

Monthly column published in NJ Life & Leisure September 2006



Managing School Backpacks!

This month we have a great question from one of our Neat Living readers!

Dear Ariane,

I have a son in 7th grade whose school backpack seem to be a bottomless pit! It's so full of stuff, he can't ever seem to find anything in it! What can we do to manage his backpack better?

Linda S., Bloomfield

What a great question, Linda! Kids backpacks (BPs) can easily become a dumping ground. One of the most common issues I've seen with kids and BPs is that they use their BPs as *storage*! The best use of a backpack is to *transport* items. Sometimes just helping your child define a clear purpose for his BP makes a huge difference. Other times, the real reason kids "store" items in their backpacks, is that they don't have anyplace else to put them! So that means to fix the backpack issue, we need to set up a system that integrates with his locker and home-study area. When home and school have places to store his things, then he can easily clean out his BP regularly and carry only what he really needs for the day!

Another tool for successful backpack management is teaching kids how to plan ahead daily. Every evening, help him develop the habit of asking "What do I need to take to school tomorrow?" and pack only those things. When he gets to school, suggest he unload items he won't need before lunch into his locker. After lunch, he can pick up things he needs for the afternoon.

Before returning home, ask "What do I need to take home to do my homework this evening?" Pack only the things he really needs. When he gets home, he can unload, do homework, and then repack his BP.

NOTE: It is important that your son be involved in making decisions about the details of organizing his BP. Being involved helps develop skills he can use for the rest of his life!

To get started, work with your son to create a list of what he needs to transport on a regular basis. Then, identify a way to contain each item and give it a home in his backpack, locker and/or homework area. Here's a typical list along with examples of how to contain and assign homes to each item.

Class Schedule / School Notices

Locker – Hang a copy of class schedule with magnets on locker door.

BP - Use a sturdy colorful pocket folder. Place schedule in one side, announcements going from home to school in the other.

Text Books

Designate a section in the Locker, BP and home for books.

Lunch / Personal Items / Pens / Pencils

Calculator / MP3 player

Designate a section in the locker, BP and home. Use a pencil case if BP doesn't have sections built in.

Homework Assignments / Class Notes & Handouts / Completed Homework

Try creating a Class Notes binder (no larger than 1.5 inch) for each school year. If necessary, use 2 small lightweight binders rather than one huge one. Label the spine clearly using a P-touch labeler or a thick black Sharpie. Use Plastic 2 Pocket Dividers with 5 or 8 Tabs by Avery (11906) to create a section for each class. (Create separate pocket folders for each school activity such as Boy Scouts.) Carry only the amount of note paper you need for a week or two of class notes.

In each class section, date a page for each day and write homework assignments there. Or, you can put all assignments on one master page in the front of the binder. One pocket can hold handouts, the other pocket is for completed homework to be turned in. Make a corresponding home file system for each class. Every weekend, he should clean out old papers and file them in schoolwork filing system at home. You may need to help him do this at first for a few weeks until he develops the habit.

Calendar / Planner

The front of the class notes binder is also a good place to keep a monthly calendar for recording/planning scheduled activities.

This is only one way to organize a backpack. There are other tools your son can use depending on his preference. For example, he can use accordion folders and pocket folders for each class instead of binders. He can use file boxes or a filing cabinet for schoolwork. Whatever the tools, the critical success factors are:

- Don't use the backpack as storage..
- Plan ahead for each day and evening.
- Setup an organizing system in the school locker for unloading BPs
- Provide a home filing system to unload old papers.
- Give everything a home in the BP
- Label everything!
- Re-organize as needs change.
- Involve your child designing the system
- Use organizing tools he loves to encourage him to use them.
- Treat organizing like a writing project. You may need a few drafts to get it right - so don't feel bad when you need to make adjustments as you go!

Good Luck! We would love to hear any additional tips from our readers and will publish them here next month!

Got an Organizing Challenge? Ask the Professional Organizer! E-mail your organizing challenges to abenefit@neatliving.org. I'll answer your questions here!

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Ariane Benefit is a professional organizer, consultant, speaker, and author of the Neat Living Blog. Her mission is to help people simplify, clear clutter, and get organized enough to live a life they love! She provides practical creative solutions for people who want a neater, simpler, less stressful life. She can be reached at 973-429-2100 or found on the web at www.neatliving.org and www.neatliving.net