

Test Anxiety: Overcoming it before it overcomes you

Test.

For some students, the mere mention of the word brings on sweaty palms or a racing heartbeat. Even though they've studied hard and memorized all the important facts, when test time comes, they suddenly freeze or draw a blank.

This scene is known as "test anxiety," and it shouldn't be taken lightly. Once your child reaches secondary school, the pressure to succeed on exams can increase exponentially. One bad grade on a test can spark a downward spiral of even more anxiety and pressure, which can set the stage for future failure.

Even if you suspect your child has some form of test anxiety, don't lose hope. There are some simple strategies you can employ to help your child overcome test anxiety once and for all.

What it feels like

Anxiety is a state of uneasiness or apprehension in anticipation of something stressful. According to Kidshealth.org, test anxiety is a type of performance anxiety – a feeling someone might have in a situation where performance really counts or when the pressure's on to succeed. For example, a child worrying about doing poorly might think thoughts like, "What if I forget everything I know?" or, "What if the test is too hard?"

Like many other types of anxiety, test anxiety can create a vicious circle: The more your child focuses on the bad things that could happen, the stronger the feeling of anxiety can become. As distracting thoughts and fears fill your child's head, the probability of your child performing poorly on the test increases.

Think your child might be dealing with test anxiety? Be on the lookout for these symptoms: "Butterflies" in the stomach, cold or clammy hands, stomach pains, headaches, nausea, or feeling faint. Your child may also exhibit feelings of anger or helplessness when a test is looming.

What you can do to help

According to the U.S. Department of Education, students who suffer from test anxiety tend to worry about succeeding in school, especially when it comes to doing well on tests. They also tend to worry about the future and are self-critical.

Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time, but when it hinders your child from thinking clearly or doing his best work, that's a problem. Unfortunately, reassuring your child that she'll "do great" usually isn't enough of a solution. However, there are ways to help:

- Start by explaining to your child why schools test students. Tests are yardsticks that not only tell students and teachers how well the students are doing, but also where they need to improve. They aren't meant to trip students up or frustrate them.
- The NYU Child Study Center suggests making sure your child has enough sleep, eats a healthy breakfast, gets to school on time, and completes his homework each day. Also, make sure he has all the necessary school supplies he needs to study and complete his assignments. Your child will have a better chance of doing well on tests if he practices healthy nutrition and consistently completes his assignments on time.
- Encourage your child to space studying over days or weeks rather than "cramming" the night before a test. Cramming tends to increase test anxiety. According to the U.S. Department of Education, real learning occurs through studying that takes place over a period of time. Test preparation should involve reviewing material your child has already learned, especially when it comes to cumulative, end-of-the-year tests. Explain to your child that the limitations of the human brain make it impossible for her to retain large amounts of information by trying to learn everything she needs to know the night before a test.

- Learn about the different types of tests your child takes and how they affect her grades. Most of the tests your child takes are “teacher made” – teachers design the tests to measure student understanding at the end of a unit of study or at regular intervals during the school year, such as at the end of a marking period. Other tests measure your child’s proficiency in a subject area, like state exams students in grades 3-8 take in math and English. These proficiency tests are not the kinds of tests your child can cram for, and your child’s scores on these exams help teachers and other school personnel determine if your child needs additional help.
- Work with your child’s teacher. Meet with the teacher as often as necessary to talk about your child’s progress. Ask the teacher to suggest activities that you and your child can do at home to help your child prepare for tests and improve your child’s understanding of schoolwork.
- The NYU Child Study Center suggests two approaches to conquering test anxiety. First, teach your child to challenge negative thoughts. Coach your child to confront negative ideas rationally and logically. Have your child ask herself, “Do I really fail every test?” and, “What will probably happen if I study the material?”
- The second approach the NYU Child Study Center promotes for dealing with test anxiety is for parents to motivate their children to want to take a test. Encourage your child to complete his studying and homework tasks rather than focus on achieving a certain grade.
- Show your child how to use stress to his advantage. According to an article on Kidshealth.org, stress is a warning mechanism, or the body’s way to signal that something important is about to happen. Teach your child that, instead of reacting with dread, he can use stress as a reminder to study well in advance of a test.

Tackling Test Time

When test time arrives, it might be natural for your child to feel a bit uneasy. Here are some test-taking strategies that may help your child calm her nerves:

- Read the directions carefully. If you don’t understand something, ask the teacher to explain.
- Answer an easy question first to build your confidence.
- If your mind goes blank, skip the question and move on to another.
- Answer questions completely and in detail.
- If you’re taking an essay test and your mind goes blank on the whole test, pick a question and start writing whatever comes to mind, even if you just rewrite the question statement. Doing so may trigger your mind to think of an answer.
- Don’t panic when other students start handing in their papers. There’s no extra credit for finishing first.
- If you start to get nervous, close your eyes, take a deep breath, and let it out slowly. Concentrate on your breathing for a few moments, then return to the test.
- If it’s allowed, get up to sharpen your pencil or go to the bathroom. Take the time away from the test to clear your mind of negative thoughts.
- Silently repeat such calming phrases as, “This is only a test,” or, “I can do this.”
- Go back and review your answers if you finish early, but don’t change anything unless you’re sure. Studies show that when a test taker is unsure of an answer to a multiple-choice question, the first answer the test taker chooses is likely the right one. Also, make sure you didn’t skip any questions.

Do’s and don’ts for parents

- DO teach your child some test-taking tips that helped you during your time in school.
- DO encourage your child to read as much as possible by providing your child with age-appropriate books and other reading materials. If you encourage your child to read more, she may learn a few new words that might appear on a test.
- DO encourage your child to make food choices that contribute to a balanced diet. Most schools provide both breakfast and lunch for students at a minimal cost, and many school districts are working toward improving their nutritional standards for the meals they serve.
- Is your family on a budget? Check with your school district to see if you qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. Remember: Healthy bodies lead to healthy, active minds.
- DON'T be too anxious about your child's test scores. If you put too much emphasis on one test score, you might upset your child or put even more stress on him.
- DON'T ignore the problem of test anxiety or hope it will go away. Work with your child at home and take advantage of resources at your child's school, including teachers and guidance counselors, to overcome test anxiety.
- DON'T judge your child on the basis of a single test score. Test scores aren't perfect measures of what children know or can do. Test scores can be affected by a number of factors, including how your child feels on the day of the test, noise in a classroom or in the hallway, or the format of the test itself.