



Household Organization

Adapted October 2017 by Victoria McMullen, Laura O'Rourke, & Meme Hieneman for Home & Community PBS from Household Organization by Meme Hieneman & Angela Seaton (Parenting Special Needs Magazine, 2015, Jan/Feb, pp. 14-15).

John and Paul are housemates in a supported living situation with staff support for sixty hours a week. John has come home from work and is playing video games, with his jacket and shoes dropped by the door. He has an open package of chips (with accompanying crumbs) at his feet and a sweating can of soda on the coffee table. Paul comes home from shopping carrying arms full of groceries. He trips over one of John's shoes and drops the groceries which go spilling all over the floor mixed in with broken eggs. Paul screams, picks up the shoe and throws it at John saying it is all John's fault. Lisa, their support staff, moves forward to talk to Paul and slips on the broken egg yolks.

This example illustrates the importance of organization in supporting appropriate behavior, something we tend to underestimate. By attending to our surroundings, we can minimize problems and create more positive, productive behavior. There is no "right" or "wrong" way to organize a household; what is important is making it work for everyone that lives and works there.

Arranging Living Spaces

Homes can be organized to support appropriate behavior and minimize problems. A good starting point is to consider the organization as a whole – in what areas do things tend to go smoothly and where do conflicts or disruptions arise. The successful areas are probably structured in a way that works; those where problems occur need our attention. For example, kitchens are places that are

used by multiple people who may have differing ideas of where things belong and what "cleaned up" looks like. Conversely while bedrooms may only have one inhabitant, one person may be comfortable with clutter in his bedroom, while another may experience anxiety when something can't be found in its usual place. Consideration of where problem behavior occurs may lead us to problem-solve regarding those spaces.

Safety and Supervision

A priority for everyone supporting people with disabilities is their health and well-being. Depending on the needs of the person being supported, we may need to provide different levels of supervision and safety oversight. Supervision, for example, may be needed in transitioning from the toilet to the bathtub for people with physical disabilities or in monitoring the water temperature. We may need to remove potentially dangerous items (e.g., medications, dangerous chemicals, sharp objects, car keys) to locked or inaccessible areas.

Controlling Clutter

We all have different levels of tolerance for cluttered surroundings – some of us perform well, while others are distracted and irritated when things are in disarray. Additionally, people with physical and visual disabilities need clear consistent pathways to move through. If clutter is interfering with household functioning, we need to develop ways to contain or eliminate it. This can be done by

creating decision rules and timelines for sorting and clearing unused items in shared spaces. Creating lists of things to do and identifying places to file or store items not currently in use can be helpful as well.

Organizing Belongings

Developing systems for organizing belongings to create functional space and make needed items more accessible may also be helpful. Functional space means organizing materials based on where they are needed. Then we consider how to keep them where they belong. Receptacles can be very helpful: bins for leisure items and games, drawers for clothing or supplies, dividers to separate craft items, crates near the door for shoes, or hooks for backpacks and coats. These may be labeled with words or pictures as necessary to define what goes where.

Cues for Independence

We can also organize our homes to provide reminders of expectations, improving independence. This might mean lining up the items needed to complete a hygiene routine, creating a picture schedule of chores required, storing plastic dishes for snacks in an accessible cabinet, or using placemats with outlines of each part of the place setting. Another example is posting a picture of the final product of a task (e.g., showing what the room looks like when it is completely cleaned up). Setting up the environment can help people be more independent cleaning up, as well as completing other daily tasks.

Providing Personal Space

Although certain supplies and spaces need to be shared, everyone needs space and places to store their belongings. A person's room should be considered their own domain into which others are invited unless self-injurious or other dangerous behavior is occurring. Personal items that people do not want to share should be stored in their rooms when not in use.

Access to Rewarding Items

A final consideration in organizing our households is to determine how to manage access to highly

preferred items or activities such as television, video games, and other electronics, as well as special snacks and objects. When we are supporting adults, we need to be sensitive to the rights people have to make their own decisions about what they have and when they have it. We need to work with people on scheduling and moderation, possibly encouraging them to wait on highly preferred items such as snacks and video games until after completing other responsibilities.

Now back to John, Paul and Lisa. After everyone has calmed down and Lisa has cleaned up the mess, Lisa sets up a house meeting for the next day. During that meeting, they agree that anyone who is responsible for making any part of a mess must help clean it up. To support this expectation, they decide to make the following changes to their household:

- *Affix hooks for backpacks and jackets and get an entryway shoe bench*
- *Create snack trays and an organizer for the video games and video game controllers*
- *Buy a hand vacuum and cleansing wipes for quick clean ups and keep them handy*
- *Establish a written daily schedule – work...then break...then chores...then leisure*
They also set a regular time to talk about house rules and routines as well as practice how to communicate with one another when things are going well and when what they are doing is a problem (e.g., “Thanks for keeping this clean”, “It bugs me when...”).

As evident in the example, simply organizing home environments is not sufficient. We need to establish clear expectations, teach people how to use the organizational system (e.g., put items away when finished and before beginning a new activity). We also need to provide and solicit praise and encouragement, remaining vigilant over time.