CPRI
CHILD & PARENT RESOURCE INSTITUTE

The Brake Shop Clinic
Putting the Brakes on
Organizational Difficulties

Many people with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) have organizational problems. This may be because **their attention was wandering during the instructions, and so they don't know how to start, or didn't hear all of the steps involved** (thanks to 'leaky brakes' over their attention; see "Putting The Brakes on Inattention"). It may also be because, in order to organize your thoughts, ideas, or steps you need to be able to 'put the brakes' on urges to jump into whatever step first comes to mind. Doing that isn't at all easy for some people with ADHD (see "Putting the Brakes on Impulsivity**"). Without brakes over your impulses, you can't pause long enough to decide what the best idea for your plan is, or what the best way is to pull off that plan**.

Neither of these 'leaky brakes' says anything bad about your intentions. Even still, though, these leaky brakes may cause you to start with a bad idea, or start with something that you later have to do over because other steps mess it up, or do it in an order that ends up taking you a lot longer than it should have. That's what happens when a person has missed steps, and/or immediately reacts to each step that occurs to him/her. It doesn't happen because you are stupid or don't care or didn't know better or can't learn. It happens because, without those brakes working properly, your brain is impatient to get it done NOW!

So let's,

Give 'em a Brake

Use of a DayTimer or electronic organizer can be a life-saver – think of it less of a "dumb school expectation", and more of a good tool to help you with your "leaky brakes". Helpful "How-To" hints for the different ways a DayTimer or electronic organizer can make life better for you can be found at **www.lifesatwitch.com/helpful.html**.

It is not surprising that these individuals often lose or forget school items at home, or home items at school! It isn't an example of the child or youth trying to avoid certain work or passive-aggressiveness. It is simply a lack of organization! A strategy to minimize these organizational demands is **to have "doubles" or "extras"** of such things as textbooks and pencil-cases. By having a school-set and a home-set this reduces time wasted looking for lost items, going back for forgotten items, or packing to go from one place to another.

Settle on particular places for certain items to be put (e.g. a set spot for backpacks). Visually label that spot, and create a routine around it (e.g. the backpack goes on the hook by the door as soon as you return home from school, and this picture of a child wearing his backpack is there to remind you of that. There is a cookie sitting on the shelf above the hook waiting for you each day after you have finished). It will likely take time for such routines to BECOME routine…but it will eventually happen if you remain consistent.

Simplify lengthier or more complex new information, **and break new skills down into simpler component parts** (called task analysis) in which earlier steps are mastered prior to progressing to later steps.

Present **clear simple verbal directions about the sequence of steps** in a task, using words like 'first', 'second', 'then', and 'after'; when necessary provide a written copy of instructions or a model for review as required and have the student verbally rehearse the steps.

Recognize that **the individual may have difficulty generalizing learned skills to apparently similar or higher level items requiring the same concepts**. For example, being able to extract information from one graph or table does not necessarily mean that she will have the same success with another more complex item. Similarly, success with double digit multiplication or division does not imply similar success when multiplying or dividing with hundreds. Despite the concepts being the same, the latter places increased demands on organizational and memory skills.

Develop activities in which the individual has **to arrange a series of statements on a topic into an appropriate order** so that they make sense in a paragraph. OR, cut up comic book strips into individual boxes and challenge him/her to figure out what order they go into to make the funny story.

Have the individual keep a journal; **writing accounts of his/her day at school, the past weekend or other events create a primary focus on organization** (sequencing events, word order, etc.). Having her **write step-by-step directions** about a favourite activity (so that others may enjoy it too) also provides practice in sequencing and organizing events.

Have the student **read written work aloud** to help identify problems with organization, and positively reinforce editing for improved 'flow'. Reward completed work that shows good organization **by clearly pointing out what she has done well**.
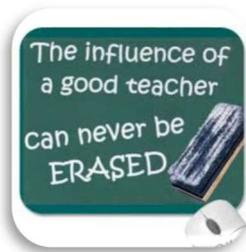
Teacher-Specific:

'Preparation to Learn' – ensure that the student is ready to learn by telling him/her in advance what will be taught, or how new information will be related to previously learned skills (this provides meaning or context to new information).

Use models, templates, key questions, opening sentences and/or vocabulary lists to enhance organization of written work. Ensure (s)he knows that paragraphs, essays, or reports need an introduction, a middle where information is contained and a conclusion or ending. Using multiple modalities to demonstrate the organizations of things is valuable; for example, colour coding for various essay components, or an exercise where students who represent different components of an essay (held on cue cards) figure out amongst themselves in what order they should stand.

As the volume and complexity of information to be organized and remembered continues to increase, **key points can then be highlighted in one colour and secondary points with another colour** – a skill that can take some time to master. This highlighting could be done on computer: certain text-to-speech programs, such as **Kurzweil** (**http://www.kurzweiledu.com**) will allow a user to transform these within-text highlights into an organized, point-form outline with the touch of a button.

Another software program, called **Inspiration** (**www.inspiration.com**), can be used to visually plan, organize, and sequence. It can be helpful for solving certain types of math problems by visually mapping solutions in a diagram format, and then printing off this "recipe" to use when appropriate. It can also be helpful for outlining essays as described above. Using a mouse the student can create visual 'bubbles' in a brainstorming format, then link and arrange these bubbles. Finally, (s)he can add his/her own text, voice notes, or links to files or websites making this a powerful study tool. This assistive software package is available for under $100.

A regular routine can become a memorized habit, thus eliminating the need to independently organize oneself; the individual appears well organized but only because the (s)he is so practiced at this routine!

Finally, parents, be sure you request that any relevant accommodations found on this hand-out are added to a formalized **I**ndividualized **E**ducation **P**lan (IEP). An informal IEP may not be implemented or transitioned, whereas a formal IEP is a legislated process that also includes the **I**dentification **P**lacement and **R**eview **C**ommittee (I.P.R.C.) that **must** be adhered to. Under the Education Act, (Education Act, Regulation 181/98). Any child with identified special needs has access to this process.
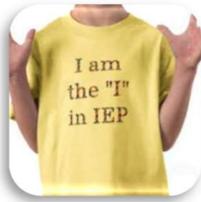
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www.leakybrakes.ca