

## Paper, Paper Everywhere!

*Below is my response to an email I got from a home schooling mother of 5 who was overwhelmed by paper and asked for suggestions. She said she would often pull it all out to deal with, sort it into big piles, but would end up putting it back with very little changed because she ran out of time.....*

Paper, paper! Can't live without it - but it can sure be hard to live with it - or around it, under it, over it.....Can you tell I have had paper problems too?? LOL

Ok, well, I think the place to start is not with pulling it all out.....

Start by doing two things:

- 1) Come to grips with some facts about paper
- 2) Before you start sorting, come up with a system and a place to put the paper you do choose to keep, then when you start sorting you'll know where it goes.

As to the facts, here's some to think on for starters:

- The average disorganised person has more than 3000 documents at home.
- Over 80% of the paper most of us keep could be disposed of, and we'd never miss it.
- Cost due to paper chaos - such as late fees on bills, can be 15-20% of you budget, says one expert
- Too much stuff in the average home creates an estimated 40% more housework
- It is a complete waste of time and energy to keep any item, no matter how useful, if you cannot lay your hands on it in a few seconds when you actually do need it.
- With the internet at our fingertips, there is almost NOTHING you cannot find out online. So you don't need to keep info on tons of things - if you ever do need to know that, you can just google it. How often have you wanted to know something that you KNEW you had an article, book or whatever on, but you went to your computer and searched it, because it was faster than going to find it amongst your boxes or bookshelves??
- We live in an age of information overload - information comes to us in

various forms constantly - and we can soon get buried under a mountain of paper. First, we don't need to read or know everything. Second, if we do need to know it later, we can always look it up. Third, no matter how good the info, it's not worth living a life suffocated by paper to keep it all!

Now, as to "creating a system", let me explain what I mean by that. I mean that, before you pull out papers to sort, you think through your needs, and place deliberate limits on how much paper you're going to keep by creating a specific, limited place to keep it. For example, you're going to need a system to handle the paperwork items that flow regularly through your house - bills, letters to answer, information to read or file etc. Plus you need some sort of useful, accessible storage system for information you choose to keep. And you need somewhere to keep your children's work. Etc.

Here's my thoughts on what you might use:

Children's work to keep Have ONE box per child, of a suitable size (NOT huge!), labelled with their names. When you want to keep some of their work, it gets filed in their box. When the box gets full, you can't keep more without weeding out some of the older items that are no longer so meaningful. You need to have a sensible place to keep this - probably an out of the way shelf somewhere. Each of my children has a file box which is a bit bigger than a large binder, and can stand on a bookshelf. Into this we put any special pictures, lapbooks and other loose work during the year. Every so often during the year we go through it and the child chooses what they want to keep, and what no longer interests them. At the end of the year, you could move the items that survive the final weeding into their permanent box. I used to keep boxes of my kids work, but I don't anymore. They each have one scrapbook into which I've pasted some of their early drawings, letters etc along with cards they received etc, and they enjoy looking at them. Those of my children who like to collect their later drawings, paintings etc are provided with a Clearfile book (full of slip-in plastic pages) in which to keep their artwork. They weed this out from time to time themselves, as well as a binder to keep other papers etc in, and the box already mentioned. My 15 yo likes to do lapbooks and other projects, and I provide her with a larger archive box to keep them all in. She uses and looks at them regularly, and she keeps them in her own room. She knows that if she is running out of space or her room is difficult to keep clean, then she needs to do some

decluttering, and she does. After all, isn't the main point of keeping kid's work so that they can look back on it when they're older? Let THEM decide what is important enough to them to keep, and let them review it often. As soon as they are old enough, let them have sole ownership and control of their things. BTW, just how often do YOU look back at schoolwork you did when you were young with fondness?? (or would you if you had it) How badly is your life ruined if you can't do this??? :-) If you keep schoolwork for purposes of "transcript" etc, then be very selective, and display it well. And remember, a prospective employer etc isn't interested in their 5 yo artwork or math - they only are interested in current and recent work.

