bedtime routines and have children get up earlier each day so the first week of school is not so painful. Once the first day finally arrives, parents and many students will be excited to review school calendars, create family schedules and fill out agendas. Everything will go smoothly while everyone is excited and motivated.

Eventually though, whether or not someone in your family has learning differences, life starts to get in the way. New backpacks fill up with crumpled, outdated fliers and assignments. Agendas, once faithfully filled out, accumulate blank pages. Bedtimes slip later and later, resulting in rough mornings.

In my experience, adults and children who struggle with organization generally know what needs to be done and are motivated to do it, yet they still get off track over and over again. The fact of the matter is most people thrive in organized, predictable environments. I don't know anyone who enjoys being messy, chronically late or forever searching for lost belongings. We all feel calmer, more competent and more in control when our lives are orderly, tidy and calm. Unfortunately, maintaining routines and structure simply comes easier to some than others.

If your child has difficulty with these executive functioning skills, chances are at least one parent has similar struggles, given the tendency for learning differences to run in families. This makes establishing routines and systems even more difficult.

Instead of starting off the new year feeling excited and motivated and then feeling guilty when things start to slide, simply embrace the fact that it's bound to happen and recognize that this is normal for many people. The best way to face this reality is to set yourself up for success by planning for "fresh starts" throughout the year.

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Here are some strategies to help:

Schedule It Out

Plan your own “reboots” throughout the school year. Every weekend is probably unrealistic for most of us. One option is to schedule a set time and stick to it, like the third Sunday every month. Others may do better using three-day weekends to clean out backpacks, rearrange drawers and tweak bedtime and morning routines. Setting aside time to start fresh more frequently keeps things from getting so out of hand that you dread trying to reign them in.

Overstock

While school supplies are at rock bottom prices, stock up with more folders, notebooks, pencils and markers than you think you’ll ever need. When the folders get messy, whether it’s October or January, simply trade them out for new ones to get that clean slate motivation going again.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

Many of us suffer from “out of sight, out of mind” syndrome, so set aside regular time to go through the stacks that pile up and the overstuffed school folder that tends to be forgotten when life is busy.

Remind Yourself

Use more than one strategy for reminders:

- Write on the bathroom mirror in dry-erase marker.
- Put post-it notes on the TV.
- Keep a white board just inside the door your family uses most frequently.
- Send text reminders.
- Set calendar reminders on both your child’s phone and yours.
- Use novelty to get your child’s attention, like putting notes on the milk jug or in their favorite snack container.
- Ask Siri!

Make a Master List

During the high energy start of the year, make a master list of every class and every ongoing task that needs to be completed for each child. Since many students struggle with time management, assignments that are not due immediately are often forgotten. At least weekly, ask your child about each class and any projects or long-term assignments coming up to avoid frantic, last minute panic due to procrastination.

Encourage your child to identify at least one friend in every class who is reasonably organized so there is someone to call or text for help remembering an assignment. Keep a list with their contact information with your master list of classes. Encourage your child to check in with those friends to make sure they’re not forgetting anything. Get to know your child’s friends and their parents. Frequently it’s the casual conversations about school assignments and struggles that reveal something your child may have forgotten.

Check In

Finally, take a few minutes every day to check in with your kids about how they are feeling about school. Very often, feeling overwhelmed and stressed is a symptom of things getting out of control and could signal the need for another fresh start. That might mean needing to organize materials, but it could also simply mean facilitating a “brain dump.” Letting your child verbally list everything on his or her mind in no particular order while you make a written list that can later be sorted and prioritized can help regain a sense of control.



No One Size Fits All

At The Joy School, we talk about fixing what we can fix and giving strategies for the rest before sending students back to traditional schools. Despite grasping the fundamentals of organization and planning, for some students (and many adults), the ability to stay organized may just fall in the category of things that can't be permanently fixed. Understanding that some people simply need more frequent fresh starts may help students and parents feel less like they are continuously failing and more accepting of the idea that this is simply a normal variance in how people manage their lives. We all learn, process and work differently. Embracing those differences rather than fighting against them can help everyone feel more competent and confident in their unique abilities. 🏠