

A little organization is in order

# Sort things out for school

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If you've ever found yourself filling out a permission slip for your kid while driving him to school, professional organizer Deborah Gussoff has some suggestions that might make the school year easier and safer for both of you.

Gussoff, who 14 years ago started the Montclair company In Order, is a member of the National Association of Professional Organizers, a 4,000-member organization dedicated to developing the professional organizing industry. More importantly, she's a mom in the trenches with two daughters, ages 13 and 17.

Gussoff remembers being the naturally orderly daughter of a mom who was "a terminal pack rat and a hoarder."

"This was my way of rebelling," Gussoff jokes about her people-helping pursuits, which include working with students to help create and maintain tidy study areas and systems that make it easier to do well in school.

She shares a few of her tips with us this week on ways to ease the morning rush and stay ready for school.

**Q What is involved in your work with children?**

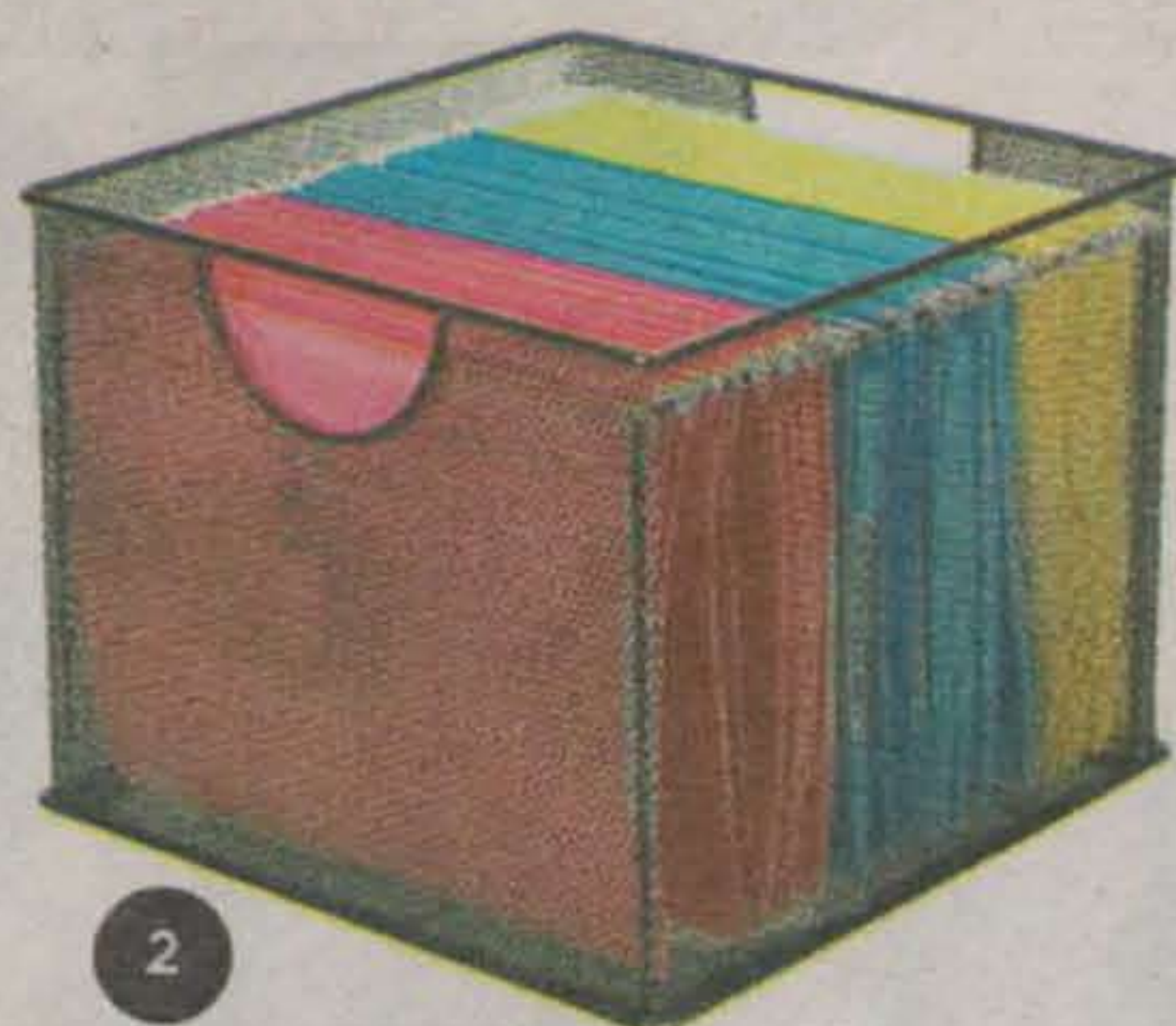
**A** I have helped children organize their desk areas at home. I've helped kids organize their bedroom, dealing with everything from their books and clothes to toys. I've also worked with children on time management, which is particularly important for kids in the middle school and high school — years when they have so much that they are balancing. I have worked with kids in elementary school as well.

