

Handling exam stress



Achieving success while avoiding stress is the balance we're all looking for when it comes to our child's exams. **Karen Doherty**

and **Georgia Coleridge** offer expert advice on managing the pressure



The race is on. In schools across the country, children will be filing into examination halls for their 13+ Common Entrance exams. A million more are already keenly awaiting their GCSE, AS-level and A-level grades this summer.

With intense competition for the best schools, many younger children are already swotting for their 7 and 8+ exams, their 11+ exams in January, and the public school pre-tests which take place throughout the year. In some cases, competition is so hot for good nursery and primary school places that parents are even coaching their infants in advanced Play-Doh skills and toddler maths. Others with a 10-year plan are already boosting their children's extracurricular CVs with programmes of Kumon, judo, ballet, Suzuki violin and Mandarin.

Many parents feel ambivalent about the exam system. "My son Charlie is only six but he's already being prepared for the 8+," a mother from Notting Hill explains. "In one sense, I'm reassured that his school is on the

case sending home lots of homework but I often wonder whether he's under too much pressure."

Parents remember their own school days, when entrance exams weren't such a big deal. A parent told us, "My mother woke me up one morning and said we were going off to see a big school. It was the first I'd heard of it. I wrote a story about a pixie, and I got in. The first time I ever suffered from real exam stress was at university. I stayed up all night, drinking too much coffee, cramming for my finals. I don't want my children to feel that dread before they've even left school."

The key to avoiding this pressure is parents and children understanding that gaining high marks in exams is not the most important thing in the world. Some children flourish if they can develop at their own pace in a non-competitive environment.

"In my daughter's nursery school, there were no winners or losers. Everyone got stars and smiley faces for their work and a prize at sports day simply for taking part," says a prep school mother. "Lucy's confidence

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took a knock when she moved to big school. She'd imagined herself centre stage as always, with teachers telling her how wonderful she was. When she was only offered third tree on the left in the school play, she sobbed all weekend."

None of us wants our child to lose confidence but life won't always go their way. Learning to deal with failure can be a challenge at any age. If your child is going through this for the first time, you might feel angry with the school, the exam system, or even higher achieving children. But at least your child has your support and this is more valuable than any exam result.

As well as offering comfort, sometimes it can be a good idea to manage your child's expectations in advance. It might seem a paradox but combining our advice on helping your child prepare for exams – while at the same time letting them know that there are more important things in life – means you are offering your child the best possible preparation for success, no matter what their age. 🌸

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How to help your children pass exams with minimal pressure

BE POSITIVE

- Concentrate on anything you can do to spark your child's interest or make learning a bit more fun – but leave the nagging to the school.
- Taking your child to a museum (with an ice-cream break) is helpful; badgering your child to do revision or pointing out mistakes is not.
- Try reading to your child, listening to story tapes or going to see a Shakespeare play on their GCSE syllabus.
- Go out of your way to hug and compliment your child on the things they do well. If he or she is feeling anxious, it's a big help to know that your love is not connected to academic success.

PLAN AHEAD

- If you decide to actively help your child revise then start as early as you can. A gentle drip-drip of information and revision over a few months is better than last-minute cramming.
- Find out from the school where your child's weak spots are and then do what you can to help. Does your child need more maths or spelling practice? Could you organise a French exchange a year before GCSE exams?
- If you suspect your child is dyslexic, investigate and get all assessments done early. This way, your child will have the extra time needed and perhaps even a laptop for an exam.

LOOK AFTER YOUR CHILD PHYSICALLY

- Tire your children out with physical exercise – make time to walk to school, go to the park, play football in the garden or take them swimming or cycling at weekends. Exercise can generate all sorts of endorphins which can reduce anxiety, make their brains

work better and improve their energy levels.

- Get a good bedtime routine going, because when children are working hard they need their sleep (yes, we know: fat chance if your children are already teenagers and go to bed later than you do).

ADJUST YOUR OWN ATTITUDE

- If you find that you're getting overly anxious by the thought of your child's exams, take a step back. The last thing your child needs is your stress as well as their own. You might find it also helps to stay away from some of the other parents at the school gate. Even if the school is doing a good job at keeping children grounded, it can be hard not to get sucked in by parent paranoia.



- More importantly, it's worth remembering that these exams aren't life and death. If your child doesn't get into the school or university you, or they, hoped for, it's not the end of the world. If you can keep this in perspective, you'll be far better able to help your child do the same.

*Karen Doherty and Georgia Coleridge are the authors of **Sibling Rivalry – Seven Simple Solutions** (Bantam Press) available through Amazon and at all good bookshops.*