



Kings Langley School

Unlocking Potential for Life

Supporting your Child to Manage Exam Stress and Anxiety

**A Self Help Guide for
Students and Parents**



It is important that we listen without interrupting, pay attention and be attentive, listen to your child, give them support and avoid criticism. It is also important that parents avoid minimising their feelings with comments such as “it’s nothing to worry about, you’ll be fine”. They are worrying so we need to acknowledge that. When speaking to our children if we avoid commanding words such as ‘should’, ‘ought’, ‘don’t’ and replace them with more positive statements such as “remember to...”, “What could you do differently?”, “What do we need to do instead?” If we try and find the feelings behind the words and allow them time to tell us how they are feeling, we can keep focused on their feelings and use empathy to help show we are trying to understand.

Coping Strategies and Techniques

Whilst they are preparing for exams it is important that we offer support but also don’t provide all the answers. Using such phrases as “So how might you handle that” or “What do you think you could do differently” empowers our children to think about how they might be able to address their worry or anxiety themselves, but with your support. We need to help them to manage their emotions and teach them that emotions are ‘ok’ but they need to be expressed safely. Parents need to model resilience, we cannot expect our children to control their behaviour if we are ‘flipping out’.

Helping our children put things into perspective is key to help them avoid catastrophising. Discuss the specific issue that is causing the anxiety and then get them to think about what might be the worst case scenario, then encourage them to think about what might be the best case and then help them to be real and think about what is the most likely thing to happen. This is key when revising and preparing and our children may need help with developing a plan of what they can do.

When things start to get overwhelming and you can see anxiety increasing, we need to help our children break tasks down so they are more manageable. If tasks, activities or revising seem overwhelming, encourage them to break them down into smaller, manageable steps. Let them decide how to do this but don’t do it for them. Encourage them to have a go at one of the tasks and afterwards help them have and feel some success and celebrate their success with them.

Children can get caught up with a lot of negative thoughts which also increases anxiety. Helping them to change these thoughts into more positive or peaceful thoughts can help let go of thoughts that cause anxiety. Notice that they are having a thought that causes anxiety and discuss with them thoughts that can make them feel safe or calm. Help them to tell themselves to *STOP* the stressful thought, encourage them to say the safe or calm thought out loud or in their mind and then help keep them focused on the calm thought until the anxiety has lessened. Distractions during these times are key and can help to stop anxiety fuelling thoughts.

Children can be very good at talking themselves down and this can increase anxiety. Stress is only negative if we choose it to be and we can choose our mood by how we think. If your child is becoming overwhelmed, take time out and often distractions are key, get them to have time out and do something they enjoy. Encourage your child to think more positively, “I can..... not I can’t” or “I can’t do this.... yet”. Remind our children of past successes – When ‘have’ we managed or succeeded and how did we feel. Help your child to recognise their feelings and when they might be becoming stressed or anxious. Encourage them not to compare themselves with their friends and focus on what they can achieve.

Before they go in for a test or exam, be reassuring and positive. Let them know that failing is not the end of the world. After each exam, encourage your child to talk it through with you. Discuss the parts that went well rather than focusing on what they found difficult. Then move on and focus on the next test, rather than dwelling on things that cannot be changed.





Food and Exercise

A balanced diet is vital for your child's health, and can help them feel well during exam periods. Some parents find high-fat, high-sugar and high-caffeine foods and drinks, such as energy drinks, cola, sweets, chocolate, burgers and chips, make their children hyperactive, irritable and moody. High sugar snacks create short peaks of energy but this mood can quickly dip and can cause irritability. Sugar puts the body under a lot of pressure, diverting energy from the brain.

Dehydration causes tiredness and water is key, hydrating body and brain immediately. The body will treat any liquid with sugar as food and as a result the body and brain has to focus on digesting rather than concentration. Brain performance will be reduced if not hydrated. Where possible, involve your child in shopping for food and encourage them to choose some healthy snacks for example power foods such as fruit including smoothies, bananas, berries, peanut butter on toast and crackers and cheese.

Exercise is important during this time and can help boost energy levels, clear the mind and relieve stress. It does not matter what it is – walking, cycling, swimming, football and dancing are all effective. Activities that involve other people can be particularly helpful. Keep exercise simple.

The Importance of Sleep

Profound mental, physical, social, and emotional development requires quality sleep. Sleep benefits the brain and promotes attention, memory, and analytical thought. Sleep is a time of memory consolidation and allows the brain a period to consolidate learning into long term memory and allows the brain time to 'repair' and 'rest'. Good sleep improves thinking and concentration.

Sleep can affect mood and lack of sleep increases irritability and exaggerated emotional reactions. Sleep deprivation can affect the frontal lobe which is critical to effective decision making and controlling impulsive behaviour.

Parents need to emphasise the importance of sleep and encourage children to get into a good bedtime routine during exam time. Avoid using electronic devices for a time before sleep because the blue light from any screen inhibits melatonin production which is the hormone key to activating sleep. Eating too much or too little close to bedtime may prevent sleep onset. Finally ensure a good sleep environment.

Boosting Self Esteem

Adults need to encourage children to ask these questions:

- ***What can I do to get back on track?***
- ***I can't control everything, so what is in my control?***
- ***Can I change something I'm doing to make things better?***
- ***What can I learn from this?***
- ***Who can help?***

Useful Sources of Information

- Healthyyoungmindsinherts.org.uk
- mind.org.uk
- Kooth.com
- youngminds.org.uk
- www.gadeschoolsfamilysupport.co.uk
- www.kls.herts.sch.uk/student_wellbeing/student_and_family_services

