

Mary Pride's Organizing Secrets

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Edition

You know, I don't think there is such a thing as "homeschool burnout." The feelings of doom & gloom we all struggle with from time to time are due to "homeschool MESS-out"!

It's not Junior's difficulties with fractions or Suzy's bad spelling that get you and me down—it's our *lousy, messy* houses!

Homeschooling means three important things about how your house is organized are going to change:

- (1) Your children will be home *all day long*. This means (a) no time to clean up the mess when they are not there, (b) continual new messes, and (c) the chance of a helping hand with said messes once the oldest is able to understand simple one-word commands.
- (2) You will acquire *many more* toys, educational games, books, &c. than you ever believed possible.
- (3) Your children will also create *many large, bulky* projects—far more than will ever fit in an inconspicuous whatnot cabinet.

First, I'm going to share some general organizing secrets. Then I'll provide more specific advice on storage solutions and planning.

General Organization

When homeschooling, it really helps to have "a place for everything and everything in its place." Here are some items that need separate places of their own:

- ✓ Pens, pencils, erasers, rubber bands, paper clips, etc.: **small desk supplies** should always be kept in, and returned to, one specific location. Either give each child his own supplies and pencil box or train the children to *always* return supplies to a specified central location after using them. This helps you avoid the too-common 10-minute search for a pencil when beginning the home school day. **Bonus Tip:** Buy desk supplies in bulk from *Quill.com*. This office supply company has great discount prices,

very low shipping costs, and speedy delivery. Their catalog is an education in organizing!

- ✓ Paper, glue, pipe cleaners, clay, paint, etc.: **art supplies** need a location that is accessible to you and the older children but *not* to the toddler. A locking steel cabinet works well. **Bonus Tip:** Get your art supplies at discount from *S&S Arts & Crafts*, *www.ssw.com*. Call 1-800-288-9941 for a free catalog (*easier to shop than the online store*).
- ✓ Is there room for you to set up an **art table** (with washable flooring underneath) near your art supply cabinet? Pick an area near a sink, if you can. **Bonus Tip:** Check out your local business furniture dealer for inexpensive adjustable tables and stackable chairs. The kind sold to daycare centers are ideal. We got brand-new child-size stackable chairs for \$12 each, and a full-size adjustable 36" x 96" work table for \$75 from our local store, *National Chair and Furniture Co*, in *St. Louis*. Be sure to ask about special discounts for buying quantities at a time. Great for adding extra space for young visitors at mealtimes!
- ✓ **DVDs belong near the DVD player.** A set of shelves works better than the fancy storage containers, because you can see what's what without digging inside storage drawers.
- ✓ **CDs belong near the player or stereo.** CD/DVD storage racks are a help. I like to organize my educational CDs separately from our music CDs—this helps us find them quicker.
- ✓ **Games** can be hard to store. We put most of ours in wall cabinets (we bought a bunch of these at discount), and those that won't fit in the cabinets go on shelves.
- ✓ Got too many educational **posters** to fit on your walls? Take a hint from the geography charts we all grew up with in school. Attach a number of posters securely along their tops to a thin (ruler-width) board. Attach a stout string to either end of the board and hang all the posters up at once. Then flip the one you want to use to the front!

- ✓ **Time lines** can also be hard to fit on crowded walls. Glue your large timelines onto panels of posterboard. Stand them on edge behind the furniture between history lessons. Or use the excellent "Easy TimeLine Creator" software (only available for Windows) to create and print your own timelines on demand, which you can then store as pages in a binder (<http://www.knowledgequestmaps.com/Easy-Timeline-Creator.html>).
- ✓ **A carrel for each older child** (like those found in university libraries) helps them organize their schoolwork. This creates an area for which the child can be responsible. If you don't have time to make a carrel (a set of shelves that runs on three sides of a work area), you can buy desk-top organizers from Quill that work almost as well. Or get each child his own large stackable plastic tote, or at least his own shelf in the "homeschool" bookcase.
- ✓ **Books** demand serious organization. Here's how we organize ours: (1) Reference books in one area. We keep our favorite encyclopedia set in the living room, and the rest downstairs. (2) Texts and books we're currently using as part of our homeschool program in individual labeled totes, one per child. (3) Fiction in its own area, with grownup fiction higher up and kiddie fiction lower down (so they can put their own books away). (4) Remaining non-fiction can be organized loosely according to the Dewey Decimal scheme: philosophy/theology/religion books together, history books together, geography books together, "issues" and worldview books together, science books together, and so on. If you have a lot of books, this can be a lifesaver!
- ✓ **School papers:** a drawer of a file cabinet can hold these. One hanging file folder (or more) per child per year should do it.
- ✓ **Take photos of big projects**, then pitch or give them away if you don't have enough storage space. Date and label the photos and place them in a homeschool photo album. This is especially important in grades 9-12, when you need to document your student's achievements and

present them attractively along with their college application.

