

# How to get your child through exam season

A levels, GCSEs and SATs are weeks away. **Rachel Carlyle** asks the experts how parents can best help their children

It's three weeks until the exam season and all over the country parents are loitering nervously at the closed bedroom doors of their teenage offspring: do they venture in with a supportive cup of tea or leave them alone to revise? Do they burst in hoping to catch them on Instagram instead of physics?

Our own parents probably didn't agonise like this; they barely knew which exam was on which day. But with required grades ever higher and society's obsession with A\*s, no wonder parents are more closely involved than ever.

Parental fretting isn't reserved for GCSEs and A levels either, now that SATs in the last year of primary school have assumed such importance: parents report that schools are starting revision in January and pupils are being given extra tuition to bag the elusive Level 6 so they are assured a top-set place at secondary school.

The result of this pressure from the age of ten has been a huge increase in exam stress. Figures earlier this year from ChildLine showed a tripling in the number of counselling sessions for exam stress – some for children as young as 11.

So how far do we go to help them, and when should we step back?

## Check they know how to revise

Too many schools tell children to go off and revise without teaching them how, says author Noël Janis-Norton. That's particularly true for Year 7 and 8 exams,

she says: "It's like telling them to read a book without teaching them how to read. Left to their own devices they tend to simply read over their notes — which of course seem familiar, so they think 'I know this' when they don't know it well enough for the exam. Parents may need to step in and show them how to revise." She advocates the SQ3R system: skim (S) the chapter to get a sense of what it's about, paying attention to the headings and words in bold (five or so minutes); then make up a question (Q) that an exam board might ask based on what you've skimmed. Then come the three Rs: read carefully the part of the text that contains the answer; close the book then recall it either by reciting it or (better) writing it down; then review the passage to check your answer. Each SQ3R should take 10 to 20 minutes. "It's a very active way to revise and it includes thinking, not just mindlessly memorising."

Former English teacher Steve Skidmore, co-author of *Get Better Grades* (Piccadilly, £6.99), agrees that processing is key. "Just reading is virtually useless. It's got to be interactive, and the more senses they use the better

— writing notes in their own words or creating flash cards, listening to podcasts, or revising in a group then getting a parent to test them."

## Help them structure their time

If they haven't already got a revision timetable, help them draft one to avoid their natural instinct for "comfort revision" — revising subjects they like and already know. Sessions should be a maximum of 45 minutes with 10 minute breaks built in, and it's better to cover several subjects in one evening rather than one in exhaustive detail.

Working collaboratively is the key, though difficult when faced with a stressed and defensive teenager.

Janis-Norton advocates close involvement at GCSE and earlier: asking them what subjects might come up in each exam, which chapters they need to revise for a topic and supervising their revision by looking at their notes or hearing them recite their answers if doing SQ3R. "But it's important to stay positive: teens are not going to be interested if they are being lectured or told off."

Asking them what they want from you is a non-confrontational way to engage, says Adam Pettitt, head of Highgate School in London, who staged a conference on teