

Set Up A Homework Station

Mom, professional organizer offers advice

By Maayan Jaffe | Managing Editor
Photos by Justin Toucalas

Cindy Bernstein, owner of Aim 4 Order, is a mother of five children. Most of them are over 18 and already out of the house, but through the years this Pikesville business mom said she learned a thing or two about organization.

"If there is order at home, it is more likely there will be order at school," said Bernstein. "A student has to be able to do his homework, put it in his backpack and get it back to school."

Bernstein said homework time can be one of the most stressful parts of the night, especially when students can't get themselves to focus. With a little organization, the feels the challenge can be lessened.

"Sometimes, children do their homework and it takes every minute from the time they get home until they go to bed. That means there are likely tons of distractions and a chaotic environment. The easier you can make it for them, the better success they have," said Bernstein.

Rule No. 1: Don't require your children to work at a desk in their own room. Bernstein said most children like to be where the action is. Even those who are lucky enough — in her words — to have their own desk and chair often will opt to work in the kitchen or dining room. Accept it, and make it work.

"It can be as simple as clearing out a cabinet and putting the essentials in there — pens, pencils, scissors, glue, a dictionary, calculator, highlighter, ruler and colored pencils," she said. "Have it all there, right next to the table. Whenever a student leaves the homework area, he gets distracted. Keep them focused and sitting down."

If you can't find a cabinet or shelf, Bernstein recommends purchasing a rolling cart, like the Safco Mobile File Cart (available at Staples and on Staples.com.). This can hold supplies and active paperwork and can be moved and put away when the child is done for the evening.

Bernstein also recommends sorting "active papers" from "archival papers." Active papers are those students will need during the school year. Archival papers are those they want to save for reference or as a memory but are unlikely to be needed for actual schoolwork.

"Before the first day of school, go through your children's backpacks from last year and get rid of as much as you can. Anything that seems special, keep it, but put it in a box," said Bernstein.

Bernstein purchased a banker's box for each of her children. She labeled them with the children's names, and each year they stored inactive papers there.

To keep supplies organized, Bernstein recommended containers and Ziploc bags. She noted that using containers with lids are better than without, so that supplies don't get lost or fall.

"You can make the organization process fun. Get colorful boxes. ... Use flower pots and throw tape and glue in there. They can be all different sizes," she said.

As a general rule, Bernstein noted, when organizing, "like goes with like."

"All drawing implements could go in one box. Pens and pencils can go together. Tape and glue, too," she said, cautioning not to "over-container." The more containers, the more room it takes, she said. For items like stacks of loose-leaf paper and folders, a container is likely not needed — and it can make the items too disguised to find them.

Said Bernstein: "Order and structure at home transfers to success in the classroom." J

Cindy Bernstein does personalized consultations to help individuals develop systems that are easy to implement and maintain. Learn more about her business at aim4order.com.



Cindy Bernstein says a desktop file is an excellent way to keep active papers available but organized. Pencil boxes keep writing utensils together and available.



Bernstein recommends purchasing banker's boxes to hold archival papers.