

As seen in the "Ask the Organizing Expert" Column in the *Lake Oswego Review* and the *West Linn Tidings*

Organizing Back to School Zones

Question: With the start of another school year, what's the best way to organize schedules, homework and lunches?

I love the first day of school. The backpacks are full and the house is empty. What will I do sans my summertime charges – coffee, shopping, nine holes? Three o' clock will roll around soon enough, and my little scholars will return. Will you be ready for yours? If the after school bell rings havoc in your home, it's time to get in the zone.

Zones are synonymous with organizing and kids relate well to them. Set up these four zones and your afternoon routine will run smooth as a blackboard.

Landing Zone: Everyone needs a place to "land" – to unload their daily stuff. Give kids a landing zone in the laundry room, mud room or front entry. Equip it with hooks for coats and backpacks, some set lower than others for tiny tots. Include shelves or cubbies for shoes and large bins for current sports equipment. A bench is nice for putting on shoes if space allows. **Bare minimum: hooks and bins.**

Homework Zone: Homework zones vary with age, but the kitchen table seems to be the overwhelming choice. Essentials include good lighting, comfortable chairs (not too comfy!) and easy access to supplies. Limit supplies to a cup of pencils, an electric sharpener, and a place to store on-going projects. Give each child a hanging file or magazine butler and they'll know just where to find those book report instructions! **Bare minimum: plenty of sharp pencils.**

Lunch Box Zone: Make lunches a snap with my one-shelf technique. Line a pantry shelf with lunch boxes and baskets of granola bars, drinks, chips, fruit cups and napkins. Have your kids choose one item from each basket. Add a sandwich or a yogurt, and the job's done. Small children can help make "baggies" full of pretzels, crackers, and carrot sticks, or buy them pre-packaged. **Bare minimum: pre-packaged items.**

Processing Zone: Managing paperwork from teachers, principals and coaches requires a processing zone. Likely location: the kitchen counter. Give yourself an "in box" and instruct the children to place important papers there. Review the contents daily and return papers as needed. Place a large bin in a nearby closet and toss the kids' school work and art work into it. Decide later what to keep and toss; this is simply a holding zone to keep your kitchen counter tidy. Recycle unnecessary paperwork and transfer important dates to your calendar. **Bare minimum: mom's in-box.**

School's only been in session a few days, but the lazy days of summer seem a long time ago. These simple zones will provide your children a smooth after-school routine and your efforts will pay off in the classroom. When you set your children up for success, the whole family makes the grade.

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