

Handling Test Stress

Practical Tips to Help Your Child

In high school, your child's life is a whirlwind of tests, from midterms and finals to the PSAT/NMSQT[®] and SAT[®] tests. With all this experience, it may seem like taking tests should be a breeze for your child. Unfortunately, this isn't always the case. Pressure to get high marks can increase a student's anxiety over grades, and make tests a nerve-racking experience.

Good Stress and Bad Stress

Some stress before a test can actually be helpful. Just as stress at a job can push you to work harder, test stress can motivate students to put forth their best effort. However, too much anxiety can weaken students' confidence. The anxiety that students feel when faced with an exam can create a kind of noise or static in their minds. Unless they're able to relax, that noise can block their ability to recall important information. It can also impair their comprehension and reasoning, which makes problem-solving very difficult. As a result, students may receive grades that don't really reflect their hard work and abilities.

Tips for Calming Test-Time Jitters

If your child gets nervous before tests for classes, encourage her to try the following tips and strategies for keeping anxiety down and energy up for the next big exam.

Before the Test

Don't cram: Studying like crazy the night before an exam can leave your child exhausted and more stressed out than before, so encourage her to study in small doses over several days.

Take practice tests: Knowing the format and style of a test can keep anxiety at bay, so have your child take practice exams if they're available.

Get a good night's sleep: Lack of sleep contributes heavily to anxiety. Be sure your child goes to bed early the night before an exam.

Eat a healthy breakfast: Blood sugar is at its lowest in the morning. In order for your child to think and problem-solve effectively, she needs a good breakfast.

Exercise: Encourage your child to engage in physical activity before the test to reduce body tension. For example, take a brisk walk or jog.

Come early and prepared: By arriving to the test early and with the right supplies (e.g., No.2 pencils, calculator), your child can avoid stressing out about small details. This will allow her to focus on the task at hand.

During the Test

Preview the exam and budget time: By previewing the test, your child can avoid any unexpected surprises (and anxiety). It will also give her the opportunity to budget her time so she doesn't spend too long on any one section.

Jot notes: Jotting down brief notes right away can help your child feel less anxious about forgetting important facts or key information.

Read all directions: Some students are so anxious to get the test over with that they fail to read the directions.

Answer easy questions first: Getting the easier questions out of the way allows your child to focus her energy and time on the harder questions.

Rephrase difficult questions: Putting difficult questions in her own words can help your child slow down and really think about the problem. But your child should be careful not to change the questions' meanings when rewriting them.

Organize thoughts before writing: Your child should organize her responses to short-answer and essay questions before diving in. Having a plan will help her feel confident while she's writing.

Think positively: Negative thoughts during a test (e.g., "I'm going to fail") can destroy your child's confidence. Encourage her to override negative thoughts with positive ones (e.g., "I studied hard and I know my facts. I'll do great on this test.")

Relax: If your child starts to feel stress during a test, she should try quick relaxation techniques, such as:

- Taking deep breaths, and letting out tension with each exhale
- Tensing muscles for five seconds and releasing, repeating three times
- Visualizing a peaceful and relaxing setting

Keep in mind that using the tips above won't necessarily keep anxiety away completely. However, practicing these techniques can give your child the right skills to manage test stress when it does happen.