



West Exe School

Surviving GCSEs: a guide for parents

Managing the stress of GCSE exams



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COPING WITH EXAM STRESS - A PARENTS' GUIDE

Exam time can be a major cause of stress for children and parents at this time of year. Here are some tips on how to cope.

At exam time, many parents are anxious about how much their children are studying, whether they are looking after themselves, and whether they will get the results they need. Some parents also find their own difficult memories of exams or school return at this time and make it harder to help their children.

BEFORE THEIR EXAMS

It's always worth planning ahead and preparing as well as you can as a family. Accept that this is going to be a stressful time for the whole family - expect outbursts and try to remain calm!

- Try and find out as early as possible what is expected of your child, when their exams will be and when coursework needs to be handed in.
- But be clear that avoiding subjects they find difficult will not be helpful in the long run.

Encourage them to talk to you if they are really worried that they haven't done enough work - reassure them that if they do not get their expected grades, there will be other opportunities ahead and they should just do their best. Find out what revision techniques are recommended by the school, what revision sessions they are providing and check out online revision sites too.

If you have any concerns or questions, contact the school rather than relying on your child to do it - all teachers have email addresses which can be useful if they are hard to contact.

TIPS DURING REVISION

While they are revising, children are often stressed, anxious and irritable and can have trouble with eating and sleeping. But a few simple things can really help:

Try and work with your child and support them rather than 'policing' them.

- Encourage your child to have regular breaks, to do something they enjoy, even if it's just half an hour off to listen to some music or to watch their favourite soap.
- Make sure they eat healthy snacks regularly and drink enough so they don't get dehydrated - you can always pop your head in to see how they are doing and bring them a drink.
- Exercise is also a good way to relax, even just a walk round the block.
- Children have different ways of revision - some may prefer to be alone whereas others work best surrounded by noise and family.
- Respect their body clocks - many teenagers are more alert during the night and this may be the best time for them to revise even though it makes parents anxious!

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WHEN IT'S ALL OVER

- After the exams, there may be feelings of relief, but also stress and anxiety if things haven't gone well. Feelings may 'catch up' with your child after a sustained effort of studying hard, and you may need to 'let them be' for a while.
- After an exam or hand-in, they might not want to talk about it immediately so let them decide.

If they are anxious, reassure them that they have done their best for now and any problems can be dealt with in the future.

Try and plan something nice for when it's all over - reward them for trying their best, however they feel it went.

GETTING FURTHER ADVICE

If you are very worried about your child and feel that exam stress is overwhelming or has made other pre-existing issues worse, call the [YoungMinds Parents Helpline](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/for_parents/parent_helpline) for information and professional advice: 0808 802 5544 (free from landlines and mobiles)

Website address: http://www.youngminds.org.uk/for_parents/parent_helpline

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How to cope with stress: The best way to combat stress is to recognise and deal with it. It is perfectly normal to feel stress over examinations—it is a matter of finding the best strategies to reduce it. Stress becomes a problem when parents and children handle it by denying its presence or by doing things to reinforce it. For parents, making a family joke of a child's anxieties or imposing an excessive revision schedule are sure ways of increasing the stress burden. For students, going to a party and getting drunk has the same effect!

Parents

- * Don't go on about it. Being asked how you feel often makes things worse. Try to be a listener rather than to give advice. It is normal to say that each examination paper was a total disaster, so don't join the inquest!
- * Be encouraging. Even if your child has been lazy over the past few months, now it is not the time to bring it up. Don't organise family visits and days out as entertaining distractions, either.
- * Talk to teachers if you're worried. An apparently stressed child at home may be coping well at school and vice versa.
- * Expect a 'bumpy' ride during the revision period. Slamming doors, arguing pointlessly and crying are simple safety valves and not a cause for worry. However, watch out for the child who is having real difficulty sleeping or is very quiet and withdrawn, or the one who is apparently "studying" diligently but really doing nothing - copying out the text book, for example. Watch out for side-effects. The stress of examinations can easily bring unrelated emotional issues and physical complaints to the surface.

