
Organizational Skills for Visual-Spatial Learners

Alexandra Shires Golon

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.



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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 children 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 (like a parent’s) system. If you think green folders are appropriate for all science work, for example, but green is meaningless to your children 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:

Be sure 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 children 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.

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.

Another tip for getting visual-spatial kids organized and helping them stay that way is to try to maintain a consistent schedule from week to week. I know it's really

tough these days with so many competing schedules in a family and extracurricular activities to choose from, but consistency should help your family get and stay organized. Knowing that every Tuesday afternoon they have sports practice or that every Friday afternoon a lesson with a musical instrument, followed by homework, chores, dinner, TV or computer time, may help you plan your day accordingly and find time for all you need to do.

A large calendar for recording each family member's schedule is helpful, too. Use it to show everyone's commitments from sports practices to work schedules, field trip days to long-term assignments, holidays and other days off. 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 Christmas, the last day of school, their birthday or other events they are anticipating.

Teach your kids 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.

There are certain traps for visual-spatial kids, traps their brains love to get ensnared in almost unwillingly. The traps, specifically, are the computer and television. Because of the use of visual images, the right hemisphere is highly attracted (some might argue *addicted?*) to these boxes of entertainment. Consider creating a specific time during the day or week for computer and television use. If this is built into the family schedule, it's easier to understand why mom is enforcing the homework hour at a certain time, and not allowing procrastination, or distraction of the TV or computer, to fester into an argument. We use a timer in our house to eliminate conflicts about what time the computer game or TV show started. The timer is not arbitrary. The bell rings, the turn is over.

"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. I seldom lose my car keys because they go in the exact same place every time I return home. We have a small bookshelf set aside just for library books so when the due date comes, we're not scrambling to find them. I do believe it's important for kids to have their bedrooms kept the way they would like them, but they must be able to locate their clothing, sports equipment and other items in a reasonable amount of time. In our home, we also insist on no food in the bedroom (yuck!) and that there be a clear path from the door to the bedside in case we have to go to them in the night—there have been too many episodes of bare feet on toys to count! Inexpensive containers, even shoeboxes and plastic food tubs, make great sorting accessories for small toys. We maintain an entire closet exclusively for construction toys.

Advanced preparation is critical. Have your kids pack backpacks and lunchboxes the night before. Sometimes, we even load the car up the night before to try to eliminate morning hassles. Clothing for the next day should be selected the night before, Matt lays his out on the end of his bed. Where we live the weather changes frequently and without notice so we keep the car prepared with extra light jackets, sometimes a complete change of clothing and, *always*, snacks.

With a bit of practice and trial-and-error to see what works and what doesn't, your visual-spatial children 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. 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* which has also been used by teachers as a rich source for classroom strategies. Allie has been invited to present on parenting and teaching visual-spatial learners and on homeschooling issues at state, national and international venues. She has counseled dozens of families regarding harmoniously parenting visual-spatial learners as well as on various homeschooling issues, and has appeared on talk radio programs and in various print media. Allie can be reached at alex@visualspatial.org.

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