



What can parents do to help children with test anxiety?

As the pressures and demands of “high stakes” testing and assessment increase, so too do the worries of parents. Aside from concerns regarding a child’s academic progress and performance on these measures, more and more parents are worried about the emotional toll and overall impact these experiences have on their children’s well-being. With this in mind, the New York Association of School Psychologists has created the following list of suggestions to help parents.

Handling Stress Before, During, & After the Assessment:

Before the test:

- ❖ Make sure your child gets plenty of sleep, not only the night before, but several days leading up to the assessment
- ❖ Provide a high quality breakfast (and lunch if your child brings lunch from home- some tests are given in the afternoon)
- ❖ Try to keep a normal routine at home, but consider temporarily scaling back on after-school activities if your child’s evenings tend to be heavily scheduled
- ❖ Allow plenty of time for physical activity, free play and opportunities to unwind
- ❖ Be positive with your child and point out all of the things your child does well
- ❖ Remind the child that he or she is well prepared for the test and will likely do well
- ❖ Be patient and be prepared to listen to your child’s concerns. Answer all questions honestly, but with short answers
- ❖ Monitor your own anxiety; kids quickly pick up on the anxieties of the important adults in their lives
- ❖ Maintain realistic, attainable goals and expectations for your child
- ❖ Do not communicate that perfection is expected or is the only acceptable outcome. Accept mistakes as a normal part of growing up and let your child know that no one is expected to do everything equally well
- ❖ Teach a few specific relaxation and stress management strategies, not just to minimize anxiety around the tests, but as a general life skill. Strategies could include:
 - Deep controlled breathing
 - Mindfulness exercises
 - Listening to relaxing music
 - Asking what things might help them relax - this sends the message that there are concrete things they can do to manage stress and anxiety, which are normal parts of the human experience
- ❖ Share a time when you felt anxious and how you coped with the feeling
- ❖ Often, reasoning is not effective in reducing anxiety, so do not criticize your child for being unable to respond to rational approaches.

- ❖ Seek help from the school if the problem persists and continues to interfere with daily activities. Start with the classroom teacher, but you may also consult with the school psychologist, counselor, or social worker.

If your son or daughter becomes anxious **during** testing, you can give them strategies to use ahead of time, such as:

- ❖ Deep breathing, breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth in a smooth motion.
- ❖ “Calming statements,” such as simply saying “relax” quietly to self.
- ❖ Shifting negative thoughts to more positive coping thoughts, such as “I will do the best that I can” or “I prepared well for this test.”
- ❖ Focusing on the problems that are easier first, and then go back to more difficult problems.

After the test:

- ❖ Ask one or two general questions about the test, such as “how did it go?”
- ❖ Do not ask questions such as “How many do you think you got wrong?” or “Do you think you did better than the other kids?”
- ❖ Ask what your son or daughter learned in school?
- ❖ Ask what he or she did that was fun?
- ❖ Help your child keep the testing in perspective. You can say things like, “Sure, the test are important and you need to do the best that you can, but remember tests aren’t the only things that matter, and they aren’t the things that are the most important”

Understanding and Learning from Challenging Experiences:

Research on motivation (Dweck, 2006) has found that how a person responds to academic challenges, not grades or intellectual ability, is one of the best predictors of later success in life. A child can view a failure or a challenging experience as a reflection of either their lack of ability, or as a reflection of the strategies and effort that were used during this experience. Those with the latter view tend to perceive these challenges as something to “master” or have a “mastery orientation.” They tend to face the next challenge with greater determination, a more positive outlook, and ultimately experience greater learning and success. They will seek out more challenges in learning and in life and tend to be willing to stretch themselves beyond where they are comfortable. Because of this approach, in the end, they achieve more. Parents should understand this and explain it to their children. Ultimately, we may find that it is how the child understands his or her success or difficulty that is the best predictor of his or her future success.

There are certain vulnerable groups of children, who are more easily emotionally impacted by high stakes testing. These may include students with learning difficulties or English Language Learners, who tend to have a negative perception of tests in general. However, even students at the opposite end of the education spectrum, to whom good grades, high achievement, and academic accomplishment have come relatively easy, are vulnerable to test anxiety. While at first, this may seem counter-intuitive, upon closer analysis, it quickly becomes clear that their anxiety is a result of their own perception of the test determining their academic status or their “demand” to perform well on all tests. For all of these children, it is important to remind them:

- ❖ Ability and knowledge can be demonstrated in many ways, not just through standardized testing – providing examples of the many ways they have been successful and have demonstrated their talents

- ❖ Their worth is greater than the sum of their achievement. They are loved for who they are, and not for what they achieve
- ❖ The value in some activities is not in the outcome, but in initiating a task and knowing that you gave it your all

Things to Watch For:

If your child seems to have a preoccupation with the tests (e.g., talks about them constantly, comes to you with “what if” scenarios, etc.) or has an extreme reaction (e.g., unable to sleep, becoming sick, refusing to go to school the day of the test, etc.) and your attempts to reassure him or her have not alleviated the anxiety, it may be helpful to speak with other caring adults in your child’s life. You may wish to speak with your child’s teacher, school psychologist, or principal. School employed mental health personnel should be able to provide information regarding your child’s presentation in school and give you additional strategies and support to help your child.

In this new era of reliance on data and ever increasing levels of accountability, standardized testing will not go away. Furthermore, when used correctly, as part of (rather than the sum of) a child’s educational experience they can provide useful information to educators. With this in mind, it is incumbent upon parents and educators to minimize the unintended negative effects on the overall well-being of the child.