- ✓ **Take videos of activities and projects**, if desired. A video is great documentation. Be sure to make a copy or two for the grandparents! Upload to flickr.com or another photo-sharing site for sharing and archiving.
- ✓ **Online scrapbooking.** Invite your high schooler onto Pinterest.com. Have them "pin" photos and videos of their projects. Now even if your house catches on fire, their accomplishments are safe!

Now, Some REAL Secrets!

It always pays to have the right tool for the right job. Here are some organizing "tools" I have found just *invaluable*:

- ✓ **Uniform-sized large cardboard tote boxes.** These are available from Quill or your local box company. Use as: hope chests, instant room-clean-up boxes ("just toss EVERYTHING on the floor into the box, Danny, and we'll sort it out later"), coffins for used workbooks (you are keeping these in case state authorities ever want to see what you were doing three years ago with this child), storage for out-of-season clothes . . . the list is endless. You want *uniform* (that is, all-the-same-size) boxes because they will stack neatly and be easy to store. You want fairly *large* boxes so they can hold everything up to and including a Christmas tree stand. You want *tote* boxes—e.g., the kind with punch-outs for handles—so you can easily carry them around.

Cardboard totes come in brown or white. If you're stuck with them as part of your home "decor" due to lack of closet space, pick white. They are fairly attractive when neatly stacked.

Tote boxes are also great for implementing Don Aslett's system of clutter reduction. Toss stuff you're throwing out in one box, then drag it to the garage and dump it in your garbage can. Set two more boxes out labeled "Garage Sale" and "Giveaways." The *have* that sale and *give away* those

items to charity! Put stuff you know deep in your heart you don't need, but still can't bear to get rid of, in the last box. Label that one "Emotional Withdrawal" and keep it shut for six months. If after six months you haven't needed anything in that box, toss it.

✓ **Stacking plastic totes**—the rectangular kind—are a simple, neat way to keep a child's books and papers together. Put books spine-side-up, so you can see all the titles without having to dig into the tote. Then your child can store his books and supplies in his room outside of school hours, so your living room isn't a sea of books and papers, and yet all needed school items can be brought to any work area very quickly.

✓ **Instant desks**—I already mentioned these in passing. You doubtlessly already know that you can turn two small two-drawer file cabinets into a nice desk by just adding a 30" or wider board on top. A simple hollow-plywood door makes a *great* instant desk-top. Paint, stain, or varnish if desired.

✓ More about **file cabinets**—a good file cabinet is the *one* storage item (besides bookcases) you absolutely should buy. Get the kind that accommodates hanging file folders. Put in a folder for each child, one for warranties and letters you write to companies about products under warranty, another for your checkbook statements, and so on. What a relief to *know* where everything is—and to have it out of sight!

✓ **Lap desks** are great for kids who like to work "here and there." You can make one by SuperGluing the fabric of your choice to a 14 x 18" (or thereabouts) wipe-off board. Turn over all the edges of the fabric, glue *almost* all the way around, then stuff packing peanuts loosely inside & glue the last bit. For extra fun, let each child pick his/her fabric. Or slip a fold-up whiteboard into his/her computer case.

✓ **Cleaning supplies!** Don Aslett's Cleaning Center (CleanReport.com) is where to find professional-quality supplies and tools,

which take up far less space, far less money, and far less time than the tools and supplies you'll find at the grocery store or Walmart. You can request a print catalog by calling 800-451-2402. **Bonus Tip:** Go to Amazon and order the great "Life After Housework" video and/or "Clean in a Minute" DVD. Show it to your kids. If they are like mine, this will REVOLUTIONIZE their views on cleaning. Don knows how to make cleaning not only fun, but cool!

