

Skill-Building Opportunities

What to Do When Studying Is Stressful

Question: My son gets so nervous and stressed when he has to prepare for a test. How can I help him study, but not feel stressed and anxious?

Many adults and children feel nervous about studying for and taking tests. There is usually something important at stake in these situations, like earning a driver's license or getting a good grade in a class. These heightened circumstances can make the process of studying for and taking tests stressful for everyone involved. By promoting the life skill of Taking on Challenges, you can help your child feel more confident and capable of managing his stress and anxiety when it comes to preparing for tests.

Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota, an expert on stress and coping in young children, defines stress:

Stress is when demands on your body or your expectations of those demands exceed your ability to handle them ...

Study after study reveals that children who have warm, caring and trusting relationships with their mothers, fathers and other significant people in their lives are more likely to learn to manage stress.

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

1

Your relationship with your child is an essential part of his support system.

Your child looks to you in times of stress to help him learn how to manage his thoughts, feelings and behavior. Let your child know that you believe in his ability to do things, even when they are hard.

- Give your child positive support with your words and your actions. A smile, a hug or a high five are ways to encourage your child to keep going.
- If your child tries to pick a fight with you because he is feeling stressed, explain that you are there for him, but you are not going to let him take out his stress on you. You can walk away and say you will be back when he can manage not to turn on you.

Bethany Rittle-Johnson of Vanderbilt University found that when children have the opportunity to explain how they solved a problem, it is easier for them to apply what they learned to new situations.

- Encourage your child to come to you to discuss what he is learning in studying for the test. Offer to listen to him explain his thinking.

Carol Dweck of Stanford University has found that children who avoid challenges are more likely to have a fixed mindset—they see their abilities as something they cannot change. Children

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with a growth mindset see their intelligence and talents as things they can develop and are thus more likely to take on a challenge. By promoting a growth mindset, parents can help their children learn that if they don't understand something or get an answer wrong the first time, they can continue to keep trying:

[T]he brain is like a muscle—it gets stronger with use ... [E]very time [children] work hard, their brain forms new connections.

2 Help your child learn how his brain works.

Carol Dweck has been able to help children learn to take on challenges more effectively when they understand how their brain works—that when they learn something new, their brain is making new connections.

She has also found that the way parents praise their children matters, too. When you use specific praise that acknowledges how hard your child is working, he is more likely to stay motivated and to see his abilities as things he can improve if he continues to work at them. Researcher Craig Ramey says: “[When they’re learning something new], kids need the opportunity to try and try again, in a good atmosphere where there’s a chance to refine the skill.”

- Rather than praising your child for being smart or for getting good grades, say things like: “You worked so hard to study for that test!”
- Let your child know that it is okay to make mistakes. We learn by using trial and error before we get things right. In fact, mistakes are a big part of learning. They point out the things that we need to work on.

3 Set your child up for success with a supportive study environment.

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests setting up a study space for your child that is quiet and well lit. Let your child decorate it to make it his own. Make sure he has the materials he’ll need, like pencils, pens and paper.

- Limit distractions—like the background noise of television or conversations—when your child is studying. Daniel Anderson of the University of Massachusetts has found that background noise, like television, affects the quality and length of children’s focus: “We found that episodes of focused attention were only about three-quarters as long when the TV was on.”
- If you feel like your child is really struggling, talk to his teacher. Discuss ideas for how your child can feel supported, both in and out of school.

Heidelise Als of Children’s Hospital Boston and the Harvard Medical School suggests that parents work to figure out how their children function best and then build on those strengths:

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[W]e find that the more in tune the parent is with the child's competencies, the more the parent is equipped to support the competencies.

4 Build on the ways your child learns best.

Everyone learns at a different pace and in somewhat different ways. Although we all learn through our senses, some children favor visual learning; seeing things or writing things down themselves helps them take in information. Others favor hearing—so, talking about ideas helps make them stick. Still many others favor hands on learning and need direct experience with something in order to really make sense of it. In what ways does your child learn best?

- Ask your child how he thinks he learns best. Does he need to see information, hear it or read it to really understand it? Look for study strategies that help him learn best.
- Does your child learn best when he is talking with others, when he is working with one other person or when he studies on his own?
- Does your child like lots of practice? See if you can create a practice test for him to take beforehand or ask him to try and teach someone else the information to help strengthen his understanding.
- Is your child musical or does he love using language? See if your child can come up with a song or sentence that might help him remember what he is studying.

Annie Bernier of the University of Montreal and Stephanie Carlson of the University of Minnesota and a colleague found that when parents provide external support for the children's ability to manage, children become better able to manage on their own. This includes the extent to which the mother (but it could be the fathers as well):

(a) intervenes according to the [child's] needs and adapts the task to create an optimal challenge (equivalent to scaffolding); (b) encourages her child in the pursuit of the task, gives useful hints and suggestions, and uses a tone of voice that communicates to the child that she is there to help; (c) takes her child's perspective and demonstrates flexibility in her attempts to keep the child on task; and (d) follows her child's pace, provides the child with the opportunity to make choices and ensures that the child plays an active role in the completion of the task.

5 Help your child take action.

Problem solving to come up with different strategies to use in times of stress helps your child feel a sense of control and enables him to take on challenges on his own. Ask your child for any ideas he may have to help himself manage his stress when it comes to studying. Create a list of ideas together and keep coming back to it if an idea doesn't work. Here are some suggestions for strategies:

- Have your child choose which subject he will study first. This is a way to encourage him to have some control over what he is working on and when. Is it easier for him to start with a topic he is comfortable with or is it better to get the harder subjects done first?

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- Encourage your child to set aside a specific amount of time for studying as a part of his usual homework routine. Is it more helpful for him to study a little bit every day or to take an hour once or twice a week to look over the material?
- Have your child choose an amount of wait time in between subjects during his study time. Have him set a timer for ten minutes, for example, and, in that time, let him choose an enjoyable activity for himself. When the timer goes off, it's time to go back to work.

6 Work with your child to develop “stress-busting” strategies.

Studies have shown that anxiety can get in the way of working memory, making it more difficult to take in information and remember how and when to use it later on. Help your child feel a sense of control over his stress and anxiety by helping him find stress-busting strategies that work for him.

- If your child finds himself feeling overwhelmed or anxious, remind him to take deep breaths. While he is breathing, he can repeat a sentence in his head that helps him, like: “I can do this” or “One step at a time.”
- Make time for exercise. Being physical—playing ball or other indoor or outdoor activities—helps your child come back to studying with a better ability to focus.
- Also provide opportunities for breaks and snacks. Having time to stretch his legs, do something for fun and have a snack in between study times can help your child come back to studying with a fresh perspective.
- Encourage your child to use writing, drawing or another creative activity as a way to manage his feelings and relax. Writing in a journal is a great way to express thoughts and emotions in a safe place and can often help make a situation clearer and more manageable.
- Make sure your child knows he doesn't have to take on everything by himself. Help him think about the people in his life whom he can go to for help studying or who can help him relax when he needs a break. Encourage your child to ask for help when he needs it.