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## Organizational Skills for Visual-Spatial Learners

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Most, if not all, visual-spatial learners (VSLs) are accused of being hopelessly unorganized. However, it has been my experience that these right-hemispheric learners (think “absent-minded professors”) truly can find a needle in a haystack. My son, Matt, for example, whose room on any given day may look as though multiple tornadoes have hit, never ceases to amaze me in his ability to locate just the perfect LEGO™ piece he was searching for.



Illustrated by Buck Jones, 2002. Do not use without permission.

It is important to note in the illustration above that, as long as each person is capable of finding precisely what he or she needs, in a reasonable amount of time, neither one’s method of organization is better than the other’s. This is an area where, “to each his own” is the rule. If someone (likely a teacher or parent) were to force the child on the right to “organize” the way the child on the left has done, he would likely never find another document again. His new system, or structure, of organization would be completely foreign to him and he would not be able to imagine, or *see*, where his belongings were.

Organization for many VSLs is a stumbling block. If your visual-spatial students find that they are losing important paperwork (like homework!), or toys or money, they need to start developing and implementing some system of organization. The new method must be their own, though. It simply will not work to try to become organized under somebody else’s system. If you think green folders are appropriate for all science work, for example, but green is meaningless to your students in connecting papers to science, then they can’t use that system. They must create their own meaningful strategies that they can understand and remember. Here’s how to help get them started:

Encourage parents to take their kids to visit office supply stores and other places that carry a variety of products designed to help with organization. Color-coded envelopes, files and pocket folders are perfect for storing specific papers. Colored index cards are a great tool for note taking, and the use of a Day-Timer or Palm Pilot to record due dates and appointments are all tools available for the visual-spatial learner. Do you ever wonder why so many organizational products have come on the market in recent years? These must be the inventions of the visual-spatial among us to help themselves and others like them.

Linda Leviton, a member of the Visual-Spatial Resource Access team and a visual-spatial learner herself, writes:

VSLs are either horizontal or vertical organizers...if they are horizontal, they need a long table (preferably not deep) to put out (and leave out) works in process. If they are vertical, they need places to create stacks. I bought myself one of those paper sorters with cubbies and have it right next to my computer (with labels for each section) and that's how I do it. (L. Leviton, personal communication, May 31, 2004)

When we homeschooled, each of my children used a Teacher's Planner to record their daily assignments. In fact, sometimes homework from different subjects was recorded in different colors. There are several varieties of planners available, including ones that show a week-at-a-glance or a month-at-a-glance. You can find them at local teachers' supply stores. Encourage your students to choose one that offers plenty of room to write or draw important notes about due dates, expectations, assignment details, and other appointments. We used these planners as checklists, too, which added to my children's sense of accomplishment as they crossed off each assignment. My youngest is now in middle school and such a Planner was provided for him!

Linda Leviton also advised:

As for schoolwork, I have one word for you...pockets. Forget binders and putting holes in things. They need something they can shove papers into, and if you color code the pockets you have a better chance of the right paper getting into the right pocket. My preference is a folder with each class having its own colored pockets (one in front and one on back)...front is for current work or something to be turned in, back is for reference or past work. Just don't expect them to punch holes or get papers in sections that involve opening or closing anything; stuffing is what they do best! (L. Leviton, personal communication, May 31, 2004)

Matt's personal method for ensuring that he remembers to take his homework folder, lunchbox and water bottle to school every day is to pile them all up at his place on the kitchen table. Then, when he finishes breakfast, he takes it all immediately to the car. The few times he has left one of those items somewhere other than the kitchen table, they didn't make it to school. Many adults have to leave their car keys in the same place, or they cannot locate them. Teach your students these kinds of processes to help stay organized.

A large calendar for recording the class's schedule is helpful, too. Use it to show everyone's commitments from school days off to important due dates to tests and long-term assignments. I've found that encouraging my kids to record the due dates for assignments three to four days prior to the actual due date has really helped avoid last minute all-nighters. The extra built-in time allows room for editing, project revisions, etc.

and a more relaxed approach to the deadline. Having a master calendar also allows visual-spatial learners (notoriously known for having tremendous sense of space but lacking a sense of time) to see how long until holidays, the last day of school, their birthday or other events they are anticipating.

Teach your students to use the computer to help get organized! There are a number of programs that include calendars, ways to notify them of due dates (in advance), and they can create files of notes about certain assignments. They will likely be using and relying on a personal computer all the rest of their lives. Introduce them to computer products that are available to help them in organizing their schoolwork and home life.

“A place for everything and everything in its place”—not an easy trick for visual-spatial kids, but a technique that will last them a lifetime. We have a small bookshelf set aside just for library books so when the due date comes, we’re not scrambling to find them. When I work with parents, teachers and kids, I ask them to consider mutual understanding. Just as the home or classroom needs some areas to be shared by all and kept in an orderly fashion, so too does the visual-spatial child need some area to call their own and keep in a manner that suits them best, even if it looks cluttered to the rest of us. As long as the student can find his or her belongings in a reasonable timeframe, they are organized. Try to dedicate some part of the room (their desk or cubby area?) to allow them to “organize” in their manner and in return, they keep the common areas organized the way you need them.

Advanced preparation is critical. Encourage your students to pack backpacks and lunchboxes the night before. Sometimes, we even load the car up the night before to try to eliminate morning hassles. Once a subject has been completed in the classroom, have your students immediately pack up what needs to go home and put away what stays in the classroom. Don’t wait until the end of the day and expect that they’ll remember what was assigned four hours ago—the visual-spatial learner just can’t always do that.

With a bit of practice and trial-and-error and working together with the student’s parents to see what works and what doesn’t, your visual-spatial students can probably get themselves organized and stay that way!

**Alexandra “Allie” Golon** is Director of the Visual-Spatial Resource, a subsidiary of the Institute for the Study of Advanced Development, in Denver, Colorado and Marketing Director for the Gifted Development Center. As a founding member of the Visual-Spatial Resource Access Team, a former G/T teacher and homeschooling parent to two exceptionally gifted visual-spatial learners, Allie brings a wealth of experience to her books, *Raising Topsy-Turvy Kids: Successfully Parenting Your Visual-Spatial Child* and, *If You Could See the Way I Think: A Handbook for Visual-Spatial Kids*. Her upcoming release, *The Visual-Spatial Classroom: Differentiation Strategies that Engage Every Learner*, is a rich source for classroom strategies that will help every student succeed, regardless of preferred learning style. Allie has been invited to present on parenting and teaching visual-spatial learners at state, national and international venues. She has appeared on talk radio programs and in various print media. Allie can be reached at [alex@visuallspatial.org](mailto:alex@visuallspatial.org) or [agolon@gifteddevelopment.com](mailto:agolon@gifteddevelopment.com). For more information, please visit [www.VisualSpatial.org](http://www.VisualSpatial.org).