

## Helping Your Child Perform Well on Tests

**Most of us know what a painful and overwhelming experience “test anxiety” can be for some children and adults. Here are some ideas—from common sense to expert advice—that may be helpful in preparing for tests.**

Teachers, parents, and schools have a common goal and shared responsibility to help children perform well on tests. After all, tests are often the primary means by which students and schools are measured.

Many test preparation recommendations focus on the *physical* aspects of being prepared for a test. Get a good night’s rest the night before. Eat a good breakfast. Relax mentally. This is good advice.

Test taking *strategies*, on the other hand, often focus on ways to make a good guess or prevent a careless mistake. For better or worse, one hears advice passed down, such as: Answer easy questions first. Avoid answers that include words such as “all, none, never,” or “rarely.” When completely baffled, select (c)!

But these are really just tricks and tactics, not successful strategies.

### Keys to Success

Success depends on good instruction, hard work by students, and parent support. Joan Herman, Co-director of the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) at UCLA points out: “Doing well on tests ultimately means knowing the test content. Getting good at format and knowing the tricks of test taking only take you so far, if you don’t know the relevant content and skills.”

To gain some insight into test preparation, we asked some testing experts for thoughts from their own parenting experiences. Dan Koretz, a Harvard professor and testing researcher, said: “I focused on helping my children find methods of studying and reviewing that worked for them. One thing I did is that I pushed them to discern what level of studying generally produced a given grade, which was often more studying than they initially thought.”

### Resources

#### Helpful Web Sites

##### CAESL

<http://www.caesl.org/>

##### CRESST

<http://www.cse.ucla.edu/>

##### WestEd

<http://www.wested.org/>

##### Parent Portal at LHS

<http://lhsparent.org>

##### Greatschools.net

<http://www.greatschools.net/>

##### National PTA

<http://www.pta.org/>

##### National Parent Information Network

<http://www.NPIN.org/>

##### Family Education Network

<http://www.familyeducation.com>



## Effort, Not Smarts

Eva Baker, chair of the National Research Council's Board on Testing and Assessment, pointed out that **kids are different** and that "anxious kids need to be guided to reduce their anxiety." She said that **tests also differ**, so children should prepare for the specific type of test they're taking. She emphasized, "I think the goal is to motivate but not freak them out, and to help kids see that their performance is not tied to parental love." She added, "The other big idea—rather than a gimmick—is to help kids understand that effort, not smarts, makes the difference."

Research supports these comments. *What Works: Research About Teaching and Learning* from the Department of Education summarized key research findings and affirmed that: "Accomplishment in a particular activity is often more dependent upon hard work and self-discipline than on innate ability."

A crucial performance factor for a substantial number of students is test anxiety. According to University of Southern California Professor Harold O'Neil, Jr., "The relationship between high anxiety and poor performance is particularly strong for high stakes exams." These include the SAT, advanced placement exams, and the Graduate Record Exam. O'Neil estimates that between 10–20% of children and adults have high anxiety that contributes to lower performance. One of his current research projects is to develop an Internet-based program to help reduce student test anxiety. It's also interesting to consider that, just as in any dramatic or sports performance, a certain level of anxiety or tension helps a person achieve peak performance, but too high a level does not.

## What You Can Do

Here are some suggestions for what parents can do to help their children make good academic progress in the classroom *and* perform well on tests, especially in a high-stakes environment.

- Instill the value of learning in your child at an early age. Encourage curiosity and provide a nurturing, learning environment.
- Endeavor to make sure your children are good readers. Reading comprehension is an essential skill in both learning and testing.
- Communicate frequently with your child's teachers. Be familiar with the content students are learning and the tests they're taking. Try not to miss a back-to-school night, where parents can learn what types of tests children will be taking and what students must do to earn a high grade. Ask about the state tests students will be taking.
- Try to keep abreast of your child's learning progress and needs by monitoring assignments, homework, and test performance. As your children mature, they may need less monitoring, but if your



child needs extra help at any age, make sure they get it. As parents of older students know, middle and high school can pose their share of educational crises! Some excellent teachers make themselves readily available for individual help. However, if school instruction seems weak, more of the same may not help. If necessary and possible, consider other resources, such as tutoring, to help your child.

- Increased emphasis on accountability has led many school districts and schools to increase homework and the number of classroom tests, in addition to scheduling more high-stakes testing. Establish a regular time for homework and studying. Children should have a quiet place to work, free from distractions, such as TV, phone calls, or “instant messaging.”
- Try not to make your child nervous about tests, even big ones. At the same time, if your child isn’t preparing for a test and his or her results show a lack of motivation, take positive action. Again, different children have distinct needs and these needs can vary from one testing occasion to the next.
- Research indicates that a positive self-image can improve performance. Encourage your child to develop a positive attitude toward school, testing, and especially their own capabilities. Knowing how to prepare for a test and following through can contribute substantially to a positive self-image.
- As possible, review classroom tests with your child when they are returned home for what was and was not understood. If you don’t understand the subject well enough, encourage your child to find a helpful friend or relative. Teachers tend to use similar test formats so reviewing tests is good preparation for the next one and can provide clues to better ways of studying. Classroom tests are generally quite different from high-stakes standardized tests, but grappling with whether or not an answer on a classroom test is correct—and why—is good general preparation for all test taking.
- Keep a critical eye. Many parents and students invest considerable time and money in test preparation courses and publications. These may be helpful to individual students, especially in familiarizing them with the formats of certain standardized tests or providing an impetus for review. But it should be noted that some studies have found that such preparation has a limited impact on test scores.
- Remember that tests and grading systems are not perfect. Classroom tests may vary substantially in content, format, and level of difficulty, even with two teachers teaching the same subject. Parents should keep these factors in mind when judging their child’s classroom performance. For more information on the accuracy, uses, and interpretation of high-stakes standardized tests, read other articles on this CAESL website as well as the resources listed below.

## Useful Resources

Checklist for Test “De-Stress” <http://www.greatschools.net/cgi-bin/showarticle/ca/151>

Help Your Child Do Better in School <http://www.pinkmonkey.com/parentscentral/pgdobet.asp>

Ten Must Know Facts About Educational Testing by James Popham  
[http://www.pta.org/parentinvolvement/parenttalk/pt\\_oc\\_educationaltests.asp](http://www.pta.org/parentinvolvement/parenttalk/pt_oc_educationaltests.asp)

Get Ready for the SAT: Help Your Child Score High  
<http://www.greatschools.net/cgi-bin/showarticle/ca/244/track/print>

Talking to Your Child’s Teacher About Standardized Tests  
<http://npin.org/library/pre1998/n00390/n00390.html>

How’s Your Child Doing in School: Ten Research-based Ways to Find Out  
<http://www.pta.org/childinschool.asp>

The Effect of Admissions Test Preparation by Derek C. Briggs  
<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~chance99/141.briggs.pdf>

*Ron Dietel, the original author of this article, is a member of the Public Understanding strand of CAESL, and the Assistant Director for Research Use and Communications at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST). CAESL Reviewers included: Jacquye Barber, Lincoln Bergman, Grace Coates, Kathy DiRanna, Joan Herman, Julia Koppich, Karen Milligan, Mike Timms, and a group of parents and teachers who provided their comments before we finalized this series of briefs.*

*Note: This article was developed by the Public Understanding strand of CAESL to summarize basic information for parents and the general public. It is not a CAESL position statement nor does it necessarily represent the precise views of diverse reviewers. We welcome comments!*

*Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation. This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 0119790.*

© CAESL 2003. All rights reserved. Permission to reproduce, with CAESL copyright notice included, is hereby granted.