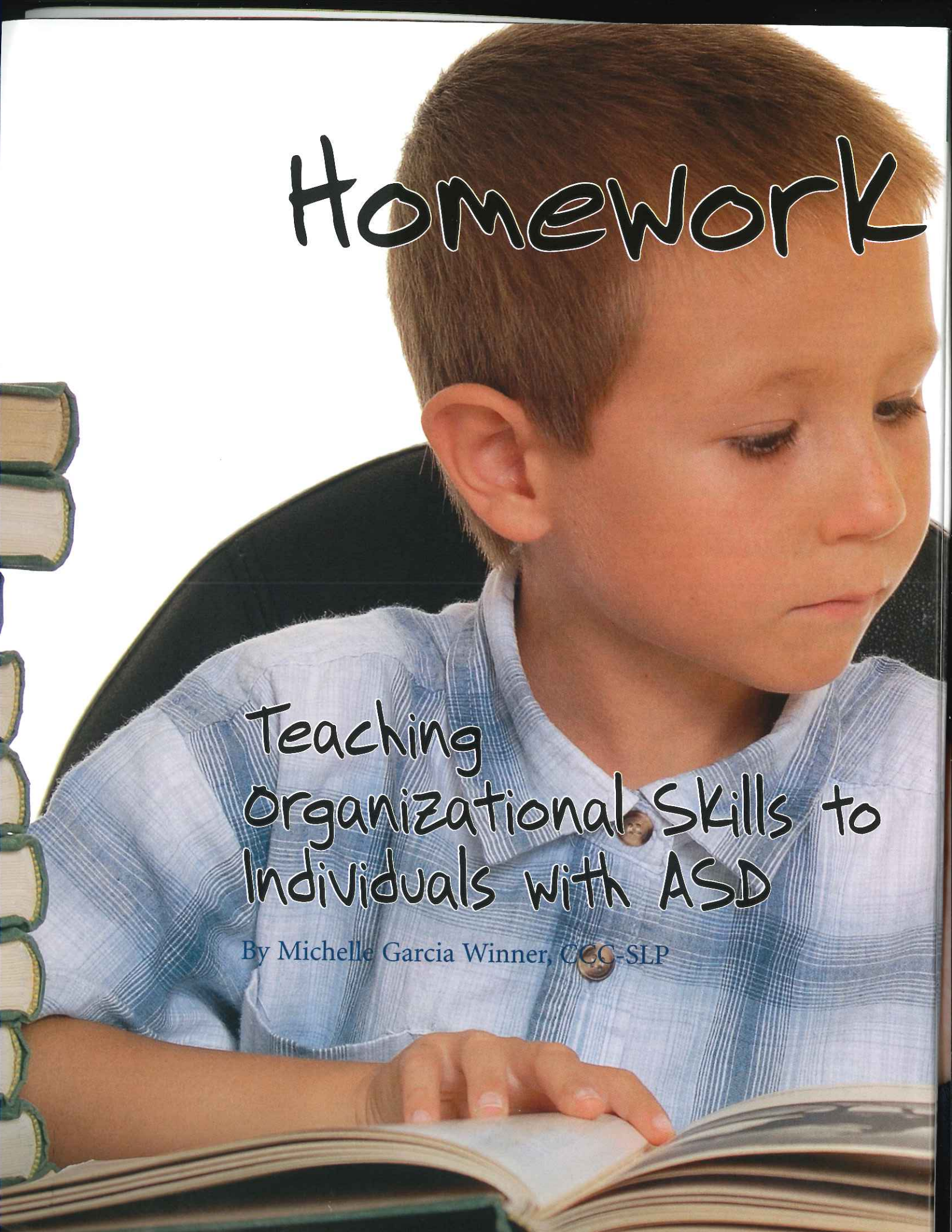




Homework

Teaching Organizational Skills to Individuals with ASD

By Michelle Garcia Winner, CCC-SLP

and Beyond!

Our daily lives are made up of an endless stream of thoughts, decisions, actions and reactions to the people and environment in which we live. The internal and external actions fit together, sometimes seamlessly sometimes not, largely dependent upon a set of invisible yet highly important skills we call Executive Functioning (EF). These skills, which involve planning, organizing, sequencing, prioritizing, shifting attention, and time management can be well-developed in some people (think traffic controllers, wedding planners, business CEOs, etc.) and less developed in others. They are vital in all parts of life, from making coffee to running a profitable business. The skills develop naturally, without specific, formal training, and we all have them to some degree – or at least, we all assume we all have them.

Things are never quite as simple as they seem, and these EF skills are no exception. They require a multi-tiered hierarchy of decisions and actions, all coming together within the

framework of time, knowledge and resources.

Imagine trying to navigate life when EF skills are impaired or nonexistent, as they are with individuals on the autism spectrum. For most of us, our imagination won't stretch that far. Therefore, we assume all these kids – especially those who are “bright” – have EF skills and we act and react to our spectrum children or students as if they did.

Nowhere does this EF skill deficit cause more turmoil than in the area of homework, producing monstrous levels of anxiety and dread in students, parents and teachers alike. The myriad of details that need to be accomplished in a student's class, school day or week can overwhelm even the healthiest student; it can shut down our ASD kids.

I am regularly asked: if tasks are so overwhelming to their EF systems, should we just avoid having students deal with them? The answer is an unequivocal emphatic “NO!” Organizational skills are life skills, not just school skills, and even though they are “mandatory prerequisites” for succeeding at school, like social skills they

Adults must be organized in their own thinking if they are to effectively teach students with EF deficits this skill.

are rarely directly taught. Few states include explicit teaching of EF skills in their "standards of education."

So where do we start? First, by understanding how complex organizational systems become by the time students reach middle school. We can only be good teachers if we appreciate the demands the skills we teach place on our students.

Second, by understanding organization as a skill set, which involves static and dynamic systems.

Static organizational systems and skills are structured: same thing, same time, same place, same way. Static organizational tasks are introduced in kindergarten, first and second grade. We break down tasks and ask students to explicitly complete very defined units of information, at a certain time and place. Write your name at the top of the page, read the instructions, complete the work, when done turn the paper over and sit quietly until time is up.

Dynamic organizational systems and skills involve constant adjustments to priorities, workloads, timeframes, tasks and places. They are less teacher-directed and more student-directed.

By 4th grade, teachers are introducing dynamic assignments to students with moderate levels of support. Soon after that we expect students to be able to manage increasingly dynamic workloads with little extra support or direct teaching. By high school, almost all school and homework has dynamic components requiring students to use EF skills to allocate time, resources, places to work, etc.

Here's the good news: most of us understand that to tackle a dynamic task we have to break it down into its static elements. The dynamic part of the task requires thinking; the static part of the task requires doing. A dynamic assignment such as writing an essay requires a significant portion of the task be spent thinking about the topic before the static tasks of actually writing the paper at a table, at a specified hour, etc. One of the great challenges for our spectrum students is learning to break down dynamic tasks into more concrete, static chunks of work.

Fostering organizational skills in students with ASD requires an evolutionary approach towards teaching students, one that is ideally started at an early age. Students hone organiza-

tional skills starting in preschool, when we first ask them to clean up their toys. Teachers can accurately identify organized versus disorganized students as early as kindergarten. By 4th grade teachers expect students to be proficient with EF skills.

However, the reality is that the majority of our ASD students of all ages desperately need help with homework, specifically, and EF skills in general. Help is available. The following 10 steps illuminate specific aspects of EF skills that increase students' static and dynamic organizational coping mechanisms. While these steps are interrelated and synergistic, avoid trying to teach them all at the same time. Each may be difficult to grasp and master for the student with ASD; allow learning to take its own pace. Keep expectations realistic, talk things through regularly, and probe for misunderstandings or miscommunication. Learning EF skills is a dynamic system of its own, with its static components. Make sure your child or student experiences success and feels competent at each stage of the process.

10 Steps to Foster Organization Skills

1. Clearly define what needs to be done

Too often, parents and schools view organization goals too simply: "the student must write the assignment in his planner." Clearly this is not nearly enough detail for most tasks and may not even be the best starting goal for a particular student. Adults must be organized in their own thinking if they are to effectively teach students with EF deficits this skill. Go beyond giving out assignments; help the student understand how to also approach the task from an organizational standpoint.

2. Move it with motivation

Almost all students with weak organizational skills also struggle with motivation to accomplish homework tasks. Parents and teachers often don't realize this lack of motivation can stem from feeling overwhelmed by the task demands. Students with the greatest motivational challenges are often our most intelligent students (e.g. those with high IQ scores). We often assume "smart" means "organized" and say things like "come on, I know you can do this, I know you are smart." Yet, they may have the hardest time motivating themselves when overwhelmed because they have never had to work at learning. Learning just happened if they stayed attentive.

By adolescence, students need to appreciate that completing work - even work that seems somewhat ridiculous to them - has its rewards. It establishes them as hard working in the eyes of others, improves their grades and increases feelings of self-worth through meeting their grade level academic expectations. However, as obvious as this sounds, this level of cause-effect can still be too overwhelming to some spectrum students because it requires delayed gratification. Many students need to start at a much more concrete level of motivation, with very small work steps combined with reward early in the task completion process. For example, if a student cannot easily work for an hour, have him work successfully on a single part of the task for just 10 minutes before he gets to pause and congratulate himself. Self-motivation increases when students feel confident in understanding and accomplishing the task before them. It doesn't matter how "well" you teach students these EF skills; if they are unmotivated, they will not implement the ideas. Work directly on helping students tackle and overcome motivation challenges.

3. Prepare the environment

Most adults familiar with helping students "get organized" understand this point. Establish a dedicated workspace for homework that includes the essential tools: pen, pencil, paper, etc. Color coding tasks, making sure the student has an organized binder, possibly access to a time-timer (www.timetimer.com) create structures that promote success during homework time.

4. Chunk and time it

Assignments that sound coherent and structured to teachers can still overwhelm a student with EF challenges. For example: "write a report focusing on the economy, culture, weather and climate of a specific country." Clear enough, you think? Maybe to us, but not to them. Make sure the student understands how to "chunk" an assignment (break it down into smaller pieces) and how the individual parts create the larger whole. For example, not all students will know their report needs four sections, essentially "mini-essays" worked on separately and then joined together.

Furthermore, once they "chunk" the project students also need to predict how long each chunk will take to complete. The majority of our students with poor organizational skill have a resounding inability to predict how long projects will take across time. In fact, they tend to be weak in all aspects of interpreting and predicting time. Consider this: Is there anything you do without first predicting how long it will take? We "time map" everything, gauging how the task will or will not fit into what we're doing now, an hour from now, later in the day or later in the week.

Homework functions in much the same way. Students are more willing to tackle homework when they can reliably predict how long they will have to work on the task. For example, a

student will usually calmly do math if it should only take 5-10 minutes. However, for those spectrum students who can't predict time, the nebulous nature of the activity incites anxiety such that they may cry 45 minutes over doing a 10-minute math assignment. When the student does not - or cannot - consider time prediction as part of his organizational skill set, he is likely to waste a lot of time rather than use time to his advantage.

5. Use visual structures

As the school years progress, homework shifts from mostly static tasks doled out by one teacher to mostly dynamic tasks assigned by many different individuals. We expect students to self-organize and know how to juggle the many pieces of learning that make up each class, grade and level of education. Yet, this valuable skill is never directly taught!

Visual long-term mapping charts, such as a Gantt Chart, (www.ganttchart.com) can help students plan and monitor multiple activities.

These bar type graphs allow a student to visually track multiple projects across time, determine when they are due and how much time is



available to work on each. For example, a history paper may be assigned in February and due in late March; a line would run from early February to late March to indicate the time allocated to the project. A math project assigned in early March is also due in late March; another line would represent this project. Visually the student can see that two big projects are due at about the same time, and both are worth significant grade points. This then helps the student understand why he should not wait until the last minute to start one or both assignments. Gantt charts are frequently used in business, but have yet to make it into student software for school/homework planning. However, they are easy to create and use at home or in the classroom. For students with ASD, they are invaluable tools for organization.

Visual structures can represent entire projects and then also be used for individual chunks, creating the visual organizational framework students with EF deficits need. Once assignments are understood as needing to be worked on across time, we can encourage students to chunk tasks to be worked on during specific weeks, then make related lists of things to do on specific days.

6. Prioritize and plan daily

Learning to prioritize is a valuable skill and helps the student get things done. Keep in mind that many of us make daily lists but don't always complete all tasks on our list, and that priority is largely based on the value we place on the assignment. Within the school setting, "value" is often dictated by the teacher. Priority is a factor of the task's value overall, its deadline and the time to complete it. However, just because a task is due does not mean a student needs to make a decision to complete it, especially if it is a low priority or low value task to the student or the teacher. For example,

Keep in mind
that many of us make
daily lists but don't always
complete all tasks
on our list.

during her sophomore year in high school my daughter was looking at her math grades online. I looked over her shoulder and saw she had mostly A's and B's but noticed she had two F's. I exclaimed, "Robyn, you have two F's," to which she replied, "Mom, they were each worth one point. They were hardly worth doing." Robyn realized that in light of the many assignments she had to juggle for all her classes, projects with the least point value were not worth doing; she'd rather save her time and effort for the larger, more important projects.

With a prioritized plan in hand, many students will still struggle with actually working on the tasks. Even students with high intelligence may have difficulty getting themselves to work on projects not of their liking. Their baseline attention span may be no more than 7-10 minutes. (Test one of your student's baseline attention span by observing how long he can attend to mundane projects without self-distracting. You may be surprised by how short it is!)

Help students succeed with their daily schedule by teaching them to

take frequent small breaks at the end of their baseline attention span. For example, a graduate student in theology found he could only push himself through 10-minute work cycles before feeling overwhelmed or internally distracted. He used a visual time-timer and gave himself a short stretch break every 10 minutes. Once he completed a number of these short work cycles he gave himself a larger reward. The key to using self-reward is to make sure the small reward isn't likely to be distracting or absorbing (computer games, TV, reading a book). Instead make these small breaks quick and refreshing, just to refocus attention: sensory based activities (stretching or movement), a small snack, a quick trip to the bathroom or pencil sharpener.

7. Hunt and gather

Simply put: students need to plan time into their schedule to locate different resources to complete a task. For example, research at the library might be a "chunk" they plan for on their homework list (don't forget travel time!).

8. Consider perspective

Homework is more effectively completed when students start by considering the teacher's perspective before diving into the assignment. An assignment done well is one that meets the teacher's expectations and follows the teacher's instructions. A high school student went to great lengths to develop a computer program for his computer programming class. His teacher came to me exasperated, explaining that while well done, the project was totally unrelated to the class assignment.

Parent perspectives enter into the homework plan also. Many parents expect children to finish homework before watching TV. Even though children may have accomplished a great deal of homework (in their mind "enough"), trouble can still erupt because it wasn't "finished" in the parent's mind.

Perspective taking can be quite overwhelming to many students with social learning and organizational problems. A strategy called "social behavior mapping" (Winner, 2007) can help students understand how expectations, actions and reactions affect not only how we are viewed by others, but how their responses ultimately impact the way we view ourselves.

9. Communicate and then communicate some more

Homework assignments often result in students needing help from others. Knowing when and how to ask for help can be challenging for students with social learning and organizational weaknesses. Avoid assuming students – especially "bright" students – should intuitively know how to ask for help, clarification or even how to collaborate with others on assignments. These skills are not nearly as simple as they seem and may need to be explicitly taught by the special education teacher

or speech language pathologist at your school. Tip: as students age into middle school and beyond, most are turning to their peer group rather than their teacher for help. This fosters peer support networks desperately needed for success in college and later life.

10. Completion and reward

Having a clearly defined "end" to a task is important for the concrete thinking minds of students with ASD. Be sure the child knows what "finished" means, both at school and at home. For instance, a homework assignment is not truly "done" until it is turned in to the teacher at school. While homework turn-in boxes (static) are commonly found in elementary school, they all but vanish during middle and high school years when even the act of turning in homework becomes dynamic. Make sure your students know where to turn in homework. Also, parents should save big celebrations for completed projects until the assignments are actually turned in. Some students may need reminder systems set up to make sure work is turned in on time. Visual notes, PDA messages or watch timers can be used to help.

At home, "finished" homework yields its own rewards when students can engage in more personally pleasing activities, such as a computer game, watching TV, reading for pleasure, etc. Even our favorite activities have a finite time frame attached to them before it is time to go to bed. Many of these organizational strategies can be used to help a student learn to shut down a favorite activity and get his brain ready for bed.

"Planning takes time!" This is a message we need to constantly reinforce with our spectrum students. "Teaching organizational skills takes time, across months and even years!" This is a

message we need to reinforce to parents and teachers. Whether students are using organizational skills for homework, doing chores, preparing for a weekend activity or something as simple as getting a snack, as children grow and develop, tasks become increasingly complex and dynamic with each passing year. Teachers and parents need to work together, while children are still in elementary school, to identify and teach any or all of the 10 steps mentioned in this article that are problematic for the spectrum child. In doing so, we give children the tools not just to handle homework, but to be successful in all areas of life. ■

Michelle Garcia Winner is internationally recognized as an innovative clinician, enthusiastic workshop presenter and prolific author in the field of social thinking and social cognitive functioning. Visit www.socialthinking.com for additional information.

References

- Allen, D. (2001). *Getting Things Done. The art of stress free productivity*. Penguin Books: New York. (recommended by an adult with AS)
- Dawson, P. and Guare, R. (2004). *Executive Skills in Children and Adolescents: A Practical Guide to Assessment and Intervention*. The Guilford Press: New York.
- Giles-Brown, C. (1993). *Practical Time, Language and Living Series*. Imaginart. www.proedinc.com
- Hyerle, D. (1996). *Visual Tools for Constructing Knowledge*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development: Virginia.
- Myles, B. & Adreon, D. (2001). *Asperger Syndrome and Adolescence: Practical Solutions for School Success*. AAPC: Kansas. www.asperger.net
- Soper, M. (1993). *Crash Course for Study Skills*. Linguisticsystems: Illinois. www.linguisticsystems.com (highly recommended for building a curriculum!)
- Winner, M. (2005). "Strategies for Organization: Preparing for Homework and the Real World." The Gray Center: Grand Rapids, Michigan. (www.socialthinking.com)
- Winner, M. (2007). *Social Behavior Mapping*. Think Social Publishing, Inc.: San Jose, California.