

Tutorial: Organization and Organizational Supports

WHAT IS ORGANIZATION?

To be successful in school and in life, people need to be able to organize their things, their activities, their thinking, their writing, and their speaking. For students, organization of things includes keeping school papers in appropriate files/folders, keeping possessions in the cubby or locker in some semblance of order, and ensuring that there is some sensible storage system for clothes, school things, and other items in their room. Organization of activities includes maintaining a schedule and moving easily from activity to activity, following accepted social protocol in activities, like eating out, and organizing study time effectively to get everything done in the allotted time. Organized thinking includes placing ideas together in reasonable systems, being able to break large tasks into smaller tasks that fit together in a logical and reasonable way, solving problems in a step-by-step manner, and the like. Organized writing and speaking includes telling stories and describing events in an organized manner and recognizing the needs of the communication partner. Some individuals are extremely organized thinkers and can live effectively in a world of disorganized things. They don't need things around them to be neatly organized. Others who **are not** organized thinkers may need the things around them to be very well organized.

Cognitive psychologists use terms like “cognitive schema” or “knowledge structure” (organized mental representations within which isolated bits of information or isolated behaviors become integrated and meaningful) to refer to the mental realities that are the basis for virtually all meaningful, successful thinking and behavior in the real world. Cognitive schemas or knowledge structures are the basis for:

1. cognitive processes like remembering (thinking back in time in an organized way), planning (thinking forward in time in an organized way), grouping (putting items together according to salient attributes), sequencing (putting events together as they are organized in time) and other organizational processes;
2. language competence in the domain of organized discourse (e.g., understanding and producing narratives, writing essays, maintaining coherent conversations, and other forms of connected language);
3. activities of daily living like dressing, grooming, and eating;
4. successful social behavior in real-world social contexts.

Typically developing kindergartners have already internalized hundreds of these organizing schemes, which enable them increasingly to think, act, talk, and solve problems in an organized manner. These schemes range from very basic two-part associations that can be acquired in infancy – for example, drop an object; it falls – to complex social scripts – like the things, foods, activities, language, and songs that constitute a typical birthday party. In the latter case, there are many distinct pieces of knowledge that are integrated together to form the child's complex, but organized understanding of a birthday party. And it is this understanding that enables the child to act in a socially successful manner at the parties, to remember events that occurred, and to talk about the party in an organized manner.

Organizational schemas that include people and their activities are called scripts. For example, pieces of knowledge that are brought together to form the eat-at-McDonalds script include places (e.g., the restaurant, the ordering counter, the eating sections, the bathrooms), people and their roles (e.g., customers, clerks, cooks, managers), things (e.g., cooking items, serving items), apparel (e.g., the special clothes that the staff wear), language (e.g., “Would you like fries with that?”), and sequences of activities. By age 5, typically developing children have internalized a large number of these scripts, which help them to behave in an organized way in many places and under many circumstances, to engage in socio-dramatic play, to remember their experiences, and to talk about their experiences in an organized way.

Transition times offer adults opportunities to teach children many new cognitive schemas or knowledge structures. **[See Tutorial on Transition Routines]** When activities end with a review of what the child was trying to accomplish, what the plan was, what he did, and how it turned out, he has an opportunity to solidify that particular activity as a script, but also to internalize one of the most important self-regulation

routines, Goal-Obstacle-Plan-Do-Review. **[See Tutorial on Self-Regulation Routines.]** These important ways of thinking are further reinforced when the next activity begins with a statement of the goal and formulation of a plan. Thus transition routines offer adults an opportunity to teach children how to think in an organized way, how to plan, how to remember, how to talk in an organized way, and how to organize their behavior to achieve their goals in a way that is consistent with the interests of others. When these routines become internalized and habituated -- over time, across settings, and across people in the student's life -- the student can be expected to handle transitions with greater ease and, more important, will be able to think in a more organized manner, with all of the advantages that go with organized thinking.

WHAT ORGANIZATION PROBLEMS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH TBI?

Organizing schemas like scripts, plans, and other mental models are processed and implemented by the frontal lobes. The frontal lobes of the brain are particularly vulnerable to brain injury, and thus, damage to frontal lobes accounts for much of the disorganized behavior of students with brain injury. Children who have been injured at a young age often have mastered very few of these organizing schemes, in part because they need many more learning trials than other children, but even more because adults typically give these children **LESS** rather than more exposure to the organizing schemes. Because of the disability, they may simply have fewer opportunities to experience the events in the world, and thus have less opportunity to form effective schemas. Students who are older at the time of injury have had greater opportunity to master a wide variety of organizational schemes, but may lose these schemes -- or lose access to them -- due to the brain injury.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN THEMES IN INTERVENTION AND SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH ORGANIZATIONAL IMPAIRMENT?

Need for an External Advance Organizer

(Video Illustration of Advance Organizers)

One of the keys to teaching schematic organization or knowledge structures comes from the common sense adage, "If you don't know your way around the territory, you need a map." This certainly applies to physical organization, like getting around cities one has never visited before. It also applies to activities, as anyone will attest who has breathed a sigh of relief seeing a sequence of pictures following the dreaded words, "Some assembly required". The sequence of pictures that guides us through the assembly is like a map through the unfamiliar and complex activity. Similarly, PhD students are grateful for the lengthy detailed outline they are told to follow in writing their dissertation. A PhD dissertation is a large, multifaceted project, and without advance guidance provided by this "map", it can appear overwhelming to the brightest of students.

So a "map" in this broad sense of the term is an advance external organizer that can help with an organizationally complex task. For preschoolers, an organizer map can be as simple as a set of photographs, presented top-down, representing the daily schedule at home or at school. A preschool "map" is also represented by places that dictate specific activities and containers. The art corner is for art activities, the water table is for water play, the dress-up area is for pretend play, the snack table is for snack, cubbies are for my personal things, and so on. Thus more abstract ideas like activities and sequences and categories are "mapped" by physical spaces and containers. When these places are kept distinct, the preschooler is much more likely to behave in an organized manner.

By first grade, the places and photographs that are useful for preschoolers may be replaced by graphic organizers on paper. For example, a student who does not know how to tell or write an organized story will benefit from a chart -- a set of boxes and connecting lines -- that dictates what information to include and in what order. The chart might have three boxes next to each other at the top of the page for characters,

place, and time. These boxes would then be connected by a line to a large box immediately below representing the event that gets the action started, the initiating event. That box leads to the next, representing the characters' responses to that event. Below that would be a box for the characters' plan; then the unfolding action; and finally the resolution or end of the story. With this simple and organized map as a guide, even disorganized students can write well elaborated and well organized stories, which would be impossible without the map.

As the child ages into adolescence, graphic organizers shift to more structured planning tools such as written outlines and day planners with an emphasis on sequencing of events by time. These external organizers become essential in maintaining the organizational flow of day to day events. Most students will continue to need to rely on some sort of external organizer as a compensatory tool for the remainder of their lives.

As with all supports, the goal is to have the map available for as long as it is needed, but then gradually reduce dependence on physical supports as the student internalizes the organizational structure and it becomes a habit. **[See Tutorial on Graphic Organizers]**

Models of Completed Projects

A second critical support for students with organizational weakness is a very clear idea of exactly what they are trying to accomplish. "This is what it will look like when you are done" is guidance that teachers should be in a position to give their students. The model might be as simple as a filled in page of math problems. Or it might be a one page essay with three paragraphs. Or it might be an art project. The key idea is that students who have difficulty imposing organization on their thinking and behavior need a very concrete idea of what the outcome – the product – will look like. This also applies to college students who are always grateful when professors show them what a good essay looks like before asking them to write one of their own.

Advance Rehearsal

Rehearsal is useful as preparation for any difficult or stressful task. In elementary school, the first few weeks of the school year are a time to teach the classroom routines and scripts explicitly and with sufficient repetition so that the students habituate these routines and scripts. Some schools invite middle and high school students in a day early in the fall to walk through their schedule and gain some familiarity with places and routines. Parents often ask their children to practice what they are going to say before going solo to a party or other event. Thus rehearsal is a common sense procedure.

In school settings, it is well to ask students to rehearse transition routines before they are expected to negotiate the transitions on their own. When necessary, use of maps and graphic organizers should be utilized to ease the transition.

Cues and Prompts

Cues and prompts ("coaching") are a common support for all students, particularly those who are likely to get lost and then lose focus within the course of the organizational activity. .

Collaboration

When tasks are organizationally complex, it is useful for teachers or aides to offer their services as collaborators. "Let's get this done together" is a useful starting place. The student can then take over responsibility for more and more components as it becomes possible to do so. This systematic reduction of supports is critical for facilitation of the student's independence.

"This is Hard, I Need Help"

Whether it's a preschooler trying to tie her shoes or a graduate student writing a PhD dissertation, a critical skill when faced with organizationally demanding tasks is to ask for help. Teachers and parents should routinely remind students, "If it gets tough, ask for help." When students gain comfort saying, "This is hard; I need help", they can then be asked to identify why the task is hard, and then request specific types of help: "This is hard for me because; I need this kind of help to get it done....." **(See Tutorial on Self-Regulation Routines)**

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