**Q How do you help?**

**A** I tell people I can work



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with their child — or their spouse — because there is no baggage.

If you and your child have been butting heads over the fact that he is doing his homework but it's not getting turned in because he can't find it, I can work with him to set up a system that will work for that particular child. When mom says it, it's mom bugging me again. If this woman says it who I've never seen before, maybe she knows what she is talking about.

**Q How does being more organized help students?**

**A** It reduces their stress, first of all, so they can focus better. It also lets them spend the extra time doing things they would rather be doing than having to repeat something they've already done because

they can't find it.

One of the things kids need to learn is that the backpack is not storage space. It's for transporting things from home to school and from school to home. So it's important to teach kids that they don't need to carry everything every day.

Parents can make it easier by having duplicates of the things they need.

What I've done with my high school child is to buy a duplicate set of books to keep at home. I decided I would either pay for an orthopedist or I would pay for a duplicate set of books.

If you go onto Barnes and Noble.com, there is a link for text books. Enter the ISBN number so you get the right version.

Also, should (my daughter) ever be sick, there's no excuse not to do homework because the books are already there. The next year you can sell them to somebody younger.

**Q How long does it generally take for your work to make a difference?**

**A** It could be one session or two sessions. (She charges \$100 to \$150 per hour.)

Generally with kids, their physical environment is so much smaller in terms of getting it set up and organizing a system that it's not such a big time commitment. Any system has to be maintained, whether it's with a child or an adult. So I will give people things they should do to make sure the system is being maintained — making sure there is nothing on the floor, that they take a couple of minutes to take those extraneous papers and put them in the recycling bin.

Some kids and some families can do that. Other people will want me to come back on a periodic basis to just spend an hour and make sure everything is still moving forward the way it should be.

**Q With your expert organizational skills, do you still have to harass your girls to get things done?**

**A** Isn't that part of the mother's job description? (laughter) I think it's just part of a mom to say, "Do you have your lunch? Did you get your backpack?" I think the challenge as parents is to make it as easy as possible for them while still giving them independence.

**DEBORAH GUSOFF'S SEVEN TIPS FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS**

1. Rather than scrambling to find lunch money every day, write a check to your school for the week or the month.
2. Do five days ahead. "Some moms will take five bags at the beginning of the week and put in a snack and a juice box so all she would have to put in each day is a sandwich." "Have five outfits hanging on hangers. I had a boss who would just buy outfits right off the mannequin, with accessories and everything, and she would just hang them that way in her closet." If you put your clothes out the night before, it also gives you the opportunity to make sure the shirt you're planning to wear doesn't have a stain."
3. Post a schedule. "If you have a schedule of all the activities for the week posted in the kitchen, it helps you know what your kids need to take along or wear. Use one calendar system for everything — both school and non-school activities. When you use more than one, it's very easy to overlook something or double book your time. A calendar is also very useful for middle school and high school for plotting out long term assignments."
4. Allow more time. "If you know it normally takes you an hour in the morning, set your alarm for 15 minutes earlier so if the dog runs out of the house and you have to go chase him, or you get a phone call, or the outfit gets chocolate milk spilled on it, you have an extra 15 minutes and you are not in crisis-panic mode."
5. "Have a launch pad near the door. Make sure the backpack and everything you need is in this launch pad area so you can grab it when you are ready to leave."
6. Establish an "in box." Make it either a physical box or a place where the child knows to put anything that mom or dad needs to see that evening.
7. Always have adequate supplies on hand so you are not running out the night before a project is due to get glue sticks. When you buy school supplies, buy extra. And make sure you have extra binder clips, ink cartridges for the printer, poster board, etc.

1. Professional organizer Deborah Gussoff says organizational products can make a difference. 2. A file box, \$15.98 at [www.staples.com](http://www.staples.com), can lighten the backpack load. 3. Stackable storage drawers create a place for school supplies. \$6.99 for small or \$14.99 for large drawers at the **Container Store** and [www.containerstore.com](http://www.containerstore.com). 4. Whitney's Design's underbed bag is \$12.99 at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).