Our guide to supporting your child through exams

As your child nears public exams, whether for GCSE, A Levels or their equivalents, it can be hard to know how best you can help support them, so this guide is here to help. Combining educational research with tips from Maximise your Potential, a company specialising in study skills who run sessions with students in some of our schools, it includes suggestions for the academic and pastoral support you can give.

The impact you can have

Young people won't necessarily tell you this, but surveys constantly report that you, whether you are a parent, stepparent, carer, grandparent or someone close in their support network, are their biggest motivators, and cheerleaders. They don't need you to be the experts in their subjects, but they need your support, advice and comfort - it makes a huge difference.

How you can support

There are two big categories of support you can give your children in the run up to their exams: pastoral and educational. Pastoral care is the practical and emotional support you give, including ensuring they get into good habits early in the year:

- Stay hydrated: a dry roof of the mouth means they are 2% dehydrated, which doesn't sound like much but means a 20% loss in ability to focus. Make sure they take water into every exam, and drink plenty while revising.
- Exercise: children should take a break every 30 minutes to move and ideally get some fresh air. This is proven to improve concentration and memory, vital for revising.
- Eat well: breakfast in particular is important before exams but they should eat a balanced diet throughout to aid concentration and mental alertness, avoiding too much sugar and caffeine.
- Get enough sleep: the NHS recommends 8-9 hours minimum per night for teenagers and avoiding devices such as phones and laptops for at least one hour before bed. If possible, keep devices out of bedrooms to remove temptation.
- Maintain a positive mindset: setbacks are inevitable, but it is crucial that students can accept and learn from these. If they're struggling with a topic, or don't score as well as they want to in a past paper, practicing and revising this area is much more important than the areas they are confident in.
- Revise in a quiet, calm place with no music. Listening to music while they revise is proven to negatively impact the ability to memorise and recall, and of course makes the environment less like the exam.
- Practice resilience: they are very likely to have difficult moments, and maybe even in the exams themselves. Their ability to pause, think, regroup and start again will help them get more marks.

A lot of these things can seem obvious, but they all add up to making a big difference to your child's ability to concentrate, memorise and recall information.

From an educational perspective, there are two big things you can do.

Firstly, help them revise well. This means they need a plan, and they need to revise effectively. The plan needs to:

- be based on, at most, 30-minute slots; the maximum time our brains can revise information before effectiveness dwindles
- help them achieve a balance between work and 'play'
- focus more time on their weaker areas
- be specific to a part of the subject, so not just 'all of English" but "I want to learn three key Lady Macbeth quotes"
- allow them the opportunity to revisit learning at least four times; needed to really embed learning in our brains
- fit the principle of 'interleaving' where they visit a topic, then revisit it again in a week, then again in a month, for example. We learn more effectively by spacing the revision out than putting all the time together. For topics they are stronger on, the gaps can be bigger.

Effective revision has four steps:

1. Understand the learning: revisit notes, look at revision books, look up definitions, watch a video or use the resources discussed above until they feel they understand the material
2. Condense the learning: write everything down they remember, either as a mind map or a bulleted list, compare to the notes and add in a different colour what was missed, then condense it into chunk or lists of what is missing.
3. Memorise the learning: create flashcards or posters with key information, do online tests and past papers, or even try 'blurting' when they tell someone (anyone) everything they know about a topic, checking that all key points have been covered. Whiteboards can also be a useful tool for writing out to do lists, formulae, key vocabulary and of course can be wiped clean and used again. Variety is key.
4. Revisit the learning at least four times, more for weaker areas.

There are, sadly, some techniques that may be familiar to parents but have been proven not to work, including re-reading notes, highlighting key passages or quotes or using other people's resources. Try, if you can, to steer your child more towards the active revision techniques suggested above, bearing in mind that we all learn differently and they should be clear on *how* they learn. If they're not sure, ask their teacher, or you can read more about this in our guide to supporting your child's learning here.

Testing themselves through doing online quizzes and (timed) past papers is crucial since it is the best way to learn the biggest lesson in taking exams: to read the question properly and ensure they understand what it is asking them to do. Resources such as GCSEpod, Seneca learning and Quizlet are very helpful. The second two of these are free (some content on Seneca is paid for but most is free) and cover all GCSE topics. There are also some good channels on YouTube including Dr Frost for maths, Free Science Lessons, and Stacey Reay for English (some content may be paid for but again most is free).

Secondly, encouraging them to get the most out of their subject experts, their teachers. Attend every lesson and revision session they can, engage and ask questions if they are not sure.

The number one way to lose marks

Examiners and teachers agree that their biggest tip in an exam is to read the question properly and ensure they understand what it is asking them to do.

This is harder that it seems; if we believe we already know what we're being asked to do, our brains do not take in new information, especially when we are in a hurry or in the pressurised situation of an exam.

Exam boards publish lists of the 'command' words that students must understand and be clear on the difference between (e.g. 'evaluate' rather than 'describe'). Students can print these out and stick them up where they revise, checking they properly understand what each word is asking them to do.

In addition, exam boards also publish their specifications and examiners reports for each subject. Teachers can share the codes for these, and they really help students understand how to get the extra single marks here and there that can add up to a whole grade or more.

And finally…

Every member of the school community wants your children to do their very best in the exams, so if we can help in any way, please ask. If you're not sure who to ask, contact their tutor or even the school Reception and we will be really pleased to help.