

# Get Smart: Chaos vs. Control

Robert A. Horak Jr., Ph.D.

*Guidance and Counseling*

As a parent, do you catch yourself picking up after your children or maybe hounding them to clean up their rooms? Have you ever found yourself speechless after looking inside your child's backpack or closet? Believe it or not, when asked what kinds of things IS/MS students wanted to learn this year at Heathwood Hall, some students actually wrote down (yes, we have it in writing) organizational skills.

Now, how should parents and educators view this apparent dilemma where students want one thing, yet do another? I think it may be good to recognize that keeping organized, whether it is with regard to time, materials or space, requires our constant attention. Indeed, there is a good reason for this. It is the second law of thermodynamics. This law states that the natural processes go in a direction that increases the total entropy of the universe. Entropy is the tendency of systems to move toward greater confusion and disorder as time passes. Borrowing an example from Stephen Hawking, the odds of a group of molecules gathering together to form your coffee cup are much smaller than the odds of your coffee cup changing into a bunch of small pieces after falling from your desk top. Or a cube of sugar dissolved in coffee does not naturally reassemble as a cube. Simply put, odds favor randomness rather than order.

Unfortunately, humans prefer order to disorder. Order helps us manage our time better, makes our world more predictable, and keeps us safer. Can you imagine the problems that could arise from storing all of your solvents in unmarked random containers? How about shopping at a grocery store where all the items are in one big pile? Or what about living in a city with no traffic rules?

So, how can adults help young folks develop their organizational skills? Probably the best thing to do is to model the behavior that you want your child to imitate. However, let's set that rule aside for now. I think that there are some hidden aspects of organization that we need to uncover. Consider what we need to do to bring some organization to our own environment. We need to have some sort of system. Whether it is the garage, kitchen, bedroom, book bag or office, the planner needs to *think* about how things are and how they are used. Based on our needs and how things function, we come up with rules that we hope will help us control our world. Many times this may happen automatically. "This pan is heavy so I don't want it at the back of the cupboard. This gas is flammable so I need to keep it away from heat sources. This is something that I use often so I need to have it accessible. This is pretty so I want it to be visible. This is dangerous so..." As you can see, advanced thinking skills such as ordering, grouping and comparing are essential. Understand that to do this one has to hold *and* manipulate a lot of data in his/her short term or working memory. For example, we may (1) put items such as furniture, clothes, shoes, books, toys, entertainment equipment into groups and subgroups; (2) consider how to best store items (e.g., in baskets, chests or drawers or on shelves, hangars or stands,) and (3) consider the layout of the room (e.g., where the windows, doors, outlets, phone jacks and data ports are) all simultaneously.

How can you help your child reach your expectations about organization? Try to find natural opportunities to "think aloud" so that your child is exposed to your strategies

for organizing things, places and time. Also, you may invite your child to talk about the benefits of having an organized world. Help him identify the tools that adults use to help keep things in order (e.g., calendars, clocks, desks, closets, shelves, computers, tool boxes, book bags, folders, and dividers). Help your child recognize form and structure found in architectural designs, art, music, dance, literature, mathematical formulas, worship services, libraries, games, tools and toys.

Staying organized takes initiative, perseverance, and physical and mental work. Help your child recognize her use of these skills through your comments. The more you label, describe and acknowledge, the more she will understand and accomplish. What's more, by identifying the advantages of being organized, you are providing for your child an intrinsic reward and relieving yourself of the burden of monitoring and evaluating. Good luck with your efforts to keep chaos under control.