

Help Your Child Reduce Test Stress

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It's normal for kids to feel a little nervous before a big test, but some kids get so anxious that it affects their health, their attitude, and their grades. Test anxiety has become more common as schools have put more emphasis on standardized testing. All types of students can get stressed out, including those who usually get good grades.

Here are some signs that a child is overly worried about tests:

- Doesn't want to go to school, especially on test day
- Cries over small things during the days leading up to a test
- Changes eating and sleeping patterns in the days before a test
- Won't complete even simple homework assignments
- Is distracted and unable to focus
- Puts herself down or calls herself "stupid"
- Has an upset stomach or a tension headache before a test
- Performs well on practice tests but not on the real test
- Does well on papers and projects but not on tests

Schools, principals, teachers, and communities are increasingly judged on their test scores, making everyone involved overly anxious, says Joseph Casbarro, a former New York principal and school system administrator. As standardized test scores became powerful numbers, driving student promotions to the next grade, a school's reputation, and even real estate prices, he observed that most students began experiencing stress to some degree.

"It seemed to be getting out of control," says Casbarro, now an education consultant. "Test scores occupied every waking moment."

To help kids, parents, and teachers understand where stress comes from and how to alleviate it, Casbarro wrote the book *Test Anxiety and What You Can Do About It*. He says it's in everyone's best interest to help kids feel less stressed.

Here are some of Casbarro's suggestions for helping kids overcome test anxiety.

Look in the mirror. "Parents should ask themselves, 'Am I the prime contributor?'" Some parents unwittingly heap stress on their kids by talking frequently about tests and sending the message that they measure their child's worth in terms of grades and test scores. "Parents think so much of their child's future hinges on tests and performance," Casbarro says. "Parents think if they don't push their kids they are being irresponsible."

Find balance. By praising your child for accomplishments other than test scores and grades, you send the message that other pursuits, such as the arts, sports, and relationships, are important, too.

Highlight successful people who weren't good test-takers. From his poor scores on high school math tests, you wouldn't have known that Werner Von Braun would grow up to be a rocket scientist. Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, which oversees the SAT, is dyslexic. Look for examples in your family and community.

Talk about a variety of careers. It's tempting to focus on doctors, lawyers, scientists, and other fields associated with prestige and big salaries. Make sure your kids know there are other satisfying career options, and that the most important thing is that they are happy in their career choice.

Don't expect all kids to excel equally. You may raise your kids under the same roof, but they are all different. One may do well on tests without much preparation, while the other may struggle just for an average score. Avoid the temptation to constantly heap praise on the good test-taker. Sometimes it's the kid who didn't do well on tests who has more success in after-school pursuits. "Be realistic about your kids' interests and strengths," Casbarro says.

Understand your child's learning style. Some kids need more intervention from Mom and Dad, often because they have a hard time focusing on material for more than a few minutes. And while some kids are motivated to study hard because they want good grades, others respond to a more immediate reward like the opportunity to watch a TV show if they study for their test and demonstrate to a parent that they know the material.

Help your child with study skills. You can't take the test for your child, but you can teach him how to prepare. "Doing well on a test begins well before test day," Casbarro says. Teach your child to reduce distractions and avoid cram sessions. If your child is struggling to find a way to learn vocabulary words or facts, help her make flashcards or come up with a game. If your child doesn't always know what the homework assignment is, work with her on using an organizer.

Help your child outsmart the test. Teach your child test-taking strategies that can help when she doesn't know the answer. Casbarro recommends taking a cue from the TV show *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire* and trying to eliminate two of four responses to a multiple-choice question.

Rethink the homework routine. Parents often insist their children complete their homework right after school. But some kids are burned out and exhausted at that time, Casbarro says. "That may not be the best time for homework."

Encourage healthy habits. Kids need to eat healthy meals, exercise regularly, and get a good night's sleep. Parents can help by modeling these healthy habits and making sure the child has the opportunity to make healthy choices. Parents can stock the fridge with healthy snacks, for example.

Test stress is part of life as a student, but if your child is suffering over test anxiety, she may need professional help. Extreme stress can keep a child from reaching her potential

in school and impact her physical health. You can help your kids by teaching them some strategies for coping with test anxiety. You won't just be helping them become better test-takers, you'll be equipping them with strategies that will help them handle whatever challenges life throws their way.

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