Useful information (I'll deal specifically with curriculum later) Here I mean information you've collected from various sources that you think will come in handy, is relevant to a homeschooling topic, or is relevant to some other aspect of your life. This category can get SERIOUSLY out of hand!! My recommendation is to buy large binders (we have "lever arch files" here) and select a shelf location for them to live on. Ideally you would have only ONE binder for all homeschool related info, with dividers in it to split info by topic. If this is too restrictive for you, then have one binder per main topic for the larger topics (like geography/history or science or language arts) and maybe one to combine info for those subjects that produce less paper (say math, music etc). Label your binders appropriately. You might have a binder for craft info, and another for housekeeping info. If you really need all those! The most important things here are that you (1) Decide WHERE you're going to keep your information in a sensible and accessible fashion (2) You set limits for it - a binder for a topic means you can only keep as much as fits in the binder, and must weed it out occasionally if you want to add more. A specific shelf for such binders means you can only have as many binders as fit on the shelf. Make sense? (3) You have these binders set up before you start pulling out paper, so you can put things where they belong quickly (more on this soon).

Filing In this category, I'm referring to all that paperwork you feel you have to file and keep for a while - bank statements, tax records, correspondence with official places/people, medical records, paid bills, insurance documents etc etc. For this, I use a filing cabinet, or before I had one a combination of cardboard suspension file boxes and binders. The main things you need to do is to set up specific categories, either with manilla folders, or dividers in

binder. I think the best thing to do is to file things during the tax year, and at the end of each tax year, seriously weed each folder one at a time and get rid of anything not current or no longer relevant. Anything pertaining to the previous year's tax that **MUST** be kept for a number years gets moved out of the filing system, and stored together in a file box, which is labelled with the date of the tax year and the date it may be destroyed, and put in an out of the way storage spot such as attic or high cupboard. Anything that is not legally required to be kept for tax reasons is disposed of each year, such as old bills, bank statements, and obsolete correspondence.

Special Projects Perhaps you have a particular project or interest of your own that you collect information for? For example, I am currently into genealogy and working on my husband's family tree. This is a long term project, and creates a lot of paper. I also write books, as you know, and that creates a lot of paper too. For each of these projects, I have a special binder to keep everything in. Once a project is complete, or the information on given papers has been used, inputted or rewritten elsewhere, I weed through the binders and toss out all but special items that are still of interest. Meanwhile, while I'm working on the project, all the relevant papers are together in one place, don't get lost, and are portable if I want to take them anywhere.

Current or incoming paperwork I've tried to always deal with all mail right away, but I find it hard! So my solution has been to have one special basket in a handy location into which ALL incoming mail (and other paperwork) is deposited, so it doesn't get spread around. Even if I open the mail (I usually do), anything I don't toss straight in the trash goes back in the basket until I'm ready to deal with it all. Then, approx once a week, I grab the basket, go and sit at my desk, and sort everything in it. I sort it into folders according to what I need to do with it. Just last night (few weeks ago now!) I was reading a book that arrived yesterday, "Homeschooling at the Speed of Life" by Marilyn Rockett. In it, she suggests using a system I like that she calls "F SHARP" for sorting out the mail and other incoming paperwork. F SHARP stands for the names she gives her folders into which she sorts all incoming paperwork:

F - file it

S - send it (items to mail to give to someone outside your home)

H - hold it (eg copy of pending order, receipts to reconcile to your credit

card statement, or something that is waiting on something to happen or arrive before you can deal with it)

A - answer it (items you need to respond to, whether in writing or by phone)

R - read it (small items you need to read - but empty it every 3 or so months.

If you haven't read it by then, you probably won't!)

P - pay it (bills)

The idea is that when you sit down with your pile of mail and paperwork, that you immediately sort it all into the relevant folder, tossing out empty envelopes and any rubbish as you go. These folders are not meant as permanent storage! They are do divide your paperwork and temporarily hold it so you can deal with it. That way you can pick up the File folder and file it all at once. Or items in the Send folder and go mail them or deliver them.