Planning Ahead

Today's smartphones and tablets, with their "zoom" function, are easier to use than yesteryear's PDAs. But even with a desktop or laptop, somehow it's just easier to see the big picture on actual pages, and you also don't need to boot the computer or application.

✓ **Exception:** Online or software homeschool planner (for keeping really great grades, attendance, and other vital records). Most popular: Homeschool Tracker Plus, Homeschool Helper, and Homeschool Planet. Some free planners also exist: just google "free homeschool planners" to see what's available.

New apps are also coming out from various publishers; google "homeschool planning app" to see what's currently hot.

An **executive planner** is another essential tool. For one thing it helps you stop feeling like "just a housewife"(!). For another, it really *does* help you get organized.

You're already familiar with the "Day-Timer" type of executive planner. This is a *calendar-based* planner. You write on each day's blocks of hours what you plan to do during those days or hours.

The problem with the calendar-based approach is that *you never do what you plan to do when you plan to do it*. This means you constantly have to transfer undone projects from one page to another. Your appointments (which *do* belong on a calendar) get mixed in with your projects (which often *don't*).

Now, for general planning (as opposed to keeping track of homeschool hours), I heartily recommend the "Planner Pad" system

(PlannerPads.com). These planners have a section at the top of each page for writing your projects, a day-by-day section beneath, and an hour-by-hour section under that.

- ✓ **Write projects at the top** and under each list the steps or items needed.
- ✓ **Check each off** as it is done.
- ✓ For more detailed scheduling, use the daily and hourly sections. Appointments go on the "hourly" lines, and my daily To-Do list goes on the "daily" lines.
- ✓ **Bonus:** You no longer need a separate "To Do" list—just check your planner!

The best tip of all: **teach your kids how to keep their own planners!** You'll still need to keep the master homeschool records, but each child can learn to write down their own appointments, assignment due dates, projects, and more. Tweens are ready to do this, and will be very impressed with a real, adult planner of their own. The expense of purchasing a Planner Pad and its yearly refills will be repaid many times when your kids go off to college and have no trouble staying on top of classes and activities right from the start.

Mottos of Experienced Organizers

Looking for a motto for your children to cross-stitch on their samplers? Here's a nice selection of "organizing" mottos, just like Grandma used to make:

- ✓ **Toss, don't file.** (Translation: open the mail next to the wastebasket—and dump *everything* unnecessary into it, right down to the envelopes.)
- ✓ **File, don't pile.** (Translation: if you have to look at it, you'll begin to hate it—and when you really do need it, you won't be able to find it!)
- ✓ **Let George do it.** Teach the children to clean, cook dinner, and change the baby. They need to learn these useful skills, and you need the break!
- ✓ **Always follow up.** Any job worth teaching the kids is worth checking up on.

- ✓ **Work on little projects in your "off" moments** (when you don't feel like tackling any "real" work).
- ✓ **Smash boxes you don't need** and haul 'em to the curb. Nothing fills up a house faster with ratty clutter than a bunch of old empty boxes. (Keep an "X-Acto" knife handy for opening and flattening boxes—saves endless trouble!)
- ✓ **Less clothes, less laundry.** Two play outfits and one nice one is probably *more* than most young children need. Make up for this with lots of undies and socks. Fill up the rest of their laundry bag with pillowcases or sheets when it's time to make up a load.
- ✓ **Less baths, less laundry.** You don't want to overdo this, of course—but if the family can stand bathing every other day instead of daily, you've just saved yourself half your laundry—not to mention half the wear and tear on your clothes.
- ✓ **Library books in the library-book box.** Another great use for plastic totes that I didn't mention was to carry books back from the library—and to keep them together until the next library trip. Saves hours of pawing through bookshelves and searching under the furniture!
- ✓ **The squeegee belongs next to the shower.** The principle here is to keep your cleaning tools next to the place where they are used. (Remember to always put poisonous chemicals in a *high*, preferably *locking*, cupboard.)
- ✓ **A place for everything and everything in its place.** Consider this a lifetime goal—something like climbing Mt. Everest.
- ✓ **We're raising kids, not grass.** An organized house is nice—but even cleanliness has to take second place to godliness. Don't be excessively anxious to avoid messes. Mudpies and sandboxes forever!