



## How To Manage School Clutter

Art projects, school flyers, dirty gym clothes—keep a handle on all the things your child brings home from school.

BY JUNE ALLAN CORRIGAN

**KIDS CARRY A LOT OF STUFF BACK AND** forth from school each day. Backpacks, gym bags, and lunch boxes that look to have everything contained and under control can catch you off-guard when their contents tumble forth. All at once you're inundated with homework sheets, permission slips, school forms, artwork, dirty socks, and half-eaten sandwiches. You need a foolproof system in place to manage it all. Pronto!

### DISCHARGE AND RELOAD

First of all, it's important to empty out those backpacks, lunch boxes, and gym bags on a daily basis. Teaching your kids to unload right when they get home from school will help manage the flow of stuff going to and fro, says professional organizer Gail Gray, owner of A Fresh Start Professional Organizing in Costa Mesa, Calif. Make sure lunch boxes go to the kitchen to be cleaned and readied for the next day. Have kids dig out dirty gym clothes and toss them in the laundry hamper while at the same time putting fresh replacements in the bag. These are obvious sanitary steps but also a way to get a jump on the next school day.

### CREATE A SYSTEM FOR PAPER

Backpacks deserve special attention. Before your child pulls out a stack of papers and leaves them in a pile on the kitchen table, teach him to separate his homework from all the school communication items (permission slips, calendars, sign-up sheets, etc.). You may have to do this yourself in the case of a really young child, but if you're lucky, the school will send home a folder just once a week that contains everything.

Set up an in/out box for efficient paperwork processing. Kelly McDonnell, a mother of four in Winter Garden, Fla., swears by her system of a standing pile wedged next to a display rack on her kitchen counter and a flat pile nearby. The standing pile is for urgent items with deadlines, such as forms that need to be signed, checks that need to be written,

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and schedules for providing snacks, while the flat pile is for things she's interested in but don't require immediate action. She likes this system of prioritizing paperwork quickly right after school because so often she and her family are right back out the door to other activities. She has a master calendar that she fills in later with dates of events from the standing urgent pile.

## KEEP A MASTER SCHEDULE

Gray suggests posting a master calendar where it can be seen by the whole family. Whether that's the refrigerator, the door to the garage, or a high-traffic hallway, just remember that kids thrive on routine and knowing what to expect. If they know they have practice after school, they won't make other plans with a friend. Similarly, you'll know to have soccer gear washed and ready to go when the calendar says "Game Saturday." If there's a class party, you'll remember to bring the treats...or your kids will remind you! Use a different color of marker for each family member, plus one for all-family activities. For preschoolers, draw pictures or use stickers.

## ASSIGN A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING

Backpacks and gym bags need a home, too. Once emptied and refilled, there should be one place where they stay when not in use. Maybe it's a spot next to your child's bedroom desk, or perhaps it's a bin in the garage. If it's the hall closet or laundry room, keep things tidy by mounting hooks labeled for each child. These should hold their bags and, if necessary, a jacket. If you have the luxury of a mudroom, you might consider installing a locker-type compartment for each child. With an assigned space, Gray says, there's simply no excuse why stuff should end up on the floor, or worse, misplaced. The last thing you want to hear is "but I can't find my..." just as you're rushing out the door.

## FILE OLD HOMEWORK

As the school year wears on, completed homework sheets can start to accumulate in the bottoms of backpacks and on the tops of desks. In the case of younger children, it's certainly not necessary to save all those alphabet or cursive handwriting practice pages. However, you have to be a little more discerning as your child gets into the higher grades. Middle school and high

school students often reference old assignments and use them as study guides. A small accordion file with a slot for each subject is ideal for assignments they want to keep for the term or maybe even the whole year. A real clutter buster for a student with a computer and scanner is to scan key assignments and store them in an electronic desktop file to access later. **1**



## Too Much Artwork?

Young kids bring home so much artwork that it's practically impossible to keep it all. How should you display it, and for how long? How do you decide what to keep for the long term? It's best to have a place of significance for art to hang for a period of time, says professional organizer Gail Gray. She recommends a magnetic board. Children usually love their current creation, making it easy to swap out the old for a new masterpiece.

When determining what to keep and what to toss, be selective. Mom of four Kelly McDonnell stacks plastic storage tubs in her garage, one for each child, and only fills them with items that show growth, like a painting that actually starts to resemble the real thing. Other items that make the cut are questionnaires about themselves

that include a photo; an essay or drawing about family; or something with sentimental value like a Mother's Day card. It's best not to save anything with glitter or glued food such as macaroni or beans. The glue disintegrates over time and you'll only end up with a mess in your storage container. Another idea is to use dividers to separate years and create a timeline.

As your child gets older, you'll find you have less and less to sort and store. The occasional art project from a 5th grader hardly matches up to the daily paintings of a kindergartner. So set your standards early and limit your keepsakes to what an assigned storage container can hold. With these tips in mind, you'll be able to stay on top of the clutter and still have meaningful items for reminiscing in the future.