

How to Help a Child with Test Anxiety



What is Test Anxiety?

Test anxiety is actually a type of performance anxiety. Performance anxiety is when a person feels worried about how they will do on something, especially when they feel it is important. For instance, a child might feel performance anxiety when trying out for the school band or for the basketball team.

When taking a test, your child might feel "butterflies," a stomachache, or a headache. Some kids may feel shaky, sweaty, or feel their heart beating quickly as they wait for the test to start. Just about everyone — adults and kids — feel some anxiety before a test. In fact, a small dose of anxiety can be helpful, keeping people sharp and focused. But when symptoms take over so that your child can't function or is so anxious that they feel sick, they may not be able to do their best.

Why Continue to Give Tests?

If teachers know that students get stressed out about tests, why do they still give them? Believe it or not, both teachers and students benefit from tests. Tests measure how well students are learning the skills and information their teachers have been teaching them. And tests of all different sorts are a part of life — from the driving test your child will take one day to the test they will take if they decide to be a doctor.

What Makes Anxiety Happen?

Anxiety is a feeling a person gets when expecting something stressful to happen. When under stress, the body releases the hormone adrenaline, which prepares it for danger. Adrenaline causes the physical symptoms, such as sweating, a pounding heart, and rapid breathing. These symptoms can be mild or intense.

Focusing on the bad things that could happen can make your child feel worried. Your child might think, "What if the test is too hard?" A thought like this does not leave much room in their mind to concentrate on remembering the answers to the test questions. A child with test anxiety can also stress out about the physical reaction and think things like "What if I throw up?" This thought can cause your child to become even more upset, making their anxiety even stronger. Now, your child feels worse and is even more distracted and unable to concentrate.

What Can You Do?

- **Talk to your Child.** Just talking to someone about their anxiety can make them feel better. Have them describe what happens to you when they are taking a test and try to help you figure out some solutions. For instance, learning study skills can boost your test-day confidence, or a positive attitude going in will change their perspective about the test and allow them to think clearer.
- **Help them to Prepare for the Test.** Talk to them about paying attention in class, doing their homework, studying for the test. Using practice tests and sample test questions if available. On test day, they are more likely to feel calm if they feel like they know what to expect.
- **Train them to Expect the Best.** Teach them to think positively. Have them say to themselves, "I studied and I'm ready to do my best."
- **Focus on Blocking Bad Thoughts.** Teach them to watch out for any negative messages they might be sending themselves about the test ("I'm no good at taking tests" or "I'm going to freak out"). These thoughts can make anxiety worse and make it harder your child to do well on the test.
- **Help them Accept Mistakes.** Assure them that everyone makes mistakes and that is alright.
- **Teach them to Breathe Better.** Help your child learn breathing exercises that can help calm them down. Here's how to do it: **inhale** (breathe in) slowly and deeply through your nose, and then **exhale** (breathe out) slowly through your mouth. Have your child do this two to four times before a test or when they start to feel anxious and they may find they it calming.



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