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[Home](#) > [Resources](#) > [Printer-friendly PDF](#)

Organizing Your Home to Create a "Learning Lifestyle" Environment

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Organization at a Glance

- **Pray** about what God wants you to work on for your particular family.
- **Ask your spouse** for guidance as to which areas are important to him.
- **Find a balance:** "Our house is clean enough to be healthy and messy enough to be happy."
- **Be careful not to be such a perfectionist** that people are uncomfortable living in your house.
- **Our goal is to glorify God** with our lives and, as homemakers, with our homes. We can do that better in an orderly home because we can be more gracious to our children when we aren't rushed or hunting for the car keys or always behind, and can be hospitable. Our home is more peaceful and calm.
- **This is a spiritual work** because the end result is to bring peace to our homes and to glorify our Creator.
- **Look** for ways to bring order to your home, but don't allow organization to be an idol. Get organized to give you the time and liberty for relationships.

Organization is *not* about an immaculate house or quintessential neatness. There is not any one best way to organize. *Organization is a means of functioning effectively and efficiently*, and you must find what works for you and your home.

Why get organized? To beat stress and be in control of your day, to accomplish what God has for you for today. I Corinthians 14:40 says, "Let all things be done decently and in order."

It's all about stuff and time. On another page, we discussed the importance of organizing our time. We went over basic time management skills, lesson planning, sample schedules, etc. to help our households run smoothly and efficiently.

Now let's consider how to physically organize our homes—including our stuff—to make the best use of our space and our time because if we can find things and move through our houses easily, we will save time and effort.

Some physical household management will overlap with time management. For example, a chore system or household tasks system will help you stay on top of the cleaning and maintenance, but it also falls under time management. None of this is carved in stone. Glean from this what you can. Ask your spouse and family about key areas to "target" for improvement, and pray about areas that may need your concentration.

There are many "systems" to help you get started or motivated to take control of your surroundings—we'll list a few for starters. Some people need the all-day-long reminders and assignments from *FlyLady*, while others will appreciate the one-item-a-day task listing in *The 70-Day Rush Hour Challenge*. Entire books are devoted to *How to Organize Your Stuff*, so we certainly cannot cover it all here, but we can pass along a few helpful tips.

I Know It's Here...Somewhere

(Practical Ideas for Getting More Organized)

Although homeschool moms have tasks common to most moms, we also have challenges unique to the 24/7 proximity of our families, the amount of time we may spend in the car (van?) on field trips, and the often-overwhelming amount of paperwork and other “stuff” generated by a houseful of children. Here are a few ideas that moms may find helpful.

Set up a Command Center.

Remember *The Bridge on Star Trek*? This should be an area close to your family's activities in the house, not totally isolated—you want to actually use it!

Have a plan.

Some sort of planner, calendar, and/or note system will be helpful (see Resources). Because our family tends to be predominantly visual, I find it helpful to use lists like our Tidy Room checklist. I also have a weekly chore chart system that incorporates child training with housekeeping.

Store items closest to point of use. In our small mobile home, I don't have space for a silverware drawer, so I stood five pretty blue plastic cups in a nice basket on the counter and put spoons, tablespoons, forks, salad forks, and butter knives in the five cups. The basket sits on the counter in a corner, next to the dish drainer and below the cabinet that contains the dishes and cups. What started as a compensation for too little space turned out to be a wonderfully convenient storage of flatware. When the girls set the table, the silverware is right there with the dishes, one or two steps from the table. When they empty the dish drainer, they don't even have to move to put the silverware away!

Notice if you habitually must go somewhere else to get what you need to accomplish a task. Ask yourself if it can be stored closer at hand, or if it would be practical to have a duplicate item to keep at the task location. Keep stamps and envelopes in the bill-paying area. Store extra staples near the stapler. Ask yourself: Where would I look for this? Where do I most often use this?

Simplify housework.

Clutter is not the first problem (although it surely may seem that way sometimes!) I had to ask the Lord to free me from any bondage to things.

The chore system I mentioned earlier helps me to narrow down my household routine (or “household blessing,” a la *FlyLady!*) to certain tasks. In this way, I accomplish what I have decided is important and am not as easily sidetracked by other “would be nice” items.

Streamline the kitchen.

Gain counter and drawer space by paring down the number of gadgets. Organize the pantry and freezer so you can cook more efficiently (see Leanne Ely's articles on *FlyLady.net*). Get rid of extra cookbooks you never use. Stand those cookie sheets and baking pans and cooling racks in \$4 lid racks from the discount store. Purge the leftover containers and invest \$10 in a matching assortment with lids that stack together, bases that nest, etc. Keep all the mixing items near the baking center, and the pots and pans near the stove. Consider a knife magnet or block for your knives, to free up a drawer. Ikea and others sell small racks that can be set up on the back of the stove to hold salt and pepper, timer, oft-used spices, etc. and can save counter space. Hang a small metal bookstand on two plastic hooks inside a cabinet door, to be quickly retrieved to stand your cookbook on the counter, then swiftly returned to the hooks during after-dinner cleanup.

Make your kitchen kid-friendly.

If you want them to fix their own breakfast, put the cereal or other breakfast items where they can reach them. Put dishes in a cabinet low enough for them to set the table or get their own drinks (unless you are trying to avoid this!).

Speaking of kitchen cabinets: Put your support group phone list in a plastic page protector and tape inside a cabinet door for reference!

Clean out the car.

Take everything out, including the junk behind the seats (hidden in those big pockets) and in the glove box. Put back the essentials into the glove box (registration, insurance card, maybe a map or emergency numbers, flashlight, etc.). Be sure to put a supply of trash bags in the car (our van has a small wastebasket behind the driver's seat) and use/empty the

bags regularly.

Corral those dangerously rolling items in a laundry basket or a cardboard box in the trunk or back of the van. I have a basket for things to be delivered/dropped off, and a basket of things that stay in the car (emergency kit, bottles of water—real dangers when they roll underfoot, library returns file, paper towels, jumper cables, etc.).

Have an Errand Box.

If you tend to forget to return items, or forget to put them in the car, make yourself an Errand Box or Errand Basket. On a shelf near my front door is a basket into which I deposit items to be picked up or returned or dropped off somewhere next time I go out. On the same shelf is a pretty napkin holder that contains the outgoing mail. I usually stash my wallet or purse on the same shelf, so I am reminded to check the basket when I grab my wallet to leave the house; the keys are on a hook nearby.

In another house, we had a small armoire near the front entry in which I housed a basket for things-to-go-out, a shelf for the library basket, and shelf space for my purse and cell phone. A \$5 key rack from the home improvement store held several sets of car keys inside the armoire door (I used 3M removable adhesive to stick the rack up).

Consider taking toys out of kids' rooms and having a toy closet.

I remember a childhood friend whose room was totally devoid of anything but beds and dressers and a comfy rug. When we wanted to play a game or with a toy, we went to the closet in the hall and got the game or toy, took it to the rug, and then put it back in the closet when we were done. Also, when the closet was full, they had “enough” toys.

Another option is to select a handful of toys and books to keep out, then store the rest away. Every six months, trade the toys on display with some of the toys in storage, and it will seem to your child that he has all new playthings!

Color code when possible.

Assign each child a color and buy towels, napkins, cups, etc. in those colors. You will easily know whose towel is on the floor, which basket the math book goes into, which file the papers go in, etc.

Pre-sort laundry. Instead of a jumbo hamper that holds several loads that must be sorted prior to washing, consider a multi-compartment sorter or stacking recycling bins (or separate laundry baskets, if you have the space). Teach the children to put the correct color items in each basket (label lights, darks, colors, or whatever you choose). It will be much simpler to just toss a load into the washer if it is pre-sorted. I went so far as to purchase a white hamper, a black hamper, and a colored (blue) hamper to make the sorting obvious.

Laminate your books and answer keys.

Use clear contact paper to cover paperback books, workbooks, answer keys, etc.; your materials will last longer.

Store magazines upright.

There are some magazines that I feel I must keep for reference, so I store them in plastic or heavy cardboard magazine holders. If those are too spendy, cut a Cheerios box at an angle to accommodate your magazines, booklets, pamphlets, teacher keys, etc.

Appliance manuals and receipts...

...can be stored in plastic page protectors or zipper bags in a binder. Or file warranties for indoor appliances in one file and outdoor in another. Keep receipts or copies of receipts with the manuals for easier warranty service.

Deal with paperwork now instead of later.

Homeschool moms accumulate a phenomenal amount of paper.

Keep track of library books.

Have one location for library books (library basket, shelf, etc.) and remind the children to always return books/videos to that location. Clip a copy of the library book printout or the check-out cards to the basket so you will be sure you have all the books upon your return trip. Because I check out a lot of books at a time (as do most homeschoolers!), I found that I could not always be positive the books were returned unless I made a checklist, which was time consuming for me, and I often found myself presented with a list of books outstanding that I was sure we had turned in (and sure enough, they

were found on the library's shelf!).

The system we found helpful was to carry the books straight from the car to the photocopier at the library. I stand as many books on their spines as I can fit, so the titles and hopefully call numbers fit onto the glass (I have to hold them upright while I leave the cover up, and close my eyes when I push Start). I carry the books straight to the check-in counter from the copier, and I then mark the date and branch location on the photocopy. This gives me a record of all the books returned, and I am 100% sure of what got turned in where. I put this paper in a file that stays in the back of my car. It costs me up to about 50 cents per library visit, but this is considerably less than the cost of a replacement for one book I was sure we turned in.

Have a short-term holding area, if needed.

Picked something up and aren't sure yet where it goes? Have a small short-term holding area (one designated basket or drawer or shelf)—but plan regularly to clear it out.

Of course, it's better to have a place for everything and everything in its place. When you are in a time crunch and want to have the house tidied, it is so much simpler to put things into pre-designated, logical spots than to try to figure out good places to stash them and then just hope you can figure out later where you stuffed them. Again, ask yourself: Where would I look for this later?

Manage your school area.

Keep school tools handy and convenient, in a specific location. In our house, we charged a 25-cent deposit before the scissors, tape, etc. could be removed from Mom's desk to another room. If Mom had to ask for the item to be returned, the deposit was forfeited.

Teach the children to manage their paperwork.

Regularly sit with them and walk them through the purging/organizing process. Video or photograph non-heart-rending projects and keep the picture in a scrapbook or file the tape, then give away the original (Grandma?).

Put books on shelves by categories so you can find what you need when you need it. You can even mark different categories with colored dots on the spines.

Bookshelves are a girl's best friend! Organize your shelves so most-used items are closest at hand, to save you unnecessary movement during the day.

(From *Home Education 101: A Mentoring Program for New Homeschoolers*)



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