Etc. Marilyn recommends these folders be in a stand-up wire basket on your desk, or something similar. You want to be able to see them and access them easily so you can deal with the contents either on your regular desk day or in snatches of time. I've just adopted this system instead of the "To do", "Pending" and "File" folders I was using. Perhaps you'll find it useful too.

(BTW, I'm currently reading and reviewing Marilyn's book, and will be putting a full review on my site when I'm done. It's full of lots of great stuff! You can read more here:

<http://marilynrockett.com/books/book.php?id=1> )

Curriculum Ok, let's talk about curriculum. First, let's define "curriculum" - if you mean loose papers with interesting info, then it should be dealt with as in "Useful Information" above. If you mean actual books, manuals, workbooks and other purchased curriculum, then that should all be on a bookcase in one location. I can guarantee that if you keep curriculum in a box somewhere, you're never going to use it! If it's on a shelf, then periodically you will browse your shelf and SEE the items, and use them or review them. As far as keeping material used by older students for younger ones, ask yourself some serious questions! WHY are you keeping it exactly? Was it very good? Will it suit the learning style of your younger students? Is it your chosen curriculum you're using over and over with all age groups? Or is it "supplementary" material that may or may not come in useful? How long do you expect it to be before your next student will be ready for this item? If it's more than 2 years, think twice about keeping it that long, just sitting there taking up space. Could you sell the item now, then purchase it again in a few years if you really do want it then (and haven't changed your mind or found something better!)? Can you put it out on long term loan to another homeschooler until you will need it? I know one lady who uses Saxon Math

with all her kids. She owns most of the volumes. When any given volume is not going to be needed by one of her children for the current or soon to start school year, she advertises it on a local homeschool loop as being available for free loan. That way someone is using it, she knows where it is, and it's not cluttering her shelves. She's been doing this for years, and never regretted it. Another thought - just HOW MANY books or curriculum manuals do we need anyway? Whatever your chosen philosophy of homeschooling, you should have some idea of what will suit you, and be selective about what you buy or keep. You DO know what your educational philosophy is, don't you? If not, take a little time to define it, because it will help guide you in what you should keep. Just last week a friend asked me what mine was, and though I hadn't really thought it out recently, I told her the gist off the cuff. Here's what I said:

***I guess my overall philosophy would be 'to train up a child in the way that HE should go, according to his natural giftings, talents and bents, so that when he is old he will not depart from it.***

***As for the practical aspects of that.....have a simple, basic, loose routine..... each child has a few chores and responsibilities, but I keep it fairly light and we try to do a little of the 3 R's most days and lots of reading aloud and plenty of freedom for their own creative pursuits.***

***For the most part it seems to be working fairly well -how I apply it varies from day to day and week to week depending on what else is happening or whatever new ideas I've come up with but the more I do this the more relaxed I get and the more able to find simple, natural ways to do things. I guess another aspect of my philosophy these days would be more of a mentoring type approach...while I do direct and teach them some things, the bulk of the time is helping them with things they decide to dig into on their own.***

Now, bear in mind I was mostly talking about my younger three children - my 15 yo uses a lot more actual curriculum, but it's all stuff she's chosen to use herself. However, knowing what my approach is (mostly Charlotte Mason based), helps me decide what suits us and what doesn't. I keep few workbooks (because I don't think "fill in the blanks" is the best learning method). I have one spelling program that works for all ages. Once math books are finished, I may keep copies of tests for a while, but we do not keep any of the old workbooks or workings. No point. I go through our general books regularly, and eliminate any that are not up to my standards of "if anything is lovely, good, true, pure, excellent etc think on these things" (Phil 4:8). I actually read the books on our shelves, including those available for the kids to read, and get rid of any that are not truly excellent. They

can get mediocre from the library any time - the ones we have at home I want to be excellent. And the same goes for curriculum materials. Keep what is really EXCELLENT and fits your family and philosophy and get rid of the rest. :-)

Ok, so now you've got some things figured out and set up for how and where you're going to store paper you do need or choose to keep, it's time to actually begin working on all those boxes and piles you have stored!

Now, you've described to me how you get those papers out from time to time and start working on them, but never get done and end up just putting them all back. I have a suggestion for exactly how you should tackle this so you see real, steady progress:

- 1) Plan specific times each day or week when you will "attack" your paper clutter. Plan for about 30 mins at a time.
- 2) At the designated time, get out ONE box or pile ONLY, and sit down with it. Set a timer for 15 minutes (VERY important), and begin picking up one piece of paper at a time. You may ONLY work until the timer goes off, and then you move on to step 4 below.
- 3) As you pick each piece of paper up, try to make a decision as to what to do with it - whether you really need to keep it. You want to avoid double handling as much as possible, so the more you can toss right away the better. BUT, I don't want you stuck here forever agonising over each piece of paper, so for anything you can't decide on right away, just go ahead and put it in the appropriate pile for now. Your piles will be a reflection of the storage places you have set up. Have a pile for school information that is going to go in your binders. Another for other info you have binders for. Have one pile for things that are going to go in your filing cabinet or filing box/folders (tax, receipts, bank statements, correspondence etc). Have a pile for things that belong to each of your children - their kept school work, personal artwork etc etc. Now, you can have a bunch of smaller piles in each category if you like, but don't make it too complicated - you're only sorting for 15 mins, then you're going to deal with these things. (Keep reading)
- 4) When the timer goes off, you STOP dragging out more papers, and PICK UP the piles you have just created one at a time. You must now go and file those piles in the appropriate place. So if you pick up the pile of kids things, you then go and sort them into the boxes you set up and labeled, one for each kid. When you pick up the school information, you then go and hole

punch it all and put it in the binder for school info, behind the appropriate divider for science, history, language arts etc etc. Make sense? This may only take you 5 minutes, but we've allowed 15. However long it takes, do it completely!

5) You now have a choice - repeat steps 1-4 again for another 20-30 minutes, or put away your box of papers for today and move on to something else. If you don't have time to sort AND file papers, then don't pull any more out for now.

If you work like this, you will see slow but steady progress. If you do it regularly 4-5 days a week, it won't be long before you've been through all your stored papers and discarded lots, and filed the rest in an orderly fashion.

Hints:

- Don't worry too much for now if you find you've got a lot of pieces of paper in one category. If you can't be selective as you go, put them all there anyway. When you're done sorting all the accumulated paper, you can then go back and work on one category at a time, selecting the best stuff to keep, and discarding the rest. If, for example, you had set up a couple of binders for "useful school info" and find as you sort you've got way too much to fit in those binders, then grab one of your empty boxes, label it "useful school info - for binder" and put the rest in there. At least then that box will contain ONLY one kind of paper - you can go back and whittle it down later. Of course, DO aim to toss as much as possible as you go, and only keep the amount that fits your binders.
- Ask yourself constantly - what's the worst thing that could happen if I didn't have this piece of paper any more? If the answer is not really that bad, toss it!
- In my filing cabinet, I also have one file folder labeled with the name of each of our family members. When I get miscellaneous things related to them - certificates and awards, letters from friends, doctors reports, personal bank statements etc etc that I find around the place, I put it all in their folder. My kids now know that if they left an important piece of paper somewhere and I found it, then it will be in their folder. Their personal folders are the ONLY folders in my filing cabinet they're allowed free access to.

I hope these suggestions are helpful! I know many people say to sort everything just once, get rid of the excess etc etc, but that can be really hard, especially if you have a LOT of stuff. So I think that by setting limits by creating places for it to go, and then sorting it a little at a time and putting it in place, you'll see real progress.

Blessings

Cynthia