

**Enabling
Disorganized
Students
to Succeed**

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Enabling Disorganized Students to Succeed

1. The school day is a constant procession of varied activities requiring frequent transitions. "Turn in your papers, put the science book away, and get out this week's vocabulary worksheet" is a simple request which poses no problem for most students. For the right-brain child, each task shift provides a new opportunity for the mind to drift. Long after the new assignment has been given and the rest of the class has settled down to work, the right-brain child can be found staring off into space--without ever having gotten out the necessary materials.

It's not a matter of not doing good work. If left to their own devices, right-brain students don't do any work. They never get started.

To think about When do you lose them? Think about your own students and what's going on when they quit paying attention entirely. When everybody else gets down to work, what do these students end up doing?

2. Traditional methods of dealing with this difficulty can stimulate the student into action, but they rarely keep the situation from recurring. Instead of producing any lasting change in the child's behavior pattern, the youngster learns to wait for others to *force* him into motion. He doesn't learn techniques for self-monitoring or self-discipline. He has little chance to develop organizational skills, initiative, or independence.

Both student and teacher are damaged by continual conflict. The teacher's attitude of patient optimism is adversely affected. And the youngster comes to view authority figures as enemies.

To think about Give examples of the kinds of actions **you've taken in** the past in your attempts to get disorganized students to move smoothly through routine transitions.

3. The standard corrective measures can make matters worse. Many of them deprive the student of any opportunity for real success with the work assigned. Removing the child from the classroom can solve the problem, provided the alternative location is quiet and well supervised. That is rarely the case in the cloakrooms, corridors, back corners, and office spaces that are readily available in today's schools.

Sometimes, in an attempt to force a pupil to get his work done, teachers unintentionally reward him for being nonproductive in the normal schoolroom setting. Teachers **should** abandon any efficiency-enhancing techniques that allow the youngster to get out of doing his work and have a great time while he's not doing that work.

To think about What kinds of things have you tried as punishments for nonproductivity in these students? Did your actions really punish the child? Did they get him to **produce** satisfactory work? Were they also punishment for you?

4. Truly effective solutions come from recognizing the root of the problem and making adjustments there.

Right-brain children are dreamers. That can't be changed. But it is possible to avoid or alter situations that send them off into the clouds.

A right-brain child almost always has trouble shifting gears and getting started on a new activity. A large part of this difficulty can be attributed to the fact that he is so disorganized. He doesn't get his book out because he can't find it. Or, in the process of looking for it, he discovers some long-forgotten treasure buried at the bottom of his desk.

Every time a right-brain child looks into his desk, it invites him into NeverNeverLand

To think about Describe the inside of the desk or locker of your favorite right-brain child.

5. Many problems can be solved by keeping the student out of his desk or locker. His rummaging time can be limited to a five-minute period first thing every morning. Within that allotted interval he must get out everything he'll need for the entire day. (A schedule and list of daily supplies should be taped close at hand for easy reference.)

Sometimes it's best to have the child keep his books, notebooks, and major supplies in plain view on a shelf or cabinet within easy reach. This eliminates the need for desk digging entirely.

In extreme cases, a teacher can keep custody of all his materials. That sounds impractical, but it's actually more efficient than the repeated confrontations that develop when disorganization becomes a chronic problem with a particular student.

To think What other ways can you think of for limiting or controlling "rummaging time"?

6. Smart teachers do not allow a right-brain child to take textbooks out of the classroom. They see that he has duplicate copies at home for use on homework and projects

It is also wise to monitor the student's inventory of school supplies so that pencil and paper are always available for use in class. Ideally, the pupil provides these materials and always has them with him

Even with careful controls, a back-up system will be necessary. An old coffee can full of pencil stubs will usually suffice for emergency needs. No matter what measures have to be taken, make sure a right-brain child never has to leave the room to go in search of supplies.

To think about How much time is taken out from your average day to deal with organization problems like the ones described here?

7. Notebooks are a special source of difficulty. Unless some kind of system is forced upon him, the right-brain student will do his English assignment in his science notebook, leave worksheets at home on the dining table, and never have whatever he needs with him in class.

A notebook control system will enable disorganized students to be properly prepared for class most of the time. The basics of such a system are outlined below.

- a. For each subject, there is a separate spiral notebook with pockets for storing loose papers. Each subject has a notebook of a different color. For severely disorganized types, it is best if this notebook never leaves the schoolroom.
- b. Two pencils are kept in the notebook's storage

compartments. As they wear out or disappear, they are replaced immediately.

- c. A calendar and a schedule are taped to the inside of the front cover of this notebook. On these the student will keep track of the regular routine as well as due dates for special assignments.
- d. A very small spiral notebook is to be “on the student” at all times. In it he records his assignments and writes down reminders about the things he’s likely to forget. As one of the world’s absent-minded types, he needs to be taught how to compensate for his unreliable memory.
- e. The student *carries* a loose-leaf binder from class to class. He also takes it home every night. It contains the spiral notebooks for each of his classes. It also provides a safe place for transporting papers, assures him of a steady supply of fresh paper, and gives him a place to store two more pencils. A calendar taped to the inside of the back cover helps him keep track of due dates for projects, book reports, and other long-range assignments.
- f. Other supplies that are absolutely essential (rules, erasers, ball-point pens, a checking pencil, etc.) are kept in a zippered plastic pocket permanently fastened inside the loose-leaf binder.

If these rules are strictly enforced during the first part of the school year, most problems with disorganized students can be avoided entirely. With those few truly scatter-brained youngsters who are totally resistant to

developing more orderly habits, teachers will have to enforce organization rules for the whole year. That sounds like a lot of work until the alternatives are considered.

The notebook control system does not require close cooperation between home and school. A teacher can use it without the help of parents. The family can set it up without involving the school. Either way, at least six weeks of very close monitoring is required to help the student develop the habit of using the system. During this break-ill period, the entire notebook must be checked daily, night and morning. At this time, missing items should be replaced, inaccurate notations corrected, and all important messages made current.

Checks on a calendar in connection with some system of rewards can supply the motivation needed to get the student cooperatively involved. It also helps if the youngster builds the notebook himself and adds personal touches in accord with his own tastes and interests. Stickers, art work, monograms, and slogans can convert a distasteful form of discipline into an attractive personal possession.

Be sure every piece of the notebook is clearly labeled with the student's name, address, phone number, school, teacher's name, and grade. If misplaced, easily identified materials are likely to be returned.

Children who are highly resistant to setting up such a materials control system are usually the ones who need it most. If it is imposed by the authority in charge, designed by the child, and monitored closely, with an enforcement system based on positive rewards, it will lead almost all students to develop the desired new organizational habits without six to eight weeks.

If very active supervision is not available for the first few weeks of this materials control system, it should not be started. This program can produce the desired be-

havior changes only if (1) the student is provided with the necessary materials, and (2) he or she is systematically taught *how* to use them.

To think about What other items might be included to make this notebook control system even more effective? How could the method be personalized to fit specific classes or special needs? Explain the importance of overcoming the right-brain student's tendency to be disorganized. Give examples from your own experience to demonstrate the truth of the following statement:

Until you get the student in his seat
with his materials in his hands
and in the right mood to do some work
you can't teach him anything
no matter how many special techniques you know.

8. The right-brain child is also disorganized about time. He doesn't plan the use of his time. He sets no limits, establishes no priorities. When launching into an activity he has no schedule in mind. He doesn't seem to feel any internal pressure to get started or keep going. Even when the task is something in which he is passionately interested, he seldom has a burning desire to get it finished.

This pattern rarely changes unless someone catches the child at an early age and actually teaches him how to organize his time. Left with his inefficiency uncorrected, the right-brain individual develops deep guilt feelings about his lack of productivity. He usually grows so sensitive about the problem that he becomes hostile and defensive when pressured or criticized for being disorganized.

This trait can cause serious difficulties for the right brain adult. Being chronically late for everything from church to dinner parties to business meetings can—and usually does—adversely affect both business and personal relationships. Employers are not patient with workers who fail to bring tasks to completion. Spouses become irate when promised projects never get started.

To think about Do these traits adequately describe the right-brain children you have in your class? Be sure to notice the words *guilt* and *hostile* and *defensive* in the passage above. Disorganized students have a lot of negative feelings about their tendencies to be unproductive. Have you ever had a student get downright huffy when challenged on this issue? Describe a situation you have seen in which a pupil's feelings about being so disorganized have had a devastating effect on his attitude.

9. A student can be taught to organize activities by dividing work into manageable chunks. A simple outline of the following five-step method should be written on a file card and taped to the top of the pupil's desk to help him remember each phase of the process.

a. **GATHER ALL MATERIALS**

Get out everything that will be needed to finish the project at hand. Keep at it until everything is ready.

To think about This really does literally mean all materials. This is the time for finding the ruler, sharpening the pencil, and truly getting ready. Since this stage is fraught with peril, teachers need to monitor this activity closely. This is not the time for going to the bathroom or

getting a drink of water. If such personal time becomes necessary, it should be put off until step c if at all possible. During the process of gathering materials, the student must keep his attention focused on just that one thing. No matter what distractions he encounters, he must put them off until later and just stick with getting ready. (Students can usually do this for short, intensive bursts as required here.)

b. **DIVIDE ASSIGNMENT INTO PARTS**

For example, reading a four-page history assignment and answering six questions at the end of the chapter could be broken into four tasks--read two pages, read two pages, answer three questions, answer three questions--with a break between each of the segments.

To think about Dividing the work into manageable chunks is the same as drawing up a battle plan. The student should be encouraged to take this step very seriously. He should be allowed to mark off chunks of material in his book or even be told to jot down his plan of attack right on the top of the paper on which he's going to do his work. Think of ways children could record their plans of action so they are visible and useful as guidelines and tangible reminders of the goals as they work.

c. **TAKE A SHORT BREAK**

On the desk-top file card, check off the steps just completed. Take three deep breaths. Stretch your arms, shoulders, and neck. Count to thirty while relaxing and looking around the room

To think about Be sure the student notices that at the bottom of the list it says, “No loafing except during breaks.” Teachers need to help children be realistic. We all loaf. What needs to be controlled is when we do it, and for how long. This step is designed to teach the student to study successfully despite his very short attention span. No matter how hard he tries, he will probably think in short bursts for the rest of this life. He can be productive in spite of that pattern if he masters some techniques that lead him to get back to work every time he loses his concentration. These frequent, short, controlled breaks provide practice that should lead to mastery of that process. It doesn’t matter exactly what the child does during his break, so long as (1) he removes his attention from his work, (2) he does not disrupt the rest of the class in any way, (3) he has a way of keeping the break brief, and (4) he gets right back to work at the end of his minute. He must be able to accomplish all four of these elements on his own. Once the child has had a few weeks to practice and settle into the pattern, the teacher shouldn’t have to monitor the child’s study-break-study routine.

d. **GO BACK TO WORK**

Complete work on the next part of the assignment. Concentrate on the work at hand.

e. **ALTERNATE BETWEEN WORK
AND BREAKS**

Repeat this process until the entire assignment has been completed. Once a step is started, complete that part before doing anything else. Don’t go to the bathroom, get a drink, sharpen a pencil. Except for an emergency, keep working. Stay in control while relaxing. Don’t let

yourself drift off into daydreams. Don't start some other activity.

NO LOAFING EXCEPT DURING BREAKS.

To think about For the disorganized student, this is the hardest part of the technique. He is not accustomed to controlling his mind. He doesn't realize it when his thoughts drift off. He doesn't decide to sit there and just stare out the window. Something draws his attention to the window, and he just never pulls it back to what he's supposed to be doing. It has never occurred to him that he can look out on the playground for a minute and then return to his classwork. His attention tends to get captured by the strongest stimulus in the environment and get stuck there. Unless taught otherwise, this will become his lifelong pattern. What is life like for adults who have trouble concentrating? What would college be like for a person who cannot keep his attention focused when he needs to? What other aspects of life would be difficult for such a person?

10. Some students do better with an organizational plan based on time limits. To switch to this alternate technique, steps a through e remain the same, except that a fixed time limit is divided into equal chunks of work time and breaks. For example, reading four pages of history, plus answering six questions at the end of the chapter could be allotted a total of forty-two minutes, divided into seven segments of five minutes of work time alternating with one minute of break time.

When shifting to the timed version of this organizational method, it is up to the student to decide on a way to keep track of passing minutes. He should be allowed to use any type of watch, clock or timer that he supplies

(provided, of course, that it does not disturb anyone in the room). Hourglasses can be useful; silent types of cooking timers are very effective.

A small, portable radio with a headset provides an especially creative timing device. A student who is listening to the radio can study during music or talking and take breaks at the commercials. The TV offers the same opportunity. (Many excellent students actually find it helpful to study with the sound of a radio or television in the background.)

No matter what the time-keeping method, breaks should be no less than one minute and no more than three.

Other than the above adjustments, the five steps for getting it together described in number seven remain the same.

Always emphasize: No loafing except during breaks.

To think about Since right-brain people have no concept of time and often have difficulty dealing with clocks and watches, an organizational technique based on time limits is not appropriate for many of them. Visual ways of showing the **passing** time can be very helpful, particularly with young children. Hourglasses and cooking timers that count off the minutes right in plain view can be effective at all ages.

Notes: