Dear Parents,

During this time of school closure, both your schedule and that of your child has changed significantly. You may be finding yourself struggling to fill the day with activities for your child. Many students with developmental and intellectual disabilities, especially those with autism, are calmed by structure, consistency and predictability. One way to provide that in the home is to create a place where your child can complete a set of tasks using a work system. I have included the chapter from my book, *Visual Support for Meaningful Independent Work Centers*, that explains what a work system is, how to create one and how to use one. Following that, I have also included pictures of a very simple work system that can be set up at home using minimal supplies- sticky notes and shoe boxes.

The chapter on work systems from the book was written for teachers and the pictures provided are from classrooms. I included it for you because the information about the different features of a work system and how they relate to each child is important for you to know in order for your home work system to be successful. If you have a printer, a laminator and Velcro handy, you can use the template included and create a more permanent work system.

Unless you're a special education teacher, however, you probably don't have all of that on hand. The last two work system are very simple and can be made of the things that most people do have around the house- sticky notes, shoe boxes, clothes hampers.

In another document, I will provide ideas for tasks that are easy to throw together.

I hope that this resource is helpful for you during this time. If you have questions about how to set up a work system, I am happy to visit with you through email. Please feel free to email me at spedresource@yahoo.com.
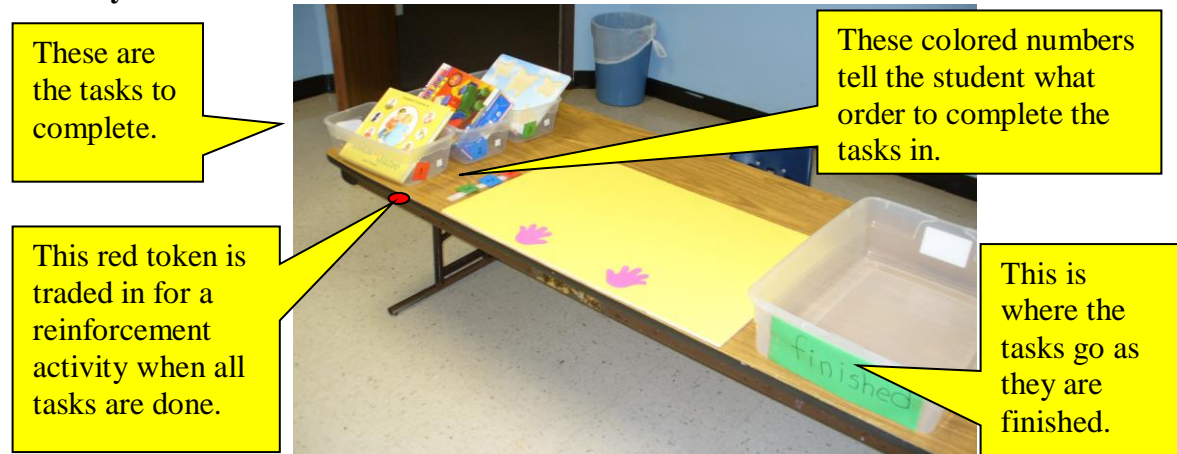
With Kindest Regards,

Liz

Work Systems

Work systems allow students to independently complete a set of tasks in a specified order, set each one in a designated place when finished and then transition to the next activity. Work systems provide the following information:
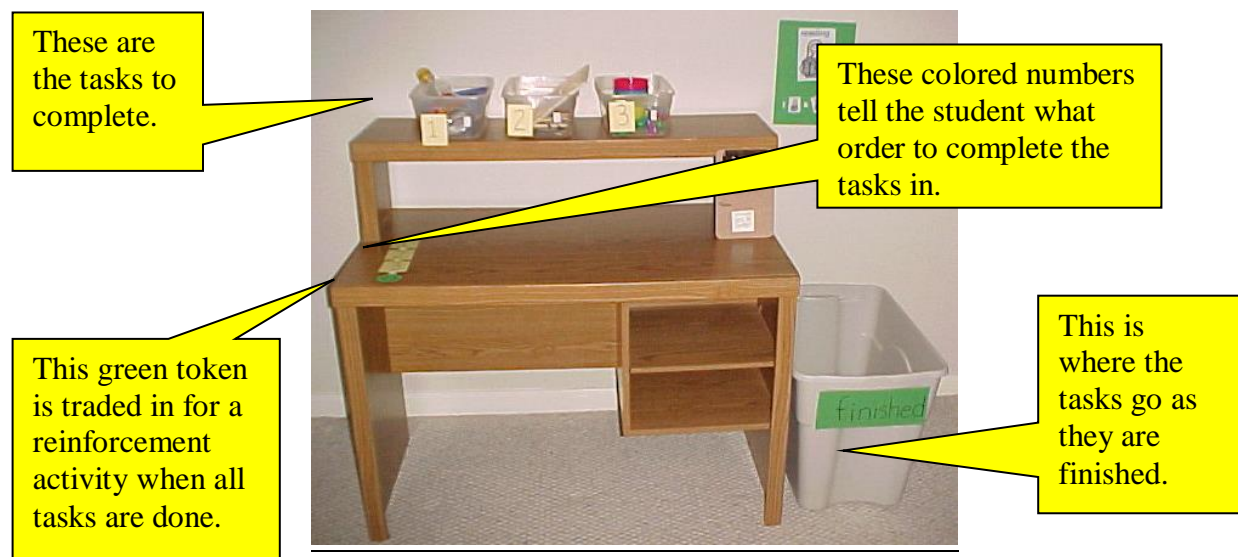
1. What tasks to complete.
2. What order to complete the tasks in.
3. What to do with each task when it is completed.
4. What to do when all tasks are completed.

Work systems may look different, as each one is individualized to meet the specific needs of each student using them. However, the information a work system provides the student must be consistent. The three work systems pictured below do just that.
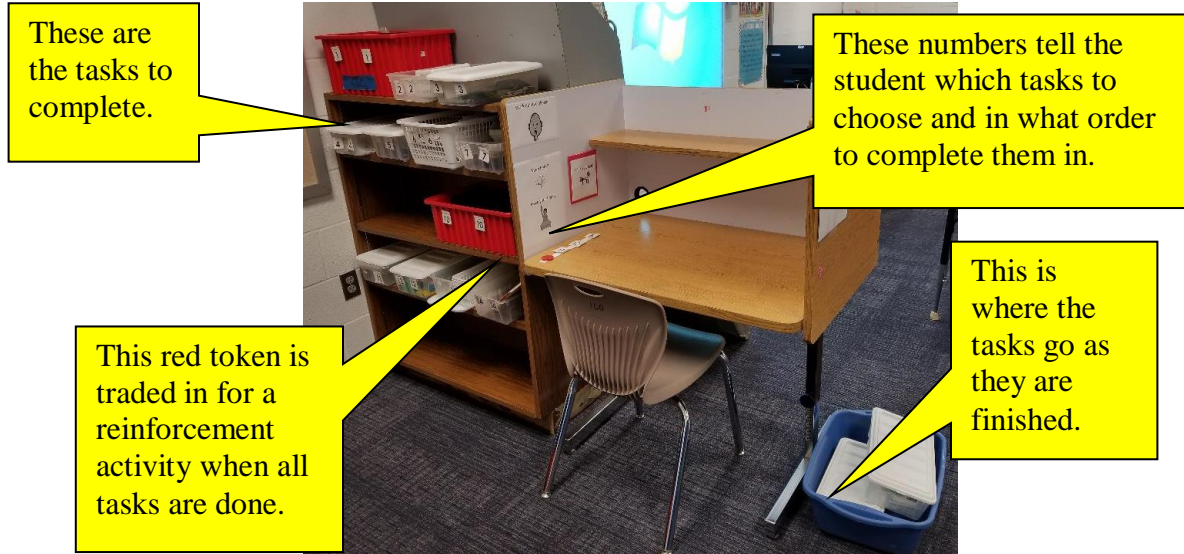
Work system 1:

These are the tasks to complete.

These colored numbers tell the student what order to complete the tasks in.

This red token is traded in for a reinforcement activity when all tasks are done.

This is where the tasks go as they are finished.

Work system 2:

These are the tasks to complete.

These colored numbers tell the student what order to complete the tasks in.

This green token is traded in for a reinforcement activity when all tasks are done.

This is where the tasks go as they are finished.

Work system 3:

These are the tasks to complete.

These numbers tell the student which tasks to choose and in what order to complete them in.

This is where the tasks go as they are finished.

This red token is traded in for a reinforcement activity when all tasks are done.

In order to provide the information needed, all work systems have five parts:
1. tasks
2. task identifiers
3. a work system mini-schedule
4. a work space
5. a designated space for completed work

Task identifiers provide a label for the task and consist of a matching pair of icons or small objects. Each task box will have a matching pair of task identifiers Velcro-ed to the front of it. The task seen here is labelled as task 5 and has two matching number 5 icons. When the task is not being used, both task identifiers remain on the task box.

Choosing the type of task identifier to use is based on the individual learner characteristics of each student. While there are a wide variety of objects, icons and pictures that can be used, the learner characteristics of the student drives the selection of the task identifier. Some students are not yet able to match identical objects, while others can match a wide variety of items or pictures. Some students are very focused while completing tasks and others are highly distractible and hard to engage. The type of task identifier chosen must support successful, independent use of the work system. The highest level of task identifier that the student can use independently should be selected. The chart that follows presents task identifier options matched to student learner characteristics.

Choosing Task Identifiers for Work Systems		
Student can:	**Task Identifier**	**Image**
not yet match or sort like objects	single task placement using gravity work system	
sort objects with very different traits, but can't yet match pictures	objects such as blocks of different colors	
match colors, but struggles sorting numbers or letters	icons made of differently colored shapes	
match pictures, numbers and letters	icons made of numbers or letters	
match pictures, numbers and letters, and also has very strong preferences and can be difficult to motivate or engage	icons made from images of student preferences	

A **work system mini-schedule** holds the task identifiers once a task is assigned to a student. It is called a mini-schedule because it shows the student what work to do, what order to do the work in and what to do when all of the tasks are completed. When a task needs to be assigned to a student one of the task identifiers is removed from the task box and placed on the work system mini-schedule. Students will work from either the top of the mini-schedule to the bottom or from the left to the right, removing each task identifier and matching it to a task identifier on a task box.

In the work area to the left, one task identifier from each box has been placed on a Velcro strip. The Velcro strip is the work system mini-schedule for this area. Students will take the first icon at the top of the strip and complete that task before moving to the next icon. Once all tasks are complete, the student will exchange the red chip at the bottom for a reinforcement activity.

To the left, the work system mini-schedules have been placed on color coded and laminated pieces of cardstock. On the right, the mini-schedule has been located inside a folder. Each student has a different colored strip of card stock or folder, making it easy for them to locate their individual work system mini-schedule.

In this independent work area, the work system mini-schedule is located on the left side of the study carrel. One task identifier (a foam block) has been removed from each task box and placed on the mini-schedule Velcro strip. The student will take the block at the top of the strip and match it to the block on the first task box. The student will work in this manner until all tasks are completed.

A suitable **work space** is crucial in independent work areas. The space needs to be large enough for task materials to be spread out. It also needs to have visible boundaries that designate a student's space. A study carrel works very well for this purpose as it has ample room to work and the walls of the carrel provide boundaries and reduce opportunity for distraction. If a study carrel is not available, or students need to work at a large table, duct tape can be used to delineate each student's space.

There are other advantages to having students practice working close to each other. In job placement settings, students must be able to work with distractions and in proximity to others. Some students may need the opportunity to practice these skills in a supervised setting in order to be successful.

Work systems must also include a **designated space for students to put each work task as it is completed**. Students should not disassemble the task, but instead, place it in a finished bin or

other designated space. Typically, a bin is placed on the floor just to the right of where the student is sitting. As soon as a task is completed, it should be placed in the finished bin. This keeps the work space organized. Students should not disassemble completed work tasks, and having a place to put them discourages that practice. It also builds a natural element of reinforcement into the system, as the student sees the amount of work disappearing from the desk.

Some teachers prefer to have students place completed work back on the shelves where it was taken from. This can pose several challenges. First, students may become confused with this process and fail to pick up the next task on their mini-schedule. Second, staff may not always know which work tasks need to be re-set in order to be ready for their next use. If a student is assigned a work task that is not prepared correctly, they can become confused or agitated. Both of these instances will create a situation where staff will need to intervene, provide support and cues and diminish student independence.
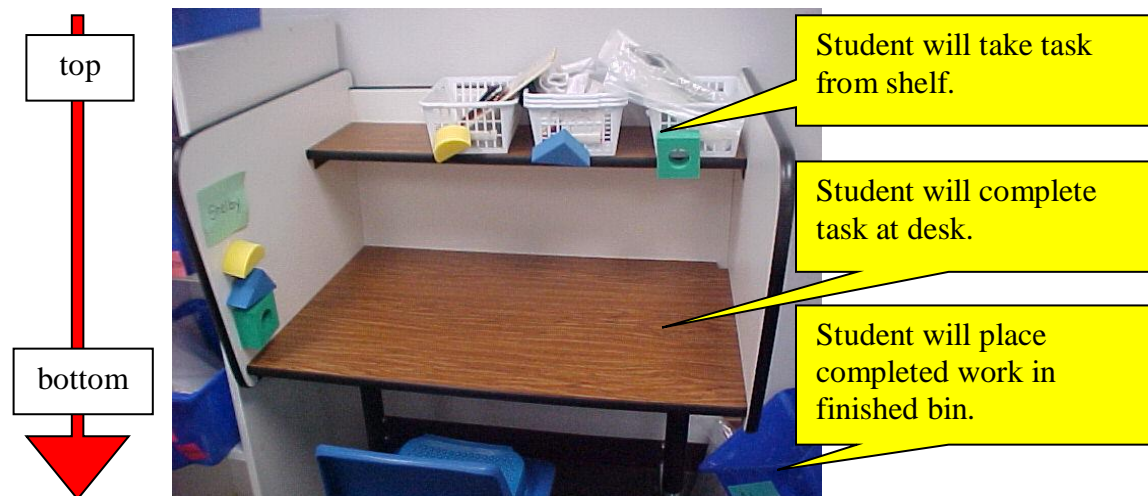
All work systems share commonalities- they communicate vital information to students and are composed of very specific parts. But each student is different and requires individualized supports. Because of this, there are different types of work systems to consider when designing an independent work area. Each type of work system is designed around specific student needs and abilities. The three types of work systems (the gravity system, the left-to-right system and the distance system) all meet student needs in unique ways.

A **gravity work system** provides maximum support for the student. This work system moves from top to bottom, letting gravity itself provide assistance. In the most basic gravity work system, one work task is placed on a shelf directly in front the student above the work area. The single task itself serves as the task identifier and mini-schedule. The student reaches up, lowers the task to the work space, completes the task then places it in a finished bin directly beneath the work space. Only one task at a time is presented. This type of work system is appropriate for students who have not yet learned to match like objects and may or may not have established one to one correspondence.

Students who are highly distractible and impulsive may benefit from a gravity work system, as it helps them to maintain focus on the task at hand. However, they may need a gravity work system that is more sophisticated. Once students have learned to match like objects, a higher level gravity system can be used. In the example below, three tasks are placed on the shelf above the work space at the study carrel. Foam blocks are used as the task identifiers, as the student who uses this work area can only differentiate between objects that have very different characteristics. Here, shape and color differences allow the student to use the work system independently.
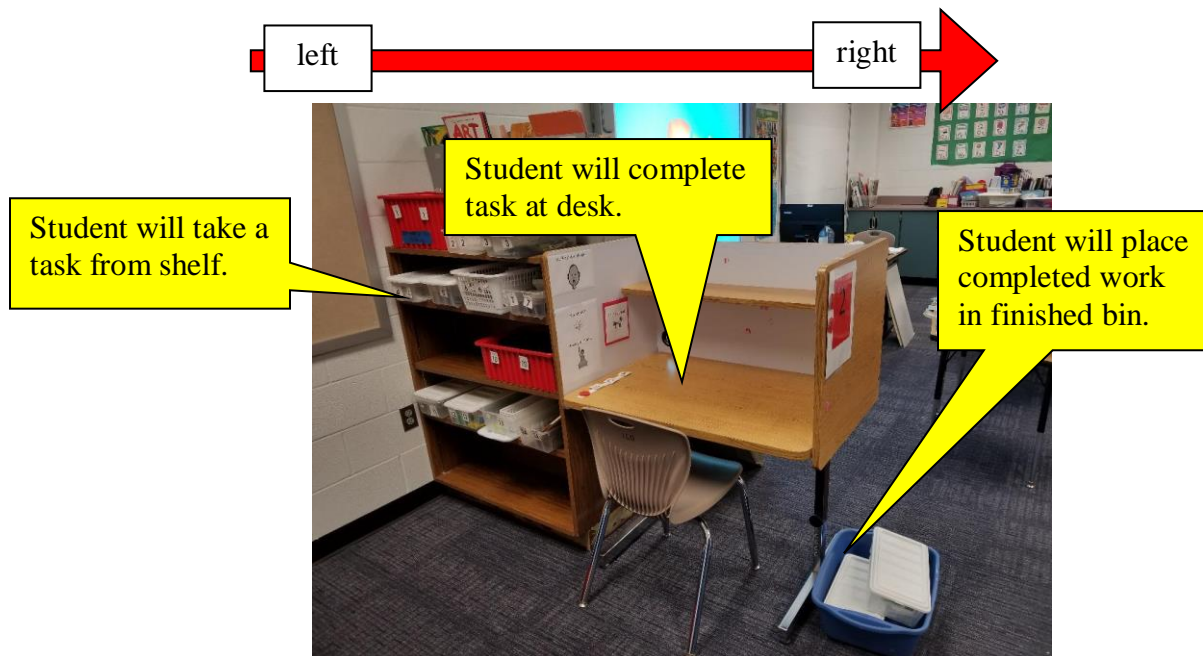
Gravity Work System:

top

bottom

Student will take task from shelf.

Student will complete task at desk.

Student will place completed work in finished bin.

When moving from a basic gravity system with one task to a more complex system with multiple tasks, the student will have to be taught how to use the works system mini-schedule. To begin teaching a student to use a mini-schedule to access work, start by placing one task on the shelf with one of the task identifiers on the task, and the other on the mini-schedule. Use faded prompting techniques to teach the student to pick up the task identifier from the mini-schedule and affix it beside the task identifier on the task box. Once the student is doing this consistently, add a second task to the mini-schedule. Continue until the student can use a mini-schedule to access three tasks.

The majority of students will be successful using a **left-to-right work system**. This type of work system is perfect for students who can match numbers, letters or pictures, and who are more successful when the tasks are close at hand. As is implied in the name, this system moves from left to right. Tasks are located to the left of the work space, the work is done in the center, and completed tasks are placed in a finished box to the right of the work space. Everything the student needs is beside them or in front of them within easy reach, and there is no need to step away from the desk they are working at.

Left-to-Right Work System:

left ──────────────────────────→ right

Student will take a task from shelf.

Student will complete task at desk.

Student will place completed work in finished bin.

The picture above shows a typical, left-to-right work system. The tasks are on the far left, the work space is in the middle, and the finished bin is to the right of the study carrel on the floor. The student will use the task identifiers on the mini-schedule to locate the corresponding work tasks on the shelf.

The student will pick up the first icon at the top of the strip and find the task on the shelf with the matching icon. Once the task is found, the student will place the task on the work space and complete it. Last, the student will place the box with the completed task in the finished bin. The student will pick up the next task identifier and continue with all tasks until they are completed.
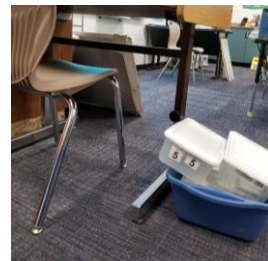
Once students have shown success using a left-to-right work system over a period of time, a **distance work system** can be tried. For students to be successful with a distance work system, they must be able to leave the independent work area, walk to the location of the work jobs and return to their work desk without being distracted by activity in the classroom. This requires self-control and the ability to stay focused, and may be too difficult for some.

In a distance work system, the work tasks are located in an area of the classroom that is not directly to the left of the student's work space. It could be three or four feet away, or across the

room. A distance work system is in place any time the student must leave his or her desk to access the work tasks.

Distance Work System:

In the picture above, students in either of the two independent work areas will step out of the area to the shelf to find their work tasks. Even though the tasks are relatively close to the desks, this is considered a distance work system.


In the independent work area to the left, students will stand and find their work tasks on the shelf to their right.

When creating independent work areas with distance work systems, it's important to ensure that students understand clearly where the tasks are located for each area.

The goal of using work systems is to create an environment where students can function independently. This will only happen if the supports meet the student needs. If a student requires reminders or additional direction to access tasks using a distance work system, then that type of system is not meeting their needs. Implement a left-to-right work system so that the student can be successful.

More likely than not, each independent work area will be accessed by multiple students throughout the day. And, each student will have different needs and abilities. Work systems can be set up to accommodate each student within the same area, using different task identifiers and mini-schedules.
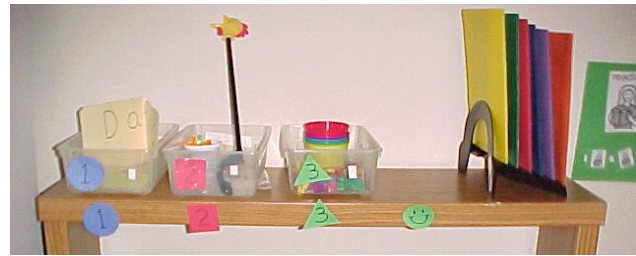
One student who accesses the work area to the left requires a gravity work system using matching colored icons. That is set up on the top shelf of the desk. The other students who rotate into this work area

use number icon task identifiers to locate tasks. Those task identifiers are placed in color coded folders with student names on them. These are also located on the top shelf of the desk. The students using the folders will choose their color coded folder and find their tasks on the shelves to the left of the desk.

Another way to set up work systems for multiple students at the same area is shown in the pictures below. Each student's mini-schedule is made from color coded, laminated strips of tag board. When students rotate to the work area, they take their tag board mini-schedule with the task identifiers assigned to them to the desk.

Choosing the appropriate work system, task identifiers and mini-schedule is crucial for student success at an independent work area. If a student struggles with independence in these areas, closely analyze the structures in place to determine where changes need to be made.
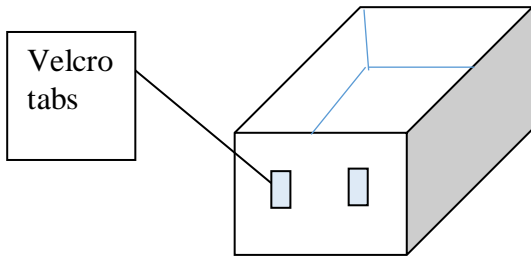
Number Icons for a Work System

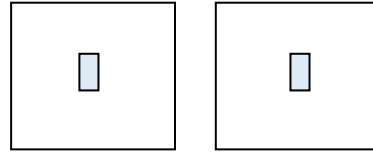|			
1	**2**	**3**	**4**
1	**2**	**3**	**4**
5	**6**	**7**	**8**
5	**6**	**7**	**8**
9	**10**	**9**	**10**

Directions for work systems:

1. Print the page with number icons.
2. Laminate and cut out each work icon.
3. Place 2 tabs of male Velcro on the container that will hold the task.
4. Place a tab of female Velcro on the back of each work system icon. (See below.)
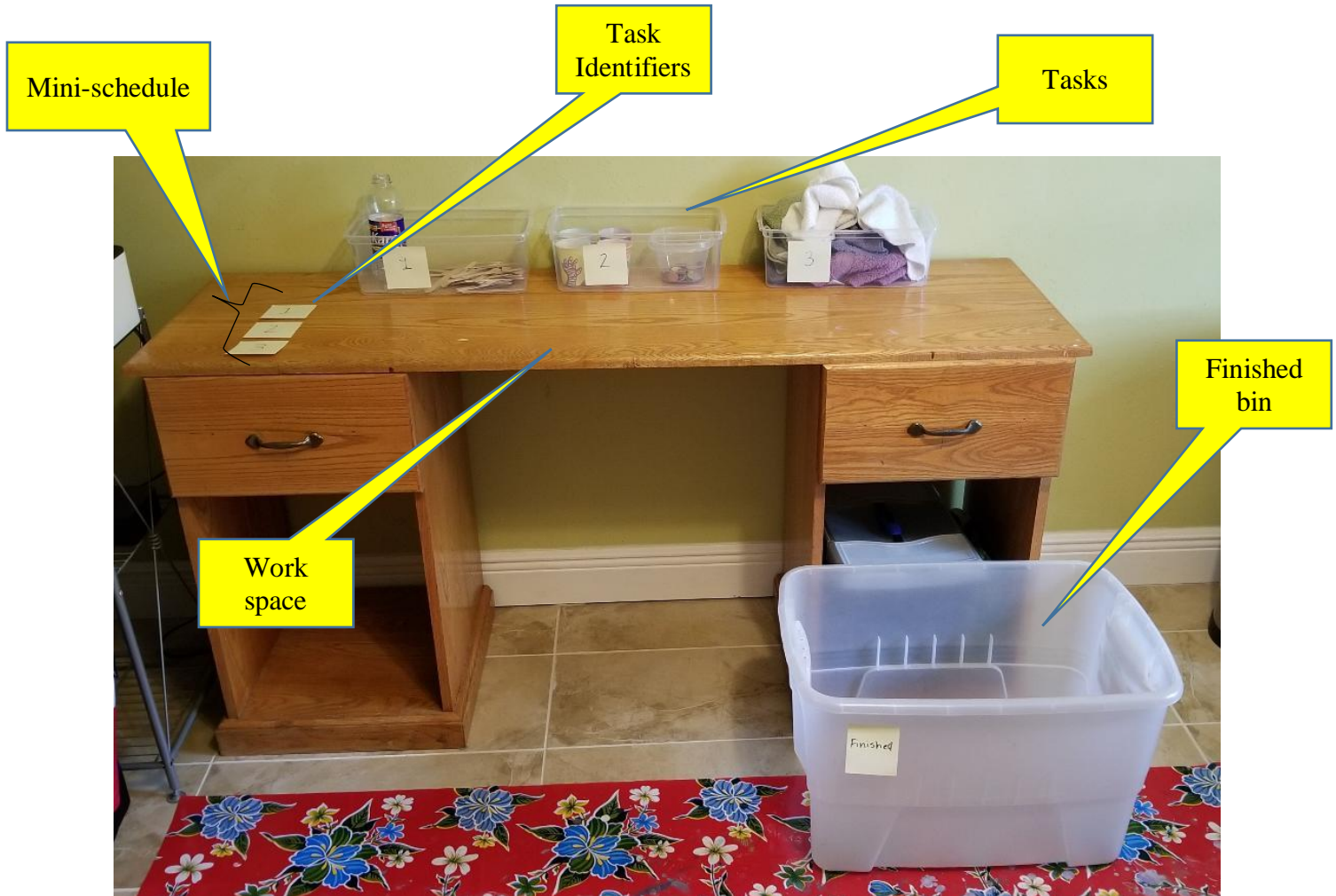
#3   #4

Velcro
tabs

Simple Home Work System 1- task boxes

This simple work systems is made using sticky notes, plastic shoe boxes and a plastic storage bin. Any containers that you have handy will work to hold tasks- cardboard shoe boxes, loaf baking pans, shipping boxes. The finished bin can be made from any large container- clothes hamper, large cardboard box, large basket.

Mini-schedule

Task Identifiers

Tasks

Finished bin

Work space

How to use the work system:
1. Take the first number on the mini-schedule and match it to the number on the first task.

