



What can teachers do to help children with test anxiety?

As the pressures and demands of “high stakes” testing and assessment increase, so do the worries of teachers. In addition to concerns regarding a child’s academic progress and performance, and how scores are tied to teacher evaluation, teachers are also worried about the emotional toll and overall impact these pressures can have on their students’ well-being. With this in mind, the New York Association of School Psychologists has created the following list of suggestions to help teachers.

Handling Stress Before, During, & After the Assessment:

- ❖ Recommend that the students get enough sleep the night before and have breakfast the morning of the test. This could be their only “homework assignment.”
- ❖ Consider having a “bagel breakfast” the morning of the test to lighten the mood in class, but also to ensure that the children have had some nutrition. Local bagel shops/bakeries will often donate items for these events.
- ❖ Keep to the normal routine as much as possible, but build in plenty of physical movement, self-directed time, or socialization
- ❖ Give students a chance to unwind after taking the test
- ❖ Tell the students what to expect the day of the test, even if they have taken it before. You can say things like, “When you come in tomorrow, your desks will be in rows and not in our usual groups.” Or “Mr. Smith will be here tomorrow to help us with the test.”
- ❖ Have extra supplies available if the students are supposed to bring their own materials. Testing days are not the time for lessons in personal responsibility or materials management
- ❖ Help your students 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”
- ❖ Select class read alouds that tell stories about testing for younger students (e.g., *The Big Test* by Julie Danneburg or *Testing Miss Malarkey* by Judy Fincher and Kevin O’Malley). For older students hold brief class meetings that give students a chance to speak about their feelings if they wish. By simply acknowledging that the stress is out there, helps to reduce the pressures that some students feel.
- ❖ Point out previous student successes
- ❖ Remind the students that they are well prepared for the test and are likely to do well on the test
- ❖ Acknowledge that the test may contain questions that are meant to be challenging; if they are struggling with an item, it is probably because it is a hard question, not because there is something that is wrong with them
- ❖ Never add pressure to the students by telling them that “your job depends on their scores”
- ❖ Monitor your own anxiety; kids quickly pick up on the anxieties of the important adults in their lives

- ❖ Throughout the year, teach specific relaxation and stress management strategies, not just to minimize anxiety around the tests, but as a general life skill. Strategies could include:
 - Deep, slow, controlled breathing
 - Mindfulness exercises
 - Progressive muscle relaxation or simple Yoga poses
 - Listening to relaxing music
 - Share a time when you were anxious and how you managed those feelings
 - Empower your class by 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
- ❖ Utilize the services of the school employed mental health professionals (school psychologists, counselors, social workers) to consult with you on classroom-based strategies or actually come into your class to talk about test anxiety and stress management

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. 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. Teachers should understand this and explain it to their students. Ultimately, we may find that it is how the student understands his or her success or difficulty that is the best predictor of his or her future success.

Students who are mastery-oriented think about learning, not about proving how smart they are. When they experience a setback, they focus on effort and strategies instead of worrying that they are incompetent. This leads directly to what teachers can do to help students become more mastery-oriented: Teachers should focus on students' efforts and not on their abilities. When students succeed, teachers should praise their efforts or their strategies, not their intelligence. Contrary to popular opinion, praising intelligence backfires by making students overly concerned with how smart they are and overly vulnerable to failure. When students fail, teachers should also give feedback about effort or strategies -- what the student did wrong and what he or she could do now. This has been shown to be a key ingredient in creating mastery-oriented students. In other words, teachers should help students value effort.

In a related vein, teachers should teach students to relish a challenge. Rather than praising students for doing well on easy tasks, they should convey the joy of confronting a challenge and of struggling to find strategies that work. Finally, teachers can help students focus on and value learning. Too many students are hung up on grades and on proving their worth through grades. Grades are important, but learning is more important.

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 is demonstrated in many ways, not just through standardized testing – providing example 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 the task and knowing that you gave it your all

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.