



## Building parent-school partnerships

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# Helping young people manage exam stress

Top tips for parents to help their young person manage stress and prepare well for coming examinations.

Now that we are coming to the pointy end of the year many young people will start to experience the stress that comes with impending examinations. Young people respond differently to the pressure that exams presents. Some will see an exam as a challenge that they need to rise to; some will be nervous because they haven't done enough work; and many will experience real stress as they see exams as THAT time of the year that determines their future.

The notion of exams, particularly final year exams as life-defining events can be very real for students who've spent 13 years of schooling all leading to this time. At least, that's how many see it. So as much as possible we need to help young people take a realistic view of examinations and remind them that they shouldn't pin all their hopes on one option. As generations of young people have found, life after finishing school doesn't always take the path they

imagined when they were students. Parents too need to keep our options open and be flexible about the future pathways for our young people.

Nevertheless exam stress can be very real so let's look at some ways you can help your young person manage their stress and prepare well for their coming examinations.

### 1 Help them study smarter

Your young person's teachers will more than likely spend time helping them to develop smart study habits so you might want to check in and follow their advice. However, you can also pass on some of these smart study tips:

- Minimise the clutter around their workspaces.
- Plan each study period and identify what they want to cover.
- Use mind maps and other aids to assist memory and organise thoughts.

- Take regular five minute breaks to refresh.
- List issues they are unsure about and ask for help at school.

### 2 Develop a relaxation strategy

Your young person needs to take a break from the pressure and resultant stress of pending examinations, which is code for rest and relaxation. In a perfect world your young person would have already established a healthy relaxation habit that recharges and replenishes his or her batteries but importantly allows them to take a break from the pressure and grind of work. If not, it's never too late to encourage your young person to exercise each day; relax to music or even practise meditation and mindfulness to clear their mind of mental clutter.

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### 3 Make sure they look after themselves

Good physical health impacts on exam performance as well as well-being. So make sure your young person gets 30 minutes exercise each day; eats regular, healthy meals; and takes care of their sleep. Having enough sleep is so important to well-being and exam performance. These sleep tips may help:

- Set a routine for going to bed and waking up.
- Aim for between 7 and 9 hours of sleep.
- Take 10 minutes timeout before bed to process the day and put thoughts aside.
- Drink warm milk or chamomile tea to help relaxation.
- Play gentle, slow music to slow their heart beat down before bed.

### 4 Steer clear of stimulants

It's tempting for a young person to take stimulants such as cigarettes, caffeine, no-doze, alcohol, marijuana, Dexamphetamine and other drugs to lift study performance. Reinforce to your young person that these short-term fixes inevitably lead to poor performance in the long term.

### 5 Make sure they don't drop out of the family

Keep your young person connected to the family at this stage by expecting them to join you for family meals; to help out at home, and not to spend all their time in their bedrooms. Mealtimes can be therapeutic as they provide

the opportunity for them to talk and also a good chance for parents to keep an eye on their well-being and mental health.

### And on the day of the first exam...

If you're a veteran of young people's exams then you'll probably know how a low key, matter-of-fact, the-sun-will-rise-tomorrow approach will help. If you are new to the exam game as a parent then you can help your young person to be calm and positive by taking this approach yourself. Kids of all ages take their cues from their parents, particularly so when they are under stress.

Also encourage your young person to organise what they need the night before, to focus on relaxation techniques such as deep breathing to deal with the butterflies and steer clear of speaking to nervous, anxious friends on the morning of the exam to minimise their own anxiety.

And do a little reality check to make sure your expectations are in line with your young person's interests and abilities so that they don't leave home with the added burden of excessive parent expectation. The pressure that many young people places on themselves to succeed is often high enough as it is.

And of course, hearing "I love you no matter what..." should be the last words that your young person hears from you before he or she heads off to their exams.



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