

TEST ANXIETY

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Resource Teacher

What is test anxiety?

Test anxiety is the uneasiness or apprehension that a student feels before, during or after a test because of worry or fear of failure. Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time. In fact, low levels of anxiety can motivate students to study and perform well. However, when anxiety interferes with test-taking and learning, it can cause students to blank out or have trouble paying attention, limiting their ability to think clearly and do their best work. The good news is that parents can help their children manage test anxiety.

What does it feel like?

Some students report physical symptoms including butterflies, cold or clammy hands, headaches, nausea, being hot or cold, or feeling faint. Others report feeling like they want to cry or even leave the room and not take the test. Still others feel angry or helpless.

What Can You Do As A Parent?

The Practical First Steps

- Make sure your child has enough sleep, eats a healthy breakfast and gets to school on time.
- Make sure your child has the needed school supplies (extra sharpened pencils, etc.).
- Doing well on a test is easier if a student has been consistently completing school assignments, including studying or reading. Encouraging your child to complete homework each day is important and helpful.

Specific suggestions

- Motivate your child to want to take a test. You can do this by reinforcing their efforts, including the studying and homework tasks, rather than focusing on having to make a certain grade.
- Help your child reduce fear and anxiety. This can be accomplished with enthusiasm, praise and, at times, small rewards for giving their best effort in spite of feeling worried.
- Anxious children tend to have many negative thoughts (“I’m going to fail this test” or “I do badly on every test.”). You can teach your child to challenge these ideas by looking at the evidence against each negative thought (Do you really fail every test? What is likely to happen if you study?).

Finally, help your child to find a more optimistic thought to use whenever the negative ones arise (“When I study I do pass tests”).

- Teach your child ways to relax through simple techniques such as deep breathing and meditation. Relaxation is a skill that requires learning and practice, so keep the relaxation practices short and simple. Make it a family activity, where everyone takes the time to breathe deeply. You can teach by example. Use the techniques yourself, for example, when you become frustrated while driving. Encourage your child to practice in real life situations (e.g., before going to a stressful family event).

What Should You As The Parent Avoid Doing?

- Avoid giving excessive reassurance, such as repeatedly saying, “You’ll do great!”. Too much reassurance causes anxious children to seek to discredit the parent’s opinion.
- Avoid telling your child exactly what to do. It is more useful to ask your child to come up with a realistic plan for studying and taking the test. Successful completion of the plan enhances the child’s feeling of control and accomplishment, and this will decrease anxiety. Build in some relaxation time to your child’s plan.
- Don’t ignore the problem by hoping it will go away by itself.
- Don’t be impatient (“Just take the test and get over it!”).
- Don’t allow the child to avoid the situation (“You can stay home today”).

When should I seek professional help?

Students with severe test anxiety may decline in their academic performance, and are more likely to perform worse on other activities that require new learning (Campbell, 1986). Test anxiety has also been related to poor self-esteem and school refusal (Ollendick & Meyer, 1984). Although it is normal to have some degree of test anxiety, if the problem persists or the symptoms are interfering with school performance, help is available.

Reducing test anxiety alone will not be effective unless children know how to study and take tests. Teaching study skills and test-taking strategies are effective in helping students perform better in school (Beidel & Taylor-Ferrerira, 1995).