

## Tips for Parents of Children with Testing Anxiety

In today's educational settings, students are tested for everything. The spectrum of exams is mind-boggling. Class exams, exit exams, placement exams, entrance exams, proficiency exams, scholarship exams, the SAT, the ACT, the Praxis and driver's license exams are all tests that students must take. Most of these exams are timed which makes accuracy more important because students must know the correct answer and be quick about it. Almost all students do not like taking exams, and some have uncontrollable test anxiety, which destroys their confidence and lowers their performance. These students usually exhibit other signs of learning anxiety such as poor concentration, procrastination, or even perfectionism.

Students internalize all kinds of beliefs about their learning abilities based upon their conditioning. If students believe that they will never do well on an exam, they will create a self-fulfilling prophecy because their beliefs will influence their behavior. Perhaps a student will not study for an upcoming exam, or perhaps he will panic and answer questions incorrectly even though he studied. In cases where students have incorporated good study skills into their learning but are still performing poorly, test anxiety is the likely obstacle.

For parents, poor study or learning habits can be frustrating because every parent wants the best learning experience possible for his or her children. In addition to test preparation strategies such as learning study skills, relaxation and imagining techniques are powerful tools that parents can teach to their children.

### Three Steps to Help Your Children

1. **Relaxation**-Train your children to make relaxation a study habit. For example, before your children begin their homework, have them take 9 full breaths. Each inhalation and exhalation counts as one breathe. Model this for your children as they are sitting down with their books open or sitting before the computer. Train your children to associate their studying space and studying habits with breathing. Also, teach them to take 3 full breaths whenever they run into a problem or feel distracted. Think of this technique as a relaxation time-out that over time will really help the mind stay calm during tests. The goal is to decrease stress and anxiety.

2. **Future Pacing Visualization**-You will need paper and markers for this technique. Ask your children to stand up. If you would like, soothing music may be helpful to set the mood. Keep your voice calm and tell them to close their eyes and just visualize a calendar. Tell them to imagine today's date and visualize themselves as the learners they are today. For example, if they are getting ready for a big exam, they could see where they are today in terms of being prepared for the exam. Now ask them to open their eyes and

write down where they are today in a few words (ex. unprepared or one chapter read). Tell them to place this piece of paper on the floor by their feet. Now ask them to close their eyes and visualize where they want to be in two weeks from now or any other amount of time. With eyes closed, have them walk forward a few steps. Ask them to open their eyes and write a present-tense phrase that describes where they are now. Ask them to place this piece of paper by their feet where they are now standing. Now, ask them to close their eyes again and visualize where they will be one month from today. Have them walk forward with their eyes closed. Ask them to open their eyes and write a phrase that describes where they will be, and then to place it on the floor by their feet. Finally, ask them to turn around and see how far they have come. Encourage them to use this visualization as many times as they would like while studying. They do not have to stand; they can just imagine that they are. This is a powerful mind/body tool, which will focus their mental power.

**3. Reassurance Communication-**What students fear the most is parental disapproval. Every child wants to make her parents proud. As a teacher for many years, I heard the phrase, "my parents are going to..." over and over again. The beliefs about parents that students internalize are major contributors to students' self-created anxiety. Therefore, if parents can reassure children through verbal communication that they will still love their children no matter how they perform on a test, the anxiety will abate. Some parents may find this difficult. It does not mean you have to lie and say that grades or tests are unimportant; it simply reassures students that they are still worthy regardless of their performance. Try to look at your children directly in their eyes in a loving manner as you express yourself. You will also have to practice what you preach. Do not grow upset at your children if they perform poorly on their next exam. Shift the blame away from your children and focus more on the exam. Use poor performance as a way to learn about the test rather than focusing on what the children did or did not do. Debrief each test/grade this way and your children will feel that they can share their experiences with you.

As always, these techniques are most effective when used in tandem with cognitive approaches. Try study skill techniques such as mind-mapping, note-taking, organization, time-budgeting, active listening, distraction-free environments, and many others for an integrated approach to test anxiety. If your children continue to experience test anxiety, schedule a one-on-one hypnosis session with a hypnotist.

**The Hypnotism Society of Pennsylvania** is an excellent resource to find a Hypnotist in the Pittsburgh and surrounding areas.

[www.hypnopa.com](http://www.hypnopa.com)