

Organisation, Routines and Everyday Life

Practical support for the ordinary tasks that can become unexpectedly hard: getting ready, finding belongings, remembering what comes next and moving through daily routines without constant conflict.

Organisation is not one skill. Getting out of the house, for example, can require time awareness, working memory, sequencing, task initiation, attention shifting, planning and remembering objects that are currently out of sight. A child may understand perfectly well that shoes, water bottle and school bag are needed and still fail to bring all three together at the right moment.

Repeated reminders can eventually make both parent and child feel as though everyday life is a test they keep failing. A more useful approach is to move some of the remembering out of the child's head and into the environment, while gradually building independence at a level they can actually manage.

What looks simple may contain many hidden steps

Everyday difficulty	Possible executive-function demand	Practical support
Getting ready takes forever	Starting, sequencing, time awareness and resisting distractions.	Use a short visible sequence and prepare high-friction items the night before.
Everything gets lost	Working memory and object permanence can make items disappear mentally when they are not visible.	Give important belongings one obvious home near where they are used.
Room becomes chaotic quickly	Sorting, categorising, deciding and maintaining systems may all be demanding.	Use broad, easy categories and open or clearly labelled storage rather than complicated systems.
Forgets PE kit, letters or equipment	Future memory - remembering to do something later - is carrying too much of the load.	Use a launch point by the door, visual reminders and preparation linked to an existing routine.
Needs constant prompting	The routine may still depend on the parent's working memory rather than the child's environment.	Turn repeated spoken prompts into visual cues, alarms, checklists or predictable locations.

Make the environment do more work

A successful system should reduce thinking at the moment the task has to happen. School shoes by the exit, a basket for everything that must leave tomorrow, a visible laundry hamper, hooks at child height, a charger that stays in one place and a simple weekly board can all be more useful than repeatedly asking the child to 'be more organised'.

Simple beats impressive

If a storage system has six categories, lids, hidden drawers and several decisions before an item can be put away, it may look organised but be difficult to maintain. Build systems around the child who actually lives there, not an ideal version of them.

Routines that support rather than control

Routines can reduce decision fatigue and make the next step more predictable, but they need enough flexibility for real family life. The aim is a dependable framework, not a timetable so rigid that one late bus or missing sock collapses the whole morning.

Morning	Keep the sequence short and visible. Reduce optional decisions. Put clothing, bag and essential items where the routine naturally passes them.
After school	Build in arrival and recovery before expecting organisation. Use one landing place for shoes, bag, letters and equipment.
Evening	Link preparation for tomorrow to something already happening: after dinner, before a preferred activity or before the final bedtime wind-down.
Weekly reset	Choose one predictable time to check bags, notices, clothing, activities and the week ahead. Parent and child can do this together before independence grows.

Visual prompts are not 'babyish' if they work

A checklist, photograph, labelled basket, colour cue or phone reminder is an external memory aid. Adults use calendars, navigation apps, alarms and lists for the same reason. Match the format to the child's age and preferences, but do not remove useful support simply because they 'should know by now'.

Build independence by transferring one responsibility at a time

Independence does not usually appear because adults stop helping all at once. Choose one part of a routine the child can begin to own. For example, the adult may still oversee the morning while the child becomes responsible for checking the three-item leaving-the-house list. Once that is stable, another responsibility can be added.

When reminders become arguments

If the parent is repeating the same instruction many times, stop and ask whether the system is asking speech to do a job better handled by the environment. Agree a cue in advance, point to the routine rather than restarting the whole instruction, and reduce unnecessary commentary. This can protect the relationship as well as the task.

Tidying and bedrooms

'Tidy your room' is a large, vague instruction. Try defining the first category: clothes into the basket, rubbish into the bin, books onto the shelf. Work alongside the child initially if needed. A functional room that the child can maintain is a better target than a highly organised room that requires an adult to constantly restore it.

Home and school can share the load

Where organisation is affecting school access, talk with staff about consistent places for equipment, written instructions, duplicate essentials where appropriate, end-of-day checks, homework systems and how information reaches home. Difficulties with organisation should not automatically be treated as carelessness.

Everyday Organisation Plan

Pick one routine that currently creates the most stress. Do not redesign the whole household at once. Use this page to make that one routine easier.

The routine we want to make easier	_____
Where does it usually break down?	_____
What does my child currently have to remember?	_____
What can we move into the environment?	_____
What items need one permanent home?	_____
What visual cue could replace repeated reminders?	_____
What can be prepared earlier?	_____
What is the smallest responsibility my child can own?	_____
What support will the adult still provide?	_____
How will we know the system is helping?	_____
What can we remove or simplify?	_____

Language that supports capability

Try: 'Let's make this easier to remember.' 'Where could this live so you can find it next time?' 'Which part do you want me to help with?' 'Let's only sort the clothes first.' 'The system isn't working yet - that doesn't mean you can't do it.' Language like this keeps the problem outside the child's identity and makes room for practical problem-solving.

A message for parents

If you feel as though you are carrying the whole family's memory, it is understandable that organisation becomes exhausting. The answer is not necessarily more reminders. Often it is fewer decisions, clearer homes for things, visible routines and support that matches the child's current executive-function capacity. Independence can grow from scaffolding; it does not have to begin with its removal.

Further reading and guidance

Useful starting points include NHS information about ADHD, NICE guideline NG87 and ADHD Foundation resources. For executive-function approaches, parents may also find *Smart but Scattered* by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare useful. This resource is educational and does not replace individual medical, psychological, educational or safeguarding advice.

Space to Breathe Therapy

ADHD Parent Support Series - Part 18