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@LIFEASPLAND

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# CONQUER PAPERWORK OVERLOAD

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*A Step-by-Step Guide for  
Parent Carers*

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Debs Aspland

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# FOR THE SEND PARENT CARERS



*who suddenly find themselves with a room  
filled with filing cabinets when they were  
expecting a nursery*

# I'm Debs Aspland

## Welcome

As a mum of three children with a variety of special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), I remember the day I realised I needed another filing cabinet to fit all the paperwork in.

I remember the piles of paperwork around the house. I remember searching for that report, appointment letter, and form to complete and then almost crying when I found it and realised the date had passed so I would have to start the process all over again.

I remember travelling to London with three pre-school children in tow, only to be told I was a month early for my appointment.

### How I can Help You?

Over the years, I have found a variety of ways to stay on top of all the paperwork. I am not promising that this will put an end to the rainforest collection you receive however, I am hopeful that if you follow a few simple strategies, you can get to a point where you know where to find what you need when you need it and never arrive a month early or late for an appointment.

*Debs Aspland*



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# Introduction

Before we begin even considering a new filing system or start the process of organising the chaos that is currently in your filing system, let's talk about being kind to ourselves.

We land in the SEND arena with a bang. We have no time to plan or prepare for the event. We arrive without a guidebook and without a clue.

When we thought about being a parent, we probably didn't even think about keeping on top of paperwork, other than perhaps ensuring their birth certificate was somewhere safe.

Why on earth are you giving yourself a hard time because the paperwork is in piles around your home?

## WE ARE OUR OWN WORST CRITIC

- Is your child fed?
- Is your child clean (or as clean as any child can be)?
- Is your child happy?

If you can answer yes to the above questions, then give yourself a round of applause, you are doing an amazing job.

Think about what you would say to a friend if they were in your position? Would you be talking to them in the way you are talking to yourself? Not a chance.

Looking at the piles of paperwork and wondering where you even begin may feel very overwhelming. This just adds to the stress that your daily life already has more than enough of.

This book will hopefully help you with that. Opening this book, whether you bought it for yourself or received it as a gift, is the first step.



# Introduction

We will do this together, in small achievable steps, and when you reach the end of the book, you will have a system that works for you and more importantly, you will be able to find the document you need when you need it, quickly and without stress.

Having a system is so important. Anyone who has decluttered a room, or deep cleaned one will know how great it feels and how you promise you will stay on top of it, but then somehow that never happens and six months later, you are back to square one. This is because you don't have a system to keep on top of it.

Having a system for your paperwork means that as it arrives at the house, you will know what to do with it and where it belongs.

What this also means is you will have more time. How you choose to spend that is up to you, but a little bit of me time never hurt anyone.

Let's go. We can do this. You work at a pace that suits you and accepts that your plans to whizz through this book in the next week may not happen. Our lives can change without warning, phone calls can change our day.

BE KIND



## 02

# Find a Box

Let's start at the very beginning and go for an easy win. Find yourself a box. This will act as your in tray. It can be a large cardboard box or an actual letter tray (from one of those occasions when you decided to get organised in the past) or a magazine file.

If you don't have one of those, use an old cereal box - just cover it in paper or an old magazine to hide the sugar content if this is something you don't want to share with every visitor to your home.

I personally use a magazine file. When I first came up with the system, I used an old cereal box (then added "nice magazine files" to a Christmas wish list). I like magazine files because they take up less space on the counter and they also limit the amount of paperwork I can store in there so I can't put off sorting it for too long.

In this box add a few different folders. These can be lovely plastic folders you already own, or if not, use a few pieces of A4 card as dividers in there.

If you have no card, use old A4 envelopes that you have received, stick a few together to make them thick.

Don't put off starting the system because you haven't got exactly the right divider, magazine file or box. Use what you have, you can get prettier or more suitable ones later. The system will work whether you use a £10 letter tray or an old cereal box.

## USE WHAT YOU HAVE

The folders I use are as follows:

1. To read
2. To file
3. To do
4. To do today



## 02

# Find a Box

The “To Read” folder is for those reports or letters you want to check through before you file. The reports you want to check are accurate before it gets filed away.

The “To File” folder speaks for itself, anything you receive that once you have read you need to file it but no action is needed.

The “To Do” folder is for those items that need something doing. This can be as simple as an appointment letter that requires you to add the date to the calendar or confirm that you can attend. It can be one of those beloved forms we all love to complete. It can be a report you’ve read and have a few queries about so need to email or ring someone.

Once you have done whatever needs doing, these can either be added to the “to file” page or maybe there are pages that can go in the recycling.

The “To Do Today” folder is for those letters that come home from school - the ones you suddenly come across in their school bag and realise you need to sign or send in £1 for some charity event the next day.



When the kids arrive home, if you are anything like me, you won't have time to sign forms or put £1 in an envelope so having a space you can put these letters and forms to deal with after dinner is really useful.

That's it. Step one is complete.

A simple, easy to achieve, first step to getting yourself more organised with that paperwork.

Find a box, create folders or dividers.



# One Touch

When the post arrives, use the one-touch paperwork method. It's simple.

Don't worry, you do get to touch it again, this is not a "get it, sort it, action it, file it all at once" system because I live in the real world.

The basic concept of one-touch works like this. Collect the post from your mailbox, hall floor or wherever your beloved house companions put it. Walk towards your recycling bin.

Add to the recycling all the things you know you do not need again - the latest offerings from the local estate agent, the leaflets offering services you either don't want or need, the menus for restaurants you know you won't use, etc.

Those seven pieces of mail suddenly become maybe two or three pieces.

Open the mail.

Yes, open it straight away. Even if it is from a debt collection agency and you are doing all you can to avoid thinking about it. Open it.

The letters we avoid opening are usually the ones that take up space in our head. We are thinking about them even when we haven't opened them. As we sit watching the latest Netflix box set or as we drive to yet another appointment, there is a little voice in our head shouting "what about me, don't forget about me". It's never a case of out of sight, out of mind, is it?

Just open the mail.



# One Touch

All you have to do now is scan read it so you have a basic understanding of what it is. Then decide which of three folders (or however many you decided you needed) it goes into.

- Does it need reading properly (when you don't have a child attached to you)?
- Does it need filing?
- Do you need to do something with it?

Go to the intray you created in the first step and then choose the relevant folder. Put the paper in the folder.

That's it. Simple.

The second step towards getting organised with paperwork.

Sort the post as it comes into the home.



## 04 Practise

When we start a new system, it's all about changing our habits. It can be a challenge.

If we are used to grabbing the mail and dumping it on the dining table or breakfast bar, it will be a challenge to do it differently. However, small habit changes are easier to achieve so if you start with attaching this action (the one touch) to something you already do, i.e. pick the mail up and put it somewhere, it will be easier.

If you are coming in to the house at a bit of a busy time (or you have kids in tow), then do the recycling thing immediately but then create a folder in your Inbox (from step one) to add today's post to. This way you can sort it out a bit later and that is fine - so long as you do actually look at it later.

To make it easier, I have created a quick habit tracker below.

One Touch

All mail was put into the relevant folder when it arrived




Build good  
habits

## 05 Filing

File is a four letter word for a good reason. I hate it. I am not going to pretend it brings me any joy in the least but it's a necessary evil so finding a system that works is essential.

Let me share some different ideas with you - some I have tried and hated, some I use. Remember though that we are all different and although we may all be parent carers, that doesn't mean we are anything alike in how we do things. What works for me may not work for you, and the systems I have given up on because I wanted to cry when I used them, may be just the thing for you.

There is no right or wrong way to do this - well, maybe filing things in the bin because it's too difficult to even consider doing anything with it may not be the best way.

You need to find a way that works for you. Something you can continue doing, something you won't put off, and something that doesn't take too much time to do.

There is no use in spending time punching holes into paperwork this week, as you find your new system, if you know realistically that you won't do it again for another six months because it is too time consuming.

You know yourself, your available time and what hasn't worked so far for you.

### Lever Arch Files

This was my first attempt. I used to work in offices and lever arch files were the norm so I thought this had to be the way to go.

However, having to then find the hole punch every time I needed to file something became a challenge. Or the kids had used it and had somehow blocked it (there are better ways to punch holes in plasticine, in case you ever wondered).



## 05

# Filing

I then bought those A4 clear inserts - filing pockets. Again, trying to find a filing pocket when you have children who quite like stationery, was another challenge and often, the reports were so thick, they tended to curl up inside an A4 pocket and I really didn't want to waste hours removing staples and inserting each individual page into its own pocket.

Lever arch files were soon scrapped.

### Filing Cabinet

If I am being totally honest, when the children were younger and I suddenly had to give up work (when we had just bought a new house), money was very tight. A filing cabinet was a dream. I had to improvise.

I had a large storage box from Ikea (one of the boxes made for their Kallax range) and I used that.

I used clear A4 file pockets. (They open at the top and along one side) and I filed my paperwork in those, and then filed the pockets on their side in this Ikea box.

I used some card the kids had in a crafting pad as dividers, and also in an attempt to have the whole thing stand upright. I also made labels for the file pockets and the card with a roll of self adhesive labels a friend gave me..

This was far from perfect. I was aiming for a hanging file system, without actually having anything to hang the files with.

However, what this did help with was realising that being able to slip a piece of paper into a file pocket worked for me. I didn't have to punch a hole or try to bend the paper to get it to fit in, I just had to slide the paper into the sleeve. This was much easier. More importantly, it meant it didn't take a lot of time or effort.



# 05 Filing

What this also helped me to work on was categories.

If we were so inclined, we could create 1001 different categories or subcategories for all the paperwork but again, this adds to the time it takes to file things.

Let's keep it simple.

## Categories

There are a few different options here; again you choose or come up with what works best for you.

### Option 1

You can start off with a main category, eg your child's name - Fred (or House for household items, or Car for anything related to the Car).

Within that category, you can have sub-categories. I would suggest you start with Education, Health, Care, Benefits and Other (or for the house have categories such as insurance, bills, etc)

Anything to do with education goes in the education file, whether that is an EHC Plan (or Statement or CYPP, IEP), school reports, school or Local Authority correspondence

Anything to do with health goes in the health file, whether that is a doctor's report, an appointment, a prescription or things like Health care plans or health funding.

Anything to do with social care goes into the care folder, whether that it is a core assessment, correspondence or direct payment paperwork.

Having broad categories makes filing a much easier task.



# 05 Filing

## Option 2

Start as you did with option 1 but add subfolders to Education, Health, Care, etc.

For example, within Education have sub-folders for the official paperwork, the correspondence, the reports, etc.

This system allows you to find what you need much quicker, however, it also takes longer to file everything as you need to determine which sub-folder it belongs to.

If you can keep it simple, you will find filing takes a much shorter time and becomes less of a burden.

There are pros and cons to every system. Some will take more time to file but make retrieving the document much quicker. You have to decide where you want to spend your time.

How often do you actually retrieve some documents? Are there some documents you rarely go back to again?

If you know there are a few documents you refer to regularly, then perhaps have them in a folder you can grab easily.

## Scan and File

If you have the ability to scan documents, this is always worth doing. Lots of printers now have a scan facility, or you can download apps for free (or very little) to allow you to scan a document. If you have an iPhone, you can scan documents from your Notes app for free.

People panic about scanning documents. "What if you lose them?"

I save documents to two different places. One to Dropbox which I pay for and one copy to iCloud. If a document is very important, I also save a copy to a USB stick.



# 05 Filing

## Scan and Email

Another option is to set yourself up an email address (using a free service like gmail, etc) that you only use for documents. Call it something like “surnamedocuments@”

You can forward emails and email any documents you scan to the email address.

When you email them, make the subject line the details of the document you are attaching, e.g. social work report Jan 2022.

This idea is another great back up, It also means you can add the email address to your phone and have the information available easily.

Filing is never going to be a fun experience, I honestly do not know a single person who enjoys it. We may enjoy the feeling once it is done but no one ever looked at a pile of filing and thought “oh yes, I cannot wait”.

Find a system that works for you. In the next few chapters, we are going to look at the piles of paperwork you have around the home.

Have a think before starting the next chapter as to what you want to file and how you want to file it.

As you work through the next few chapters, you can adapt what you come up with when you have actual documents to file. We can all think of perfect solutions but when we put them into practice, they become less perfect.

However, having a few ideas to start the process will help immensely.





## Find the paperwork

Find the paperwork you have scattered around your home. You may have piles on the dining table, the kitchen counter, a coffee table, the floor, an in tray, beside your bed, or 1001 other places.

Your first challenge is to collect it all in one place. Go around the house and find all those bits of papers, those letters, those flyers, those receipts - anything that looks like paper and put it all in one place.

In the next chapter, we will start to work through these piles of paperwork but for now, in this step, all you have to do is find all those pieces and put them into one space.

It can be your dining table, your bedroom, a big old Amazon box or anything. We just need it all together.

### Pens

While you are at it, collect all those pots of pens you have around the house.

We all have a pot of pens with pens that don't work in it. We grab a pen as we are on the phone and when it doesn't work, we shove it back in the pot and grab another one.

As we sort out the paper in the next chapter, you will have a pile of paper to recycle. This pile will be used before we recycle it.

Put all the pens you find in the same place as the paperwork. Give it a name if that helps - Paperwork Central, the Pile Palace, the Mountain of No Return. Whatever helps you to get through the bit you have been dreading, sorting out those piles. You have a system for the new stuff but we need to address the other paperwork already in the home.

You can do this!



# Create Piles

Once you have collected all the paperwork, we need to sort it out.

Using the categories we came up with right at the beginning (in Chapter 2), grab a handful of that paperwork and put them into piles (creating more piles is simple - you are an expert at this).

With each piece of paper, decide if you need:

- To read it
- To do something with it (add to calendar, note down contact details, etc)
- To file it
- To do something today
- To recycle

Put each piece of paper into one of those 5 piles.

This week, when you have five minutes, grab another handful of paperwork and add the pages to the relevant pile.

You do not have to do this all in one sitting. You may find you want to, just to get it over and done with but if your life just doesn't have that time at the moment, then do what you can when you can. Little and often is better than nothing at all.

## Pens

When you have everything into piles, we can move on to the next step. However, before you do that, grab those pens and the pile of papers you want to recycle. Use this paper to scribble away on with each pen. Throw away the pens that don't work. Organise the pens that do into small pots placed near to your phone or close to where you sit/stand when you take a call so you can grab a pen easily.

Look how organised you are getting!!!



## File, Read, Do

Filing is the bit we hate but having decided on a system in Chapter 5 means that the paper that needs filing won't seem quite so daunting. Honest!

Sort the filing pile into the categories you came up with in chapter 5. Start with the big overall category e.g. child's name, house, car, etc.

Then work through each of the piles and split that into the piles that relate to the subcategories you created.

When you have those sorted, then look at the To Read pile and the To Do pile. Go for the smallest one (probably To do) and let's clear that.

The To Do pile should contain documents that you either need to use a bit of information from it, send an email to someone about it or complete a form. Split the To Do file into the appropriate actions, then grab a pen (from your pot of working pens), and add dates to the calendar, write down the contact details you need (or add them to your phone), and then put those pages either into the filing system or in the recycling.

If there are forms in there, don't just ignore them. Look at your calendar and work out a realistic slot for you to complete it. Write that date/time on a post-it note or the envelope it is contained in and add the date to your calendar. Knowing you have committed to an appointment with that form can help you stop worrying about missing a deadline. Try to do it sooner rather than later.

We know some of the forms are just awful and can feel soul-destroying, so when you settle on the date/time to complete it, also think about how you can reward yourself for doing it. Just getting it done is not a reward, think of something that makes you happy. Write that on the post-it note or envelope. It doesn't have to be an expensive gift, it can be as simple as watching TikTok videos for an hour with no guilt.



## File, Read, Do

In our SEND parent carer planner and our Me is for me not just Mum planner, we look at creating a happy list (or things to do after a sh\*t day list) and how to use it.

If you need to send emails or write responses to something in your To Do pile, again schedule a time to do it. If it will only take 5 mins, just do it. If it will require a bit more time or patience (or perhaps you need time to edit out all the naughty words), then schedule it. Group the similar tasks together, e.g. sending emails, writing letters or making phone calls. Staying with one type of task is much easier than swapping and changing every five minutes. Your brain gets into a pattern and you will find the second or third email much easier to do.

Also think about you and your patterns. If you are not a morning person, then don't schedule big daunting tasks then, use that time to do things that don't require a huge amount of brain space. If you have an afternoon dip in energy (really common for parents who have children who do not sleep through the night), then use the afternoon slots for things that allow you to sit down, e.g phone calls.

You will know yourself better than anyone else, so don't set yourself goals you know you won't be able to achieve. Be realistic. Be kind!

When you have worked through the To do piles, either file or recycle.

Let's look finally at the To Read pile. This may include reports, magazines, research articles, etc. Again, split this pile into sub-piles. If the magazines are fun magazines, then use them as rewards. Find the best time for you to read through them and decide if you need to do something with them (eg cut out an article, send an email to ask a question, etc) or if they can be filed or recycled.



## File, Read, Do

### Little and Often

This is probably one of the biggest steps that takes the most time, so be kind. No one is expecting you to do this overnight. Grab a pile when you have five minutes, and work through them.

Don't kick yourself if you have a day when nothing gets done. Life can get in the way and sometimes, we need to prioritise our own well being. Having a day off where you catch up with a friend, or stay in PJs all day is not a wasted day if at the end of it, you feel more human and up to the challenges ahead.

Don't feel guilty for looking after you. Every one wins when you do this. These piles of paperwork have probably been around for a few years, a few more days won't hurt.



## Filing Habit

Filing habits! I know, I can't believe I am saying this either but in order to stay on top of everything, we need to create some type of habit.

It could be that you decide you will do the filing when the folder within your inbox (created in chapter 2) is stuffed and even with all the desire in the world, you couldn't add another piece to it.

You may decide that a Friday morning is going to be your filing time as you like the idea of starting the weekend with the filing completed.

You may decide that on the first Monday of every month, you will get the filing cleared away.

You do what works for you. Some people will get more paperwork than others, not because their child's needs are less but perhaps because their child is older. At the beginning of our entry into the Special Educational Needs world, we were overwhelmed as we suddenly had several people to see, several reports to be read, several appointment letters and referrals, etc. As time has moved on, we still get much more than most parents but it has settled down as the referrals have been made, appointments are spread out more, etc.

Find something that fits in with you and your life. We are all different.

As you have the inbox from Chapter 2, any new paperwork will go into a folder to be sorted and if you are using the one touch system from Chapter 3, you won't have paperwork you don't need hanging around.

You can do this. Believe me, if I can, anyone can. I love stationery but hate paperwork. I hate the reality check it brings and I hate the time it takes. However, I hate the time it takes to find something when I need it even more than I hate organising paperwork. Remember the end goal.



## Made from Experience

Life AsPland is a parent carer of three teenagers with a variety of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

After years of arriving a month early (or to the wrong building) for an appointment, or forgetting where she had put an important document or sometimes just trying to remember what day of the week it was, she came up with her own planner.

After friends started to approach her for their own copy, she realised this could be a business that would be suitable for her children to be involved with when they left education.

By purchasing this book, you are not just getting organised and supporting your own child, you are also supporting her children's future.

## Thank you xx

Life AsPland offers a range of planners and tools for SEND parent carers, along with a selection of journals and planners for the activities you will find time for, now you are more organised.

If there is something we can offer to make your day run a bit more smoothly but you can't see it in the store, get in touch

We love hearing from you with feedback and suggestions.



## FIND ME

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