Students

- * Relax for an hour a day at least - listen to music, watch television or take exercise.
- * Revise hard in slots of an hour or less - write rather than read - and take a 10-minute break - time yourself) in-between.
- * Get regular sleep and avoid too much junk food and caffeine (coffee, cola, and tea). The best revision is done in the morning.
- * Don't wind yourself and your friends up with frenzied hyperactivity. Stop planning your after-exams parties and holiday.

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Beat school exam stress



Tests and exams, including GCSEs, can be a challenging part of school life for both children and parents. But there are ways to ease the stress.

1. Watch out for exam stress

Look out for signs of exam stress. Stressed children may be irritable, not sleep well, lose interest in food, worry a lot and appear depressed or negative. Headaches and stomach pains can also be stress-related.

Having someone to talk to about their work can help. Support from a parent, tutor or study buddy can help children air their worries and keep things in perspective. If you feel your child isn't coping, talk to teachers at your child's school.

2. Ensure your child eats well at exam time

A balanced diet is vital for your child's health and can help them feel well during exam periods. Some parents find that too many high-fat, high-sugar and high-caffeine foods and drinks (such as cola, sweets, chocolate, burgers and chips) make their children hyperactive, irritable and moody.

3. Sleep helps exam performance

Good sleep will improve your child's thinking and concentration. Most teenagers need between 8 and 10 hours' sleep a night.

Allow half an hour or so for kids to wind down between studying, watching TV or using a computer and going to bed to help them get a good night's sleep.

Cramming all night before an exam is usually a bad idea. Sleep will benefit your child far more than hours of panicky last-minute study.

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4. Be flexible at exam time

Family Lives advises parents to be flexible around exam time. When your child is revising all day, don't worry about household jobs that are left undone or untidy bedrooms.

Staying calm yourself can help. Remember, exams don't last forever.

5. Help your child revise

Help your child revise by making sure they have somewhere comfortable to study. Help them draw up a revision schedule or ask the school for one.

6. Discuss any exam nerves

Remind your child that feeling nervous is normal. Nervousness is a natural reaction to exams. The key is to put these nerves to positive use. Being reminded of what they do know and the time they have put into study can help them feel confident.

7. Encourage exercise at exam time

Make sure your kids are active. Exercise can help boost energy levels, clear the mind and relieve stress. Walking, cycling, swimming, football and dancing are all effective.

Read 10 fun ways for teenagers to get fit. Get advice on how boys and girls can get started with dance for fitness.

8. Don't add to exam pressure

Support group ChildLine says that many of the children who contact them feel that the greatest pressure at exam time comes from their family. "Keep things in perspective," says Rosanne Pearce, a senior supervisor. "Listen to them, give support and avoid criticism."

Before they go in for a test or exam, be reassuring and positive. Make sure they know that failing isn't the end of the world and they may be able to take the exam again if things don't go well. After each exam, encourage your child to talk it through with you. Then move on and focus on the next test, rather than dwelling on things that can't be changed.

9. Have treats after exams

When the exams are over, help celebrate with a treat. These can be a real encouragement for the next time they have a test.

Don't use rewards as bribes. Instead, encourage them to work for their own satisfaction, offering small, frequent treats.

More information

For more information, read the Mind website page on exam stress: http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/your-stories/14-ways-to-beat-exam-stress/#.WMFPN_nyhgdg

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1. Coping with revision

My child has been revising methodically for his GCSEs since before Easter. He's made a revision timetable and copious notes for the eight subjects he's studying, but he's now overwhelmed by the prospect of trying to take it all in. How can I help him to make the revision process more effective?

Jane Florsham was a senior teacher and now works as an educational consultant. Interview by Amanda Roper.

"Your son needs to distil the information he had learned into more manageable chunks. He needs to go through his notes and reduce them into topic areas, and then key notes. These form the 'pegs' on which you can hang your wider knowledge. Working out how to remember these depend upon what type of learner you are: visual, auditory or kinesthetic.

"Visual learners use flowcharts, spidergrams, charts or mnemonics. These take a large quantity of information and then present it in a simplified but memorable, form. Put them up on the walls in your bedroom to memorise them.

"There are revision aids on CD-rom for auditory learners, but it's also worth making your own. As well as listening to it, the process of selecting the narrative for your revision CD will help to fix ideas into your subconscious.

"Kinesthetic learners learn best by doing. The very act of writing down revision notes is a form of active learning, as is watching videos. The BBC broadcasts the Bitesize revision series, which is extremely useful regardless of which form of learning suits you. It's produced with GCSE revision in mind, and gives a great deal of visual stimulus that will help to trigger remembered learning. The same is true of using computer software, such as CD-Roms or internet revision sites".

Advice to give your child:

Think about the context in which you first learnt something: for example, visualise the science experiment, the methods you used and the results recorded.

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- ◆ Practise by doing timed past papers and get them marked with feedback. To find out what examiners are looking for, dig out their marking schemes. Schools also offer revision classes in GCSE subjects. These will explain how to get certain grades and provide the opportunity to seek individual guidance. You might need something explained again or help to identify what to revise to get the highest marks possible. You may feel as if you've left school, but your teachers will still view you as their student until after your exams.
- ◆ Plan your revision timetable to follow your exam timetable. Spend 30 minutes revising, take a 10-minute break, and then test yourself on what you've just learned. Ask someone to test you. You do actually learn more by "teaching" someone else.
- ◆ A good revision programme should leave you time to unwind. Don't try to sleep straight after revising - your brain will be too active and stop you from getting to sleep. Never cram immediately before an exam, it will just make you anxious about all the things you don't know. Make sure you've got everything ready and have a good breakfast. Give yourself plenty of time to get there, you cannot perform at your best if you're stressed before you start.

2. Expert Advice

How should you help your children during the exam period? Experts give advice.

Robert Godber, Head of Wath-on-Dearn Comprehensive, Rotherham

Provide a calm and supportive environment at home: try to be there for your child, both to provide practical things like food and to help when there's an emotional crisis because a paper was unexpectedly hard or a romance has broken up. Don't offer a bribe, these almost always backfire and leave smouldering resentments, or anything that's conditional on success. But organising an event to look forward to when it's all over; an evening out or weekend away, can be a good idea. And make sure your expectations are realistic and tie in with your child's. Verdict: Be there.

John Wilding, Cognitive Psychologist specialising in student learning.

Research shows that memory is the key to exam success; it also shows that strategic learning is crucial when it comes to remembering things. So you can help your child by helping him or her devise a revision strategy. Encourage her to be organised, to have a plan. This is very important, and it's something you really can help with, especially at times when the enormity of the task seems overwhelming for the young person. You might not understand the details of their work, but you can help them plan it. And don't panic: it's never too late. Verdict: Help them plan.

Daphne Metland, mother of two children, a boy aged 20 and a girl aged 15.

When my son did his exams we all thought they were so important, and they are, but if it all goes wrong they can always do them again. Now my daughter is doing her GCSEs and this time I'm more relaxed. I keep reminding her that she does know her stuff, but that if she fails it's not the end of the world.

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Stay on your child's side: let them know your love isn't conditional. Give them food they'll enjoy and do anything you can to give them a bit of extra love and care. Protect them: don't have the house full of friends, and don't expect them to put in an appearance at family events. Verdict: Be on their side.

Michelle Elliot, Director of the child safety charity, Kidscape

My son has just gone through the US equivalent of A levels. I think the most important thing is to back off: don't tell them to do the dishes or pick their laundry off the floor. You know the flashpoints, so lay off them because your child is already under such a lot of pressure and you've got to give a bit. Don't be taken in if they're acting all cool and couldn't be bothered: they do care, they know a lot depends on these exams. Remind them to take breaks, suggest they go out for a walk. Give them lots of small snacks, and let them sleep in whenever possible. Verdict: Back off.

3. Strategies for coping

Examinations are upon us, and, along with them, the pressure for students to do well. In some respects, exams are harder than they were in the past. Jim Sweetman offers young people some strategies for coping.

With the examination season in full swing, more young people are finding it hard to cope with the pressure. "Cracking up", particularly at A level, is much more common than many parents realise and once it has happened, it is difficult to treat. In the worst cases, it is the prelude to adult mental illness and may lead to attempted suicide or even death.

For parents, there is a difficult line to read between setting expectations and encouraging a child to work towards challenging goals, as opposed to placing children in situations where they cannot cope or putting them under unreasonable pressure at home.

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A contributory factor in many cases of stress is the assumption by parents and relatives that examinations used to be harder “in their day”. There is minimal evidence for this point of view, although any sixth-former will tell you that they have heard it expressed within the last few weeks. Coursework and modular tests are hoked about as an opportunity to escape from the real test in the examination room when, in practice, they test wider areas and more content than does a short examination paper. They are also weighted quite harshly so that, despite the work involved, they contribute although only around one-third of the final marks.

The national curriculum and syllabus regulation mean that there is now more to be covered in examinations. Also, the belief that the curriculum should be rooted in concepts rather than in facts has spilled over into public examining.

For example, Geography, Biology and History—three of the most popular choices at A level - were all based predominantly on the recall of factual information when today’s parents sat them in the 1970s. Today, the syllabuses in the three subjects require work to be covered that would have been of degree standard then. Geography requires a grounding in Chemistry, and History requires a knowledge of sources, trends and statistics. So the examinations are generally harder.

Another factor in creating stress is the inability to structure study. Study patterns are set very early in a child’s school career but are usually not taught in schools. It is almost impossible to revise for an exam without notes you have made yourself, but it is common to find students wading through text books or searching hopefully on the internet in the days leading up to their first papers.

4. Making the grade

What every parent should know about revision. Liz Roberts advises on how to help your children through these testing times.

Nervous, tense, irritable, unable to sleep? You’ve probably got Pre-Examination Syndrome. May signifies the start of the most stressful period of the year for families whose children are sitting exams, especially now that the emphasis on results is so strong.

Although parents might feel impotent faced with a volatile teenager tackling a string of subjects almost unrecognisable from their own schooldays, Paul Humphreys, a chief examiner for A level Psychology, insists that they can help.

“Parents should show they are on the child’s side,” he says. “it’s unhelpful to over-react and become draconian.” He recommends lending a sympathetic ear, reassuring them that you won’t disown them if they don’t do as well as expected and avoiding adding to the pressure with comments such as: “You’ve got to get an A grade”, “Your sister sailed through her exams” or “It wasn’t like this in my day.”

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Provide a good environment for studying at home. If a separate room for revision is not available, ask the school if it can offer study space before or after school hours, suggests Martyn Berry, Deputy Head of Wilmington Grammar school for Boys. Can you change your own habits to help? “Some houses are dominated by television, in either a physical or a cultural way”, Humphreys points out.

Be lenient about domestic tasks and offer treats and rewards to encourage study. “Make sure you’ve got food in the house, including things your child particularly enjoys,” says Chris Williams, Deputy Head of Lincoln Christ’s Hospital School. But don’t force them to go for a healthy walk in the fresh air because it’s something you’d do yourself he adds.

There are practical ways of assisting students with revision. “Get a big piece of paper and draw up a plan of action with your child. Feeling in control solves 50% of problems”, says Laurence Hawood, A-level English tutor and editor of Exambusters revision tapes. “But make sure it’s achievable, or it will be demoralising.”

Hawood advises breaking down work into chunks of less than half an hour: “Seventeen minutes is the ideal length of time to study before having a break.” revision is much more effective if it’s active, he says. “The student should process the information in some way, perhaps create an index. By acting on information, you’ll be its master.”

Chris Williams recommends that parents ensure children have the syllabus for each course, so that they know exactly what they’re supposed to cover. “Stick each part on to cards, with a separate section for each syllabus. Allocate roughly equal revision time to each element.”

Parents can help by testing their children, he adds: “ But be careful not to lose patience with them.” Encourage students to read quality newspapers regularly, Berry advises. “The quality of writing and vocabulary will be absorbed and help their own work, and it gives a wider perspective on current affairs.”

Make the most of parents’ evenings, particularly to ask what’s being done to offer career services and advise. “These can raise the expectations of children taking exams. Often they have a blinkered perspective about why they’re doing them. They’re not looking at the continuity with university or work.”

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