

STRAIGHTEN UP!

WE ASKED YOU TO OPEN THE DOORS OF YOUR CLUTTERED HOUSES TO OUR EXPERTS; HERE'S HOW THEY BROUGHT ORDER TO THE CHAOS.

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Are backpacks, shoes, paperwork taking over your life? That's the question the Pioneer Press asked families with kids heading back to school. We made an offer: If you could explain why you needed help, we would send professional organizers to help make order of the household chaos. We heard from more than 50 of you, selected three families and sent in two organizers who volunteered their time. Here is what they found and what they did.

THE SAGARSKY FAMILY

The Problem: The dining room in Wendi Sagarsky's small Como Park bungalow was tiny to begin with, a mere 10 feet by 11 feet. When asked to perform double duty as homework and craft central for five kids in kindergarten through seventh grade, the result was chaos.

"At the last minute, when the kids ask where's such and such for school, I say 'I have no idea! It's in one of the piles,'" Sagarsky said.

The single mom wanted to create more space in the cramped room, keep better track of papers and make it easier for the kids to put away their things and find supplies. Also, since the family eats there, and it is one of the first rooms visitors see, she wanted it to look attractive, too.

"Right now, I'm embarrassed to have friends over because of the clutter," she said.

Sagarsky was operating the way a lot of us do, says organizer Kristin Dery of Rearrangement Inc. Some things had no home, and others had homes that weren't working. A roll-top desk, which Sagarsky wanted to get rid of, was stacked with a muddle of items and con-

tainers of crayons, markers, pencils and art supplies. She had labeled containers, but because they were hard to find and open, half the supplies never found their way back inside and lay strewn on the desk.

Also, like many of us, she simply had too much stuff.

The Process: Organizers Dery and Sara Pedersen of Time to Organize arrive with metal baskets, plastic tubs, magazine holders, boxes and a labeling machine. Setting up for sorting is key to tackling clutter.

Dery sweeps papers off the table and sets out tools of the trade: plastic bins that won't be used in the final arrangement but will help categorize things as they sort. She labels them: art supplies, markers, etc. They set up a garbage bag. Large cardboard boxes get labeled "donations" "other room" and "treasures" for items Sagarsky might want to keep for sentimental reasons.

"Just to warn you," Pedersen says. "Everything is going to look much worse before it looks better."

"But we won't leave you!" Dery says.

They pass Sagarsky a mound of felt-tip markers and tell her to try each one and toss those that don't work. Meanwhile, they start plucking things off the roll-top desk and firing off questions.

Expired Camp Snoopy passes? Sagarsky wants to save the photos of the kids on the passes, so they go into the treasure box.

Empty photo mount spray can? Trash.

Candles? Other room.

Roll of mesh? Porch, until she can replace the window screen.

A zip-lock baggie with locks of chestnut hair from 5-year old Emma's

first haircut? Treasure box.

"How about this toothbrush?" Dery asks. "Is this for art projects?"

"No, that's actually to brush the guinea pigs," Sagarsky says. It finds a home in a pet bin along with supplies for the family's dog, two cats and bunny.

"I'm sorry it looks so bad," Sagarsky says at one point.

"Would you stop that," says Pedersen good-naturedly. "Sorry is not allowed!" She tells Sagarsky about one client who found hundreds of dollars in savings bonds she didn't know she had, and another who found a pile of old pacifiers at the back of a closet her kids had used a decade before.

They press her for decisions.

"OK, an old photo album that you've never used," Sagarsky says. "Realistically, are you going to use it?"

Sagarsky hesitates for a second. "No."

"OK, then, donate it," Pedersen says. "I think it puts a lot of pressure on people to have unused photo albums lying around."

After emptying the desk, they move to other surfaces. In an hour and a half, they fill nearly two bags of trash, everything from faded dried flowers to dozens of old coloring books. The plastic sorting tubs on the table are overflowing. Then, they start putting the room back together.

The Solutions: To open the space, they place the table at an angle and move the easy chair into a corner to create a reading nook. A curtain on a tension rod now hides an unused doorway to the kitchen and the back of the dishwasher.

"One of our goals was to make this a welcoming and attractive environment," Pedersen says. "It's a homework and craft center, but they also eat dinner in

HELPING KIDS GET ORGANIZED FOR SCHOOL

— Establish a homework routine. Set aside a time and stick with it.

— Set up a space, whether a kitchen table or a desk. Create a supplies box for paper, pens, scissors, calculator, etc.

— Have kids unload and put away their own backpacks in a designated area. Try a coat rack, pegs or a wicker basket near the front door. Make them responsible for bringing out and packing up their own homework. Make sure you check in each day so they don't get overwhelmed and so you know what's going on.

— When they're old enough, help them select a simple planner or calendar. When they learn of a test, project due date or event, have them write it down.

Source: Sara Pedersen, Time to Organize

here, and you don't want to feel like you're in school all the time."

A cubby shelf Sagarsky already owned but was using inefficiently now houses everything emptied from the roll-top desk and a freestanding stack of plastic drawers.

New black mesh bins that slide into the cubbies make better use of space. They also look better (Linen 'N Things, \$9.99). Dery advises storing things in identical containers to make a mishmash of items appear neater and more uniform.

Key organizing tip: Group items with like items. Now, there are designated and labeled bins for pet supplies, supplies for the girls' beading hobby and unopened school supplies the kids can take as needed. Other bins hold art and craft supplies and office goods such as staplers, stationery, scissors and glue. One bin contains hanging files for Sagarsky and each child for important papers and homework projects. Everything is labeled so there is no confusion about what goes where.

Markers, crayons and pencils are sorted into new containers with dividers and slide into their own cubby (IKEA, \$5.99, \$1.99). Library books have a new home in a basket on the top shelf.

Homework reference books slide into wood magazine holders (IKEA, \$2.99). Coloring and activity books get their own holders.

Kids' backpacks hang on hooks under the window instead of getting tossed on the floor.

The results: After living with the new arrangement for nearly a week, the room gets a thumbs-up. Things are easier to find. Kids have an easier time putting things away. The reading chair is in such demand that Sagarsky has to assign turns. The only thing that's not working is the mesh basket with hanging files for each child. Papers are getting shoved down and misfiled. Like any organizing project, part of the process is tweaking the things that don't work.

But overall?

"This is so much more calm," says Sagarsky, as she oversees a homework session before dinner. "I used to feel overwhelmed when I walked into this room."

THE KEMPER FAMILY

The Problem: Michelle and Tim Kemper of Oakdale wanted to reclaim their entry closet. Two closet rods were crammed with dozens of coats for every season. The family's no-shoes-in-the-house rule kept floors clean, but it led to about 50 pairs of shoes spilling out of the closet into the hallway.

"Our typical week involves getting to four practices and seven games," Michelle Kemper wrote in describing her organizing dilemma. "This also means rows of sports spikes multiplying in the closet like smelly hedgehogs."

Plus, with all the clutter, there wasn't room in the closet for things they wanted to put there. Paul, 10, and Anna, 7, tossed backpacks on the kitchen floor. Tim, who is allergic to bees, hung his EpiPen kit off a newel post on the basement stairway. In winter, everyone's hats and mittens ended up in a plastic bin in the dining room, and every morning, the contents were emptied as people scrambled for their stuff before heading out the door. Michelle and Tim, who work full time, had no place for work bags.

"Unfortunately, most of our 'stuff' doesn't seem to have a permanent home, and gets shifted from one spot to the next," Michelle says.

The Process: Before tackling the

project, organizer Kristin Dery visits to assess the family's stuff and habits.

"Knowing my kids and knowing us, simplicity is where it's at," Tim says.

Dery suggests taking out a closet rod and replacing it with shelves. At first, Michelle envisions small cubbies with coat hooks like the ones she saw at a friend's house. Dery pointedly asks if the small cubbies will really accommodate backpacks. Well, no. Lesson one: First identify and measure what you want to store, and only then shop for furniture and containers.

On organizing day, Dery instructs Michelle and Tim to start purging. Most people pack too many coats in a closet, Dery says. She allows them three jackets per person.

"We're weeding out the jackets that they're not wearing right now, so they just have jackets for the right season in here," she says. Off-season coats go to the basement.

Michelle purges kid shoes, finding some too small and others seldom worn. Some go up to the bedrooms. Sport shoes head to the garage, where they can be easily picked up on the way to practice.

"I'm glad you're here to make him do this," Michelle laughs as Tim reduces his mound of footwear to a half dozen pairs.

Thermos bottles, phone books, loose shopping bags and other clutter are pulled off the upper shelves. Finally, an empty closet.

The Solutions: The tall shelf unit has a labeled shelf for each family member (IKEA, \$99). Each is large enough to fit a backpack or work bag, plus lunch bags and a clear plastic tub for hats and mittens, sunglasses, etc. (Fleet Farm, \$3.99).

The top shelf is reserved for a tub of plastic silverware, binoculars for ball-games and other things they might want to grab on the way out the door.

Two plastic bins on wheels store Anna's and Paul's shoes (Fleet Farm, \$9.95). Dery recommends this solution for kids. "You just have to toss them in," she says. "My daughter would never tuck her shoes neatly on a shelf. I don't know about yours!"

A red hanging shoe organizer finds new life housing Michelle's work shoes, while Tim's are stored on the bottom shelves.

Paper grocery and gift bags are now stored in a narrow plastic bag tote that can stand on the floor or get hung on a hook.

Thermoses, bottles and extra lunch bags get tucked in a labeled bin. Flashlights are in another. Clear plastic works well for storing things because you can see what's inside. Also, items in a container don't take up as much shelf space and are easier to retrieve.

Hooks installed on the inside of the closet just above the door are perfect for drying wet jackets and snow pants.

Two wire baskets hanging from a shelf are for Anna's and Paul's completed school papers. This was a system that had been in place and was working well for the family. Final lesson: If it isn't broke, don't fix it.

The results: "It's wonderful to have a home for those bags that used to sit in the kitchen, and it's working pretty good," says Michelle a week later. "It's much easier getting out the door, because you know where everything is expected to be."

None of the solutions is rocket science. Do Michelle and Tim feel like they really needed a professional to conquer their clutter?

"We never would have gotten to this point on our own," Michelle says. "She had ideas we never would have thought of. And just having a third neutral party walking us through the process helped."

THE SIEBEN FAMILY

The Problem: Julie Sieben of Eagan wanted help organizing her time and her family's paper clutter.

Sieben runs a small business selling home decor at house parties and works once a week at her church nursery. With her husband working long hours in sales, most of her time is spent running the home and taking care of 2-year-old Kiera and 4 1/2-year-old Kylie. Sieben felt as if she spent a lot of time spinning her wheels and never getting to what was really important.

That's not an uncommon problem for stay-at-home moms, says organizer Sara Pedersen. With few strict appointments and deadlines, it can be hard to manage time. Sieben has used four calendars, but none seemed to help.

In addition, her kitchen counter was piled with layers of mail, brochures,

medical records, directories, newsletters and cards. Bills got tucked behind a birdhouse knickknack.

"I want to stop the cycle of clutter," Julie says. "I forget to pay bills, forget to make phone calls, forget to send birthday cards."

The clutter had also become the No. 1 trigger for fights with her husband, Ken.

"I look at these piles as reminders that I have to do something," she says. "He just sees the mess."

The Process: Organizer Sara Pedersen starts by tackling Julie's schedule. She has Julie fill out a questionnaire asking how she feels about the amount of time she spends on tasks. Julie feels comfortable with most categories but says she doesn't spend enough time cleaning or spending time with her children.

"That's pretty typical," Pedersen says. "You're home with the kids, but you're doing other things and not really paying attention to them. One of our goals will be to get you some more focused time with them."

Ken and Julie also fill out a household chore questionnaire covering everything from cleaning the bathroom to paying the bills. They write down who is currently doing something and who they would like to be responsible for it. Then, Pedersen and Sieben schedule activities into a weekly "time map."

Next, they tackle the kitchen counter. "OK, I'm going to start on this side," Pedersen says. "And I'm going to pick up a piece of paper and say, 'What is this?' And then I'm going to ask you, 'Why is it here?' and 'Where else could it go?'"

They find a flier for replacement windows, medical receipts saved for flexible benefit reimbursement, expired grocery coupons, an old neighborhood directory, scrapbook materials, address labels, a moms' club calendar, newsletters, real estate brochures Sieben collected for an out-of-town relative who wants to move here and more. Slowly, categories start to emerge: Stuff Ken has to deal with soon. Stuff Julie has to deal with soon. Bills to be paid. Papers to file in the basement home office. Moms' club. Home improvement. Restaurant coupons and menus. Medical records.

And, of course, there are items that shouldn't be kept.

HELPING KIDS GET ORGANIZED AT HOME

— Teach that every item has a "home" where it belongs.

— Don't tell young children to "Clean up!" It's overwhelming. Be specific: "Please put the Legos in the shoebox and the books on the bookshelf." Wait until they complete the tasks before giving them a new one.

— Assign simple chores, such as setting the table. Make a chart, using pictures for younger children. Reward them with stickers.

— Model clutter control. Set a timer for 10 or 15 minutes every night and have everyone clean up. Put on fast music. Items that don't belong in a room go into a laundry basket to be delivered to the correct room later.

— Create a penalty box. If kids constantly leave belongings out, put the stuff in a special box where it stays until the child does an extra chore. If they don't do the chore, they lose the item.

— Purge and donate. Most kids, like their parents, own too much stuff. Downsize every six months by donating seldom-used toys and outgrown clothing. Keep a donation box in the closet. Help your child select items to donate before birthdays, Christmas or other gift-giving holidays. Establish a "new-toy-in," "old-toy-out" system.

Source: Sara Pedersen, Time to Organize

"What's this," Pedersen asks.

"A receipt for dishwashing detergent."

"Now, why would you keep this? Let's walk through this," Pedersen says. "Would you ever return it?"

"No."

"Is it a charge?"

"No."

"OK, then I'm going to make you toss this. You only need to save receipts for something you may return. And we can make a file for that."

"OK," Sieben says, tossing the receipt with a flourish. "This feels good."

WHO IS AN ORGANIZER?

Sara Pedersen of Time to Organize and Kristin Dery of Re:arrangement Inc. are part of a growing field. The Minnesota chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers, now at 71 members, has grown steadily over the past few years.

Organizers generally visit a home or office for an initial assessment and then schedule hands-on sessions to tackle a specific space. A client rarely finishes a project in a single three-hour session. More often, the organizer returns at least once and, occasionally, over a period of months.

"We're not just coming in to clean up a mess," Pedersen says. "We're trying to transfer skills to the person so they can stay on top of everything after we leave."

Fees in the Twin Cities range from \$40 to \$60 per hour. As the field has grown, some organizers also have developed specialties, such as businesses or residential projects, the chronically disorganized, families with children or the elderly.

Most people keep way too much, Pedersen says.

"Always ask yourself if could you get this information someplace else if you got rid of the piece of paper," she says. "Ninety percent of the time, you can."

When they find a warranty for a gas grill, Pedersen asks where the warranties go. Sieben slides open a breadbox in the corner.

"This is a new one," Pedersen exclaims, peering at the pile of papers. "But honestly, weird as this seems, if it's working for you, I'm not touching it!"

At the bottom of the pile, they find a notebook Sieben had been missing for a year. And some information Sieben

needs to bring to her church meeting that evening.

"Can I leave it on the counter?" she asks sheepishly.

"Could you put it in your purse?" Pedersen shoots back.

The Solutions: Julie now has a rough weekly schedule to help her manage time. To get a handle on chores, she and Pedersen have filled in laundry sessions and a weekend cleaning session when Ken will take the girls on an outing for several hours.

The 15 minutes after dinner are now designated "tidy time," when the whole family pitches in to put away toys and clutter. Pedersen tells them to set a timer. There is also a nightly communication session for Julie and Ken to exchange important information.

The girls now have a simple chore chart with three tasks and spaces to put stickers when they finish them: getting dressed, helping set the table, picking up toys.

"If we can start working on them now, it will be so much easier when they get older," Pedersen says. "It will take some of the load off Julie and will teach them responsibility."

The results: An accordion file now holds all the paperwork that used to pile up on the kitchen counter (Target \$7.99). The dozen or so files are labeled according to the categories that emerged when they sorted papers: action files for Ken and Julie; bills to pay; stuff for downstairs; an upcoming activities file for things like season tickets to Gophers football games or party invitations; a "happy things" file for cards from friends or other mementos that just make Julie smile.

Julie's time map includes a daily time to go through the mail and her action file. "If you just do 15 minutes of paperwork a day, you're never going to have a pile," Pedersen says. As a rule, one of four things should happen to a piece of paper. It should get tossed, acted on, given to someone else or filed away. If

FOR MORE

- Sara Pedersen, Time to Organize 651-717-1284 www.time2organize.net
- Kristin Dery, Re:arrangement Inc. 651-426-0351 www.rearrangementinc.com

Find contact information and links to local organizers at the Minnesota chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers at www.mnnapo.org.

The National Association of Professional Organizers has tips and a database of organizers you can search by ZIP code and specialty at www.napo.net.

it's going to take 10 minutes or less to complete the action, Pedersen says, do it during paper management time. That might include responding to an invitation or filling out a form. If it will take longer, file the paper in your action file and jot a note on your to-do list.

Julie has a new journal of "to do" lists and shopping lists to replace the mental clutter and the paper she kept on the counter to remind her to do something. Now, instead of saving an advertisement for a lotion she wants to try, she writes the brand name on her new Target shopping list.

"Without doing the maintenance every day, it will not stay like this," Pedersen warns. "It can't organize itself. It's all about retraining. And it takes 21 consecutive days of doing something to make a new habit."

A couple of days into her 21 days, Julie reports that the counter is still clean. Ken calls it "a miracle."

"It hasn't been this clean since we moved in here," Julie says.

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LOGO