



Kings Langley
Secondary



Bedmond
Primary



Bovingdon
Primary Academy



Kings Langley
Primary



Nash Mills
Church of England
Primary



Sarratt
Church of England
Primary



St Pauls Chipperfield
Church of England
Primary



Kings Langley Partnership of Schools
Working Together to Prepare our Children for the Challenges of Tomorrow

Supporting your Child to Manage Exam Stress and Anxiety

A Self Help Guide for Students and Parents

Managing Exam Stress and Anxiety



It is not just in the summer months that our children work towards exams or tests, children are planning and working towards a range of assessments and exams throughout the year.

Whether course work, generalised assessments, practice papers for exams or working towards the end of year SAT's, end of year assessments, finalising course work or GCSE's and A-Level exams. Whilst all of these are important we need to ensure our children are not overwhelmed. Everyone copes differently in different situations and there is so much more to a child's personality than how well they respond to an exam.

It is natural that children will become anxious during these times, however it is important that this anxiety does not become overwhelming and as a result affect their ability to engage and perform in whatever exam or assessment they may be involved with. Many children can be affected by levels of anxiety and the challenge we all face is how to support this to avoid it escalating from low level anxiety to a level of stress that can hinder their ability to reach their full potential.

Working towards exams can create feelings of worry and being under pressure. A little stress can be a good thing: it can be the motivational push that we need to get things done. When we're stressed, our brains release high levels of cortisol which can cloud the way we think and get in the way of rational thoughts. Because of this, it's important to help our children stay as cool, calm and collected as they can during the exam period.

Parents should be mindful of their own reactions during this time and be cautious about getting caught up in any anxiety from school staff, but also any of your own anxiety. Despite how we feel, our children do pick up on our feelings and anxiety can be transferred. We need to try to remain positive with and around our children and encourage them that exams aren't everything and success comes in many different forms. Our children's anxiety can be supported if we remain calm and treat assessments and exams as something everyone experiences.

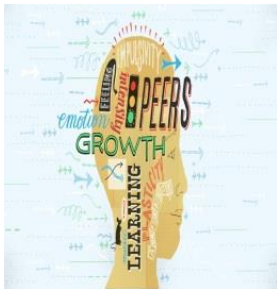
Children's Development and Dealing with Exams

Primary aged children are more resilient than we often give them credit for, however they are more likely to pick up on other people's anxiety including that of the people around them. We need to reassure our children that assessments and exams don't define them, that children develop, learn and succeed at different times and that children might struggle at Primary but excel at Secondary.

Teenagers, however will be more prone to comparing themselves to others, including siblings and they are also more prone to catastrophising and talking themselves down. The Teen development phase is a period when they can be more volatile and teenage behaviour will not always be consistent or sensible. As parents we need to make allowances for this in our reactions. Exam time can expose behaviours not normally seen and behaviour will not always be consistent or sensible. We need to remember that a lot is happening to your child and much of this is invisible from the outside. Parents support is essential during this time and whilst we can't do it for them, we can offer support and understanding.

Communication is Key During Exam Time

Emotions are very volatile during exam time so it is important that parents are mindful of this in their reactions. Be flexible about the timing of conversations as it needs to be good for them as well as you, communication is a 2-way process - talking and listening and this will avoid confrontation and upset which only fuels anxiety. Our children want to talk as long as their needs are respected, so parents need to actively show they are happy to talk.



It is important that we listen without interrupting, pay attention and be attentive, listen to your child, give them support and avoid criticism. It is also important that parents avoid minimising their feelings with comments such as “it’s nothing to worry about, you’ll be fine”. They are worrying so we need to acknowledge that. When speaking to our children if we avoid commanding words such as ‘should’, ‘ought’, ‘don’t’ and replace them with more positive statements such as “remember to...”, “What could you do differently?”, “What do we need to do instead?” If we try and find the feelings behind the words and allow them time to tell us how they are feeling, we can keep focused on their feelings and use empathy to help show we are trying to understand.

Coping Strategies and Techniques

Whilst they are preparing for exams it is important that we offer support but also don’t provide all the answers. Using such phrases as “So how might you handle that” or “What do you think you could do differently” empowers our children to think about how they might be able to address their worry or anxiety themselves, but with your support. We need to help them to manage their emotions and teach them that emotions are ‘ok’ but they need to be expressed safely. Parents need to model resilience, we cannot expect our children to control their behaviour if we are ‘flipping out’.

Helping our children put things into perspective is key to help them avoid catastrophising. Discuss the specific issue that is causing the anxiety and then get them to think about what might be the worst case scenario, then encourage them to think about what might be the best case and then help them to be real and think about what is the most likely thing to happen. This is key when revising and preparing and our children may need help with developing a plan of what they can do.

When things start to get overwhelming and you can see anxiety increasing, we need to help our children break tasks down so they are more manageable. If tasks, activities or revising seem overwhelming, encourage them to break them down into smaller, manageable steps. Let them decide how to do this but don’t do it for them. Encourage them to have a go at one of the tasks and afterwards help them have and feel some success and celebrate their success with them.

Children can get caught up with a lot of negative thoughts which also increases anxiety. Helping them to change these thoughts into more positive or peaceful thoughts can help let go of thoughts that cause anxiety. Notice that they are having a thought that causes anxiety and discuss with them thoughts that can make them feel safe or calm. Help them to tell themselves to *STOP* the stressful thought, encourage them to say the safe or calm thought out loud or in their mind and then help keep them focused on the calm thought until the anxiety has lessened. Distractions during these times are key and can help to stop anxiety fuelling thoughts.

Children can be very good at talking themselves down and this can increase anxiety. Stress is only negative if we choose it to be and we can choose our mood by how we think. If your child is becoming overwhelmed, take time out and often distractions are key, get them to have time out and do something they enjoy. Encourage your child to think more positively, “I can..... not I can’t” or “I can’t do this.... yet”. Remind our children of past successes – When ‘have’ we managed or succeeded and how did we feel. Help your child to recognise their feelings and when they might be becoming stressed or anxious. Encourage them not to compare themselves with their friends and focus on what they can achieve.

Before they go in for a test or exam, be reassuring and positive. Let them know that failing is not the end of the world. After each exam, encourage your child to talk it through with you. Discuss the parts that went well rather than focusing on what they found difficult. Then move on and focus on the next test, rather than dwelling on things that cannot be changed.



Food and Exercise

A balanced diet is vital for your child's health, and can help them feel well during exam periods. Some parents find high-fat, high-sugar and high-caffeine foods and drinks, such as energy drinks, cola, sweets, chocolate, burgers and chips, make their children hyperactive, irritable and moody. High sugar snacks create short peaks of energy but this mood can quickly dip and can cause irritability. Sugar puts the body under a lot of pressure, diverting energy from the brain.

Dehydration causes tiredness and water is key, hydrating body and brain immediately. The body will treat any liquid with sugar as food and as a result the body and brain has to focus on digesting rather than concentration. Brain performance will be reduced if not hydrated. Where possible, involve your child in shopping for food and encourage them to choose some healthy snacks for example power foods such as fruit including smoothies, bananas, berries, peanut butter on toast and crackers and cheese.

Exercise is important during this time and can help boost energy levels, clear the mind and relieve stress. It does not matter what it is – walking, cycling, swimming, football and dancing are all effective. Activities that involve other people can be particularly helpful. Keep exercise simple.

The Importance of Sleep

Profound mental, physical, social, and emotional development requires quality sleep. Sleep benefits the brain and promotes attention, memory, and analytical thought. Sleep is a time of memory consolidation and allows the brain a period to consolidate learning into long term memory and allows the brain time to 'repair' and 'rest'. Good sleep improves thinking and concentration.

Sleep can affect mood and lack of sleep increases irritability and exaggerated emotional reactions. Sleep deprivation can affect the frontal lobe which is critical to effective decision making and controlling impulsive behaviour.

Parents need to emphasise the importance of sleep and encourage children to get into a good bedtime routine during exam time. Avoid using electronic devices for a time before sleep because the blue light from any screen inhibits melatonin production which is the hormone key to activating sleep. Eating too much or too little close to bedtime may prevent sleep onset. Finally ensure a good sleep environment.

Boosting Self Esteem

Adults need to encourage children to ask these questions:

- ***What can I do to get back on track?***
- ***I can't control everything, so what is in my control?***
- ***Can I change something I'm doing to make things better?***
- ***What can I learn from this?***
- ***Who can help?***

Useful Sources of Information

- Healthyyoungmindsinherts.org.uk
- mind.org.uk
- Kooth.com
- youngminds.org.uk
- www.gadeschoolsfamilysupport.co.uk
- www.kls.herts.sch.uk/student_wellbeing/student_and_family_services

