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Helping teens sort piles of crumpled papers

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NEW YORK — There's a reason why a new book about helping disorganized teenagers was published midway through the school year, rather than in September.

"When you go back to school in September, everything is fresh and everything is new," said Ana Homayoun, author of "That Crumpled Paper Was Due Last Week" (Perigee/Penguin, \$15.95). "But now you've got first-semester grades," and that can be a reality check.

Midwinter is also a good time to establish new habits for what's left of

the school year, and getting a handle on all the crumpled papers lurking in backpacks, folders, desks and elsewhere is an important first step, Homayoun said in an interview.

"We typically recycle a few brown paper bags full of paper in the course of going through their backpacks and organizing their binders for the first time," said Homayoun, founder of Green Ivy Educational Consulting, based in the San Francisco Bay area.

Homayoun says she motivates kids by explaining that once they're organized, "they're going to get their homework done faster, and they'll have more time to do the things they want to do," whether it's music, sports, video games, Facebook or just hanging out with friends. She added that getting organized not only helps kids with school work, but also reduces stress and helps them succeed in other areas as well.

To get maximum cooperation from your teen for the paper-sorting project, schedule a mutually agreeable time a few days ahead. Saturday afternoon is ideal.

Then clear a flat, empty surface for the paper dump. Dining room tables are perfect.

A three-hole punch is crucial to Homayoun's system, along with an inch-thick binder for every subject in school, with tabbed dividers in each notebook for homework, quizzes, notes, etc. Get large envelopes for storing papers from last

semester (one per subject), and have a recycling bin handy for paper that can be thrown away.

Homayoun says the accordion files and pocket folders recommended by many schools don't work for all students. "It overwhelms them," she said. "Kids need to know they have a place for everything."

As you work through the pile, don't berate your child for the quiz with the low grade, the homework that wasn't handed in or the notice you never got. Just punch holes in each sheet, place it in its new home and move on.

"The key is that you go through every piece of paper," she said.

Set a timer and see how much you can do in an hour. Homayoun says she can get through any pile in 90 minutes, but she cautions against spending more than two hours at home on the project.

Some kids may welcome your help, but if your teen wants to tackle the pile alone, Homayoun recommends that you get your own paperwork to organize — taxes, anyone? — and work side by side.

Once the papers are under control and the new organizational system is in place, Homayoun says a few other changes are essential to help your teen work more effectively.

One of the most important things you can do is to create a study space for teens outside their rooms. The dining room, which in many homes is underutilized and is often located away from TVs and computers, may be ideal for studying.

Homework that doesn't require a computer should be done first, Homayoun says, because once kids sit down in front of a screen, hours can be wasted on Facebook, IMs, games and surfing.

She emphasized that parents have no idea how much time kids fritter away when they are in their rooms supposedly doing school work. "Kids are really honest with me," she said. "I'm not there to judge them, so they'll tell me, 'I regularly spend two hours a night just on text messages or I spend five hours on Facebook.'"

With that in mind, designate a "technology box" where cell phones and iPods can be put away until homework is done. Otherwise kids constantly interrupt their concentration to respond to texts and calls. Homayoun said music — unless it's classical — is also distracting.

Also, provide a planner with a weekly grid and enough room so kids can jot down assignments for each class, each day. Some schools hand out planners, but Homayoun says they are often so small that kids can't easily use them, especially kids with large handwriting. She says calendar apps on smart phones are also too small for juggling assignments; kids need to see the big picture of what's due when.

The subtitle of Homayoun's book is "Helping Disorganized and Distracted Boys Succeed in School and Life," but she says some girls need help as well. While Homayoun has observed that teenage girls are often better at multitasking than boys, about a third of the students Green Ivy sees are female.

Regardless of gender, Homayoun has noticed that after the initial paper cleanup, a lot of kids say, "My backpack is so much lighter now!"

She's not sure the crumpled papers weighed all that much, but sorting through the mess "is both a literal and a figurative load off their shoulders."

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