2. Place the task on the work space and complete the task. (Sorting coins into cups)

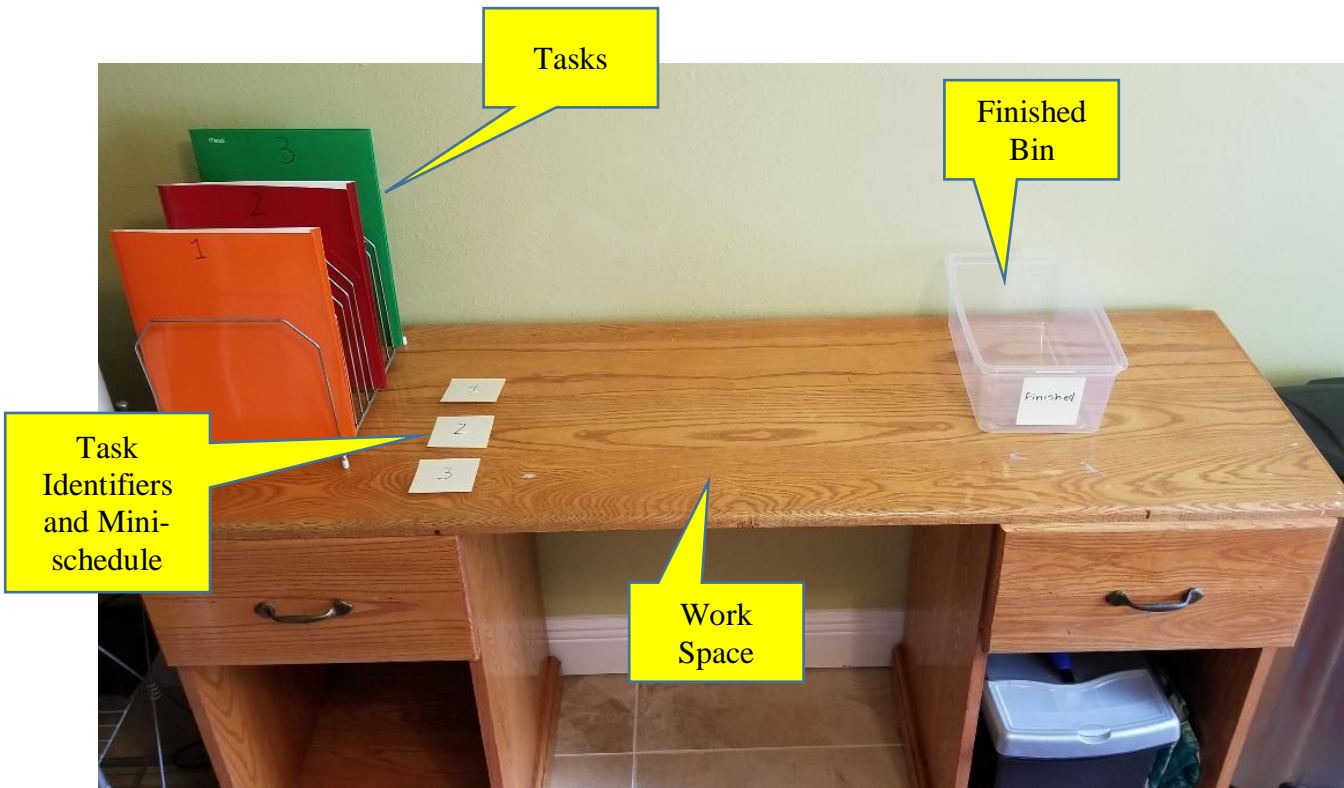3. Place the finished task into the finished bin.

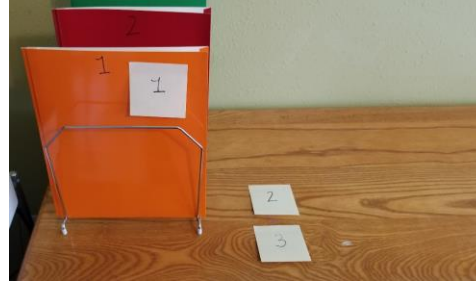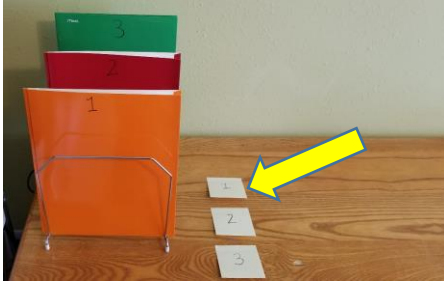4. Continue until all tasks are completed and placed in the finished bin.

Simple Home Work System 2- folder tasks

This simple work systems is made using sticky notes, folders, a folder organizer and a plastic shoe box. You can use any other materials you have at home that will serve the same purposes.

How to use the work system:
1. Take the first number on the mini-schedule and match it to the number on the first task.

2. Place the task on the work space and complete the task. (Writing sentences about a picture.)

3. Place the finished task into the finished bin.

4. Continue until all tasks are completed and placed in the finished bin.