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Desk clutter no problem with spring-cleaning plan

By INGRID TIMBS

Special to The News-Journal

Have your kids taken over the desk in your home office? Are the bills piled up with permission slips, third-grade art treasures, invitations, and junk mail? Did your sixth grader spend hours on math homework, and then miss the bus again because he was frantically looking for it? Is your stapler missing again?

When a desk is shared, there are certain challenges that must be addressed to keep peace in the family and your mind.

The first challenge: Can everyone find his/her own stuff? The next questions: Will everyone have the time he/she needs at the desk, without an argument? And finally, can the desk be easily cleared for the next user?

THERE'S A PLACE FOR US

Everyone should have a place to keep their own desk items. Some kids are so concerned about which pencil they use that half their homework time is spent looking for it. The solution: Assign a drawer or get a container for each person, after you've agreed upon the amount of space needed.

If a drawer is not available, choose a container that works for each person's needs, thinking of function before beauty. Do they need a place for supplies or papers or both? Here are some ideas for inexpensive, practical containers for desk items:

- Ice cube bin.
- Shoe box.
- 9 x13 cake pan (one with a sliding lid would also serve as a portable desk to take in the car.)
- Shallow baskets large enough for papers -- but make sure there are no holes for pens and things to fall through.
- Plastic dish pans large enough to hold supplies and papers.
- Stacking desk trays; although the amount you can stack is limited, these take up less room than separate trays and can remain on the desk. Each person could be assigned one tray.
- Magazine holders for papers, or make your own. Marilyn Ling, a first grade teacher in Volusia County, had each student decorate a large, empty cereal box they brought in from home. She cut off the top and most of one side. This is where all the papers went until the end of the day. These make great project files for students and mail or receipt holders for adults.

Don't like the normal in/out trays? Stray outside the office supply aisle when shopping for bins and baskets. Target has bright trays and leather boxes in the cosmetics department. You could even buy a bare wooden box or tray (find them at craft stores) and have the kids paint and decorate it themselves. Rolling carts add extra drawers to a desk; measure first if you want to stash it under the desk. They're available in many sizes and styles, just be sure to get a fairly sturdy one.

If the desk is crowded, rethink items that take up too much room. The first to go are decorations and any other clutter, like dusty old tissue boxes and broken jewelry you meant to have repaired. If the desk lamp takes up too much room, consider a more efficient style. Then use a printer stand, file cabinet, or

bookcase to hold useful objects that take up too much desk space, like printers and desktop files.

Adjustable shelving is another simple and inexpensive way to add convenient storage. Use wall space behind or beside the desk and go as high as you can. I always suggest the industrial strength tracks and plenty of brackets to avoid sagging shelves.

DESK TIME

If arguing about who gets to use the desk next is a common occurrence, first determine how much time each person needs at the desk and create a simple schedule, especially if the computer is to be shared. Try to consider the natural rhythm of the day; for example, some children need a break or a snack when they first get home from school, so schedule around that time. If they use the computer for games and fun, decide if extra computer time can be traded or "bought" by doing extra chores, or let them earn 30 minutes of computer time for 30 minutes of reading.

Prevent accidents by password-protecting vital programs for the family computer, even though you trust your kids.

TIME'S UP -- CLEAR OUT

By now, there should be a designated home for everyone's stuff (gentle reminders may be necessary). If homework is done, it gets put in the backpack right away, not set aside until "later." Mail should be sorted before it even hits the desk. Put a shredder and a wastebasket in a convenient place between the front door and the desk and get rid of most incoming mail before it comes in the house. Keep bills separate from other papers and update your file system to make filing easier.

With a few easy steps and some diligence from everyone, you, your kids and your desk all can coexist happily. And that's peace of mind worth the trouble.

For more information,

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Want Help With Your Messy Desk?

Is the mail piled so high on your desk you need a ladder to look over the top of it? Are your manila folders threatening to break away and start their own republic?

We want your messy desk.

Send us a non-returnable photo, via e-mail or snail mail, of your working disaster area. And remember, we want *your* desk, so fess up and don't try to nominate family or friends. Include your age, phone number and hometown and limit yourself to one entry.

The, um, winner will get tips on clearing up the mess from local organizational expert Ingrid Timbs and will be featured in a future edition of Home & Garden.

Send your photo to accent@news-jrnl.com or mail it to The Daytona Beach News-Journal, Messy Desk, Accent Dept., P.O. Box 2831, Daytona Beach, FL 32120-2831. Deadline is April 4.

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