

Back-to-School Organization Basics

Getting the family organized for back to school is easy as ABC with these tips and shopping solutions.

By Sarah Stebbins



David Land

← 1 of 12 →

A: Assess Needs

Organizing and shopping strategies for clothes and supplies.

Schedule time with each child to take a wardrobe inventory. Toss damaged goods and decide which wearable items can be passed on to younger siblings or donated to charitable organizations, says professional organizer Debbie Lillard, author of *Absolutely Organize Your Family* (Betterway Home).

Before hitting the stores, make a list of pieces needed and set a budget, suggests organizing pro Stacey Platt, of New York City-based DwellWell. If those over-the-limit boots or jeans are really

must-haves, kids will know in advance that they'll have to save up to buy them.

The great thing about the school's supply list is that it usually details exactly what's needed. The downside: It doesn't remind you about the three calculators your kids already own. To curb unnecessary purchases, Lillard sends her kids on a room-to-room scavenger hunt to see what they can find and check off their lists.

If a supply list isn't digital, Platt recommends using an app, such as Scanner Pro (itunes.apple.com, \$7) or Droid Scan (amazon.com, \$8), to scan the document with a smartphone. This way, if you're out shopping and spot a back-to-school sale, you can quickly verify what you still need.

One item every middle and high school student should have—requested or not—is a good academic planner, says Lillard. Her favorite, Order Out of Chaos (orderoochaos.com, \$18), features large pages for recording assignments and after-school activities. The notebook also has plenty of blank space so kids can fill in free-time pursuits as well as long-range events such as family parties, vacations and weekends away.

B: Bring Order

Ideas for mudroom, pantry and other key spots.

Every home needs a dumping ground. Whether it's a mudroom, entryway or hall closet, the essential components are the same—enough hooks to hold coats and backpacks, racks or trays for shoes, and a bin for each family member to store smaller items, such as iPods, sunglasses and gloves. Professional organizer Ann Sullivan, author of *Organizing for Life: The Kids Room* (Create Space), likes to assign a different-colored bin to each family member. Or, for a more uniform look, she suggests matching containers labeled with kids' names. Lillard also recommends creating "activity bags" for each extracurricular so kids can grab their stuff and go. If there's space, keep the bags in an entry area—otherwise, put in children's bedrooms.

Keep kids' clothes hampers in a user-friendly spot like a corner of their room or the bathroom. To save time on gathering and sorting, install large hampers (try Honey-Can-Do pop-up mesh hamper, amazon.com, \$15) in the laundry room. On wash days, get family members to empty clothes from their individual hampers into the bins.

Streamline the morning bathroom routine by hanging a see-through over-the-door shoe rack to create space for kids' hair tools, lotions and whatever else clutters counters.

Carve out a place for kids to do homework, keeping in mind their study-habit likes and dislikes. A desk next to the bed can provide extra storage as well as double as a nightstand. But if your daughter prefers working on the bed, consider giving her a lap model. For kids who'd rather sit at

the kitchen or dining room table, Sullivan suggests a rolling cart with drawers for materials. When you want to neaten up, it's easy to move it into a corner or closet.

Simplify lunch packing by compiling sandwich ingredients—cold cuts, condiments—and juice boxes in a container that you can quickly pull out of the fridge, says Sullivan. Use another bin for bread and snacks. If you buy, say, pretzels in bulk, empty them into smaller, see-through containers. Once you're ready, take everything out and set up an assembly line. Insulated to-go food containers and reusable sandwich bags streamline the packing routine.

Keep kids from trashing the kitchen by setting up an after-school snack station. Leave a tray on the counter with everything they'll need for a quick bite, such as granola bars and fruit. "This also helps late risers, like my daughter, who eat on the go in the morning," says Lillard.

Store snacks at eye level in cupboards or the fridge so kids can find what they want without rummaging.

Try These Products

All For Color Blooming Bunch Lap Desk, \$24, giftsthatgive.com

Ready-to-Roll Storage Cart in Mini Dot Pool, \$99, pbteen.com

24-Ounce Insulated To-Go Food Container in Lettuce, \$15, aladdin-pmi.com

Sandwich Bag in Mini Dot Black & White, \$8, builtny.com

Cubeicals Fabric Drawer in Ocean Blue, \$8, closetmaid.com

C: Create a Hub

A command center in the kitchen or entryway.

Put a big desk pad calendar next to a large bulletin board. Keep track of each family member's activities with different-colored pens. Tack up school lunch menus, directories, chore charts and anything else you refer to frequently. If you think everyone in the house can commit to entering their own appointments, try a free online calendar, such as the Cozi mobile app (cozi.com). Post a monthly or weekly copy on the board as a visual reminder.

Designate a surface near the bulletin board—a desk, table or countertop directly below is ideal—for handling day-to-day paperwork. Set up a filing system with stacking letter trays where permission slips, school notices, assignment sheets and mail can be stashed. Try to sift through it at the end of each day. Organize paperwork you need to keep throughout the school year—or longer, such as directories and report cards—in a folder for each child, says Lillard.

Set out a basket for keys, loose change and other small items that are unloaded as each family member walks through the door. You may want kids to park phones here, or in a central charging station, during homework time. Lillard also recommends having kids "turn in" their devices at bedtime.

Try These Products

2-Pod Charging Station in Pink, \$8, greatusefulstuff.com

Kate Spade File Folders, \$15/set of 12, nordstrom.com

Circuit Letter Tray in Orange, \$13 each, containerstore.com

Academic Desk Blotter Calendar, \$27, paper-source.com

Originally published in the September 2012 issue of Family Circle magazine.

This piece was accurate at publication time, but all prices, offerings and styles are subject to change.