

PLANNING AND ORGANIZATION

What is this developmental skill?

Planning and organization are the abilities to identify a goal, determine the steps needed to achieve it, and manage the materials, time, and effort required along the way. These skills help children prepare for activities, complete school assignments, keep track of belongings, and break large tasks into manageable parts. Planning answers the question, *"What do I need to do?"* while organization answers, *"How do I keep everything in order?"*

How does this normally develop?

Planning and organization emerge gradually throughout childhood as executive functioning matures. Young children rely almost entirely on adults to organize their environment and guide them through tasks. During the elementary years, children begin managing simple routines, organizing school materials, and completing multi-step activities with support. By adolescence, most youth become increasingly capable of independently planning projects, managing schedules, and anticipating what they will need in advance. These skills develop through repeated practice, predictable routines, and guidance from caregivers.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Neglect can disrupt planning and organization because children often grow up in environments where routines are inconsistent, expectations are unclear, and adults are unavailable to provide structure. When daily life is unpredictable, children have fewer opportunities to learn how to prepare, sequence tasks, and organize their belongings. Chronic stress may also make it difficult to think beyond immediate needs, limiting the development of longer-term planning skills. As a result, children may struggle even when they genuinely want to succeed.

What might this look like?

A child with difficulties in planning and organization may:

- Frequently lose homework, toys, or personal belongings.
- Forget what materials are needed for school or activities.
- Feel overwhelmed by large assignments or chores.
- Have difficulty deciding where to begin a task.
- Skip important steps when completing activities.
- Have a messy backpack, bedroom, or workspace.
- Require frequent reminders to stay on track.

Parenting Implications

Children develop planning and organization by experiencing consistent structure rather than being expected to figure everything out independently. Establish predictable routines, use visual schedules or checklists, and teach children how to break larger tasks into smaller, manageable steps. Instead of taking over, guide children through the planning process by asking questions such as, *"What's the first thing we need to do?"* or *"What will you need before you start?"* As children become more successful, gradually reduce your support while allowing them to assume greater responsibility.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of thinking, *"They're lazy and disorganized,"* consider, *"They may not yet have the developmental skills to plan and organize this task."* This perspective shifts the focus from blaming the child to teaching the process. By providing structure, modeling organization, and supporting planning without doing everything for the child, caregivers help build the executive functioning skills that lead to greater independence over time.

