

A Guide for Parents

Many students will be feeling worried about their exams, and parents too! It is natural to want your child to get the best possible marks in their exams, and it is natural for students to feel nervous. However, when stress becomes overwhelming – yours or theirs - it can affect their performance. Here are some suggestions for coping with exams:

Try not to nag or argue about revision. Instead, offer to help with short-term daily goals. Some students will welcome your help, while others will not want your involvement.

Encourage your child to devise their own revision timetable. If you do it for your child, it may lead to feelings of powerlessness or that they can't manage on their own. Let them see that you trust them and tell them they will manage.

Don't try to tell them how to revise. If they need guidance, they should speak to their form tutor or trusted teacher.

Giving advice can sometimes be perceived as criticism. Ask open, less confrontational questions like, 'What did you cover today?', 'Which methods work best for you?' or 'What's your plan to prepare for ____?'

Siblings will prepare for exams in different ways, so try not to draw comparisons between your children.

Don't brush off your child's anxiety. Saying 'Just do your best' can be perceived as dismissive by children. Instead of dismissing, diminishing or disapproving of children's anxiety, try using empathy and validation. 'I see how stressed you are and it's understandable - exams can feel overwhelming.'

Some teenagers won't admit to feeling stressed, so instead of asking 'What's wrong?' if your child is moody, avoid yes-or-no questions and try instead asking 'How are you feeling about exams?' or 'You look stressed, I wonder how exam pressure is making you feel?'

Give them a break over keeping their room tidy or helping with chores. Tidying can become a displacement activity - something teenagers do to avoid revising.

If your child does ask for help, suggest the following:

- A structured but not rigid revision plan.
- Revising 'little and often' can create big results! In fact, research has shown that repeating something **twenty times** over the course of one day is **less effective** than repeating something **ten times** over the course of a week.
- Study in blocks of 20-30 minutes with small breaks between sessions. Using a timer really helps.
- Limit revision to four hours a day. If they achieve this, praise them. If not, move on.
- Try and mimic exam conditions whilst revising – no phones, music or TV.
- Give them regular snacks but avoid sugary foods, junk foods and fizzy drinks. Encourage them to drink lots of water as this aids concentration.
- Encourage them to play sport or take a walk to clear their head and have a different focus.

- Don't sacrifice sleep for revision time. A sleepy brain cannot learn or perform efficiently, and there is evidence that memories are consolidated whilst we sleep.

Trust your child when they say they want to do well - they usually mean it. Here are some specific methods, backed up by research, that are proven to increase the effectiveness of revision:

- Mixed Drill Practice – Imagine going to the gym and only doing one exercise. It wouldn't be very effective for building muscle, would it? The same goes for building connections in the brain – we need to mix up what we do to give our memory a proper work out. This means doing different activities or answering different types of question within a subject in each revision session.
- Mind Maps for Better Essays – The brain does not work in a linear fashion and neither do mind maps – that's what makes them so effective. Using mind maps to plan answers for essay questions is particularly effective, even if you don't write out the entire essay after doing the plan. If you've practiced planning essays ahead of time, you will feel much more confident and less stressed on exam day, and will need less time to plan your answers.
- Test and Quizzes – The best way to discover where your weak spots are is to take practice tests and quizzes. Most teachers are happy to give out sample exam papers, or there are plenty available on the internet.
- Flash Cards - The very act of creating them engages the brain and begins the learning process. The best flashcards have only one fact per card, have drawings or pictures (“a picture is worth 1000 words”) and are colour coded.

Fight Procrastination

It is always best to start revision with the thing they have to do but that they don't want to do as a way of creating a feeling of accomplishment and positive momentum. This is called 'eating the frog.' (Mark Twain famously said, "If it's your job to eat a live frog, it's best to do it first thing in the morning. And if it's your job to eat two frogs, it's best to eat the biggest one first.") It's sort of liking eating the foods on your plate that you don't like before enjoying the ones you do like. You can spot the 'frog' by using a prioritisation grid like the one below, or simply make a list of things that have to be done and circle the hardest one first.

<p>Things I want to do <i>(and need to do right away)</i></p>	<p>Things I want to do <i>(but don't need to do right away)</i></p>
<p>Things I don't want to do <i>(and don't need to do right away)</i></p>	<p>Things I don't want to do <i>(but need to do right away)</i></p>

The night before and morning of an exam:

- **Encourage a good night's sleep** – it is far more beneficial than doing last-minute cramming.
- **Check equipment** – are the pencils sharp? Do the pens work? Does the calculator work?
- **Double-check the time and location of exams** and plan extra time to get to school – running late is stressful.

- **Advise them to wear layers of clothing** that can be added/removed easily. The temperature in examination halls can be unpredictable.
- **Discourage revision on the morning of examinations** - this will only make them feel more stressed.
- **Discourage listening to music on examination days until after the examination is over.** Songs stay in the head for a long time and can distract from the material they're being tested on.
- **Serve them a healthy breakfast** - the brain uses lots of energy! Eggs, porridge, banana or peanut butter on toast, or protein-rich smoothies are all good choices.
- **Wish them luck!**

If you need any support, please contact your child's tutor or their Head or Deputy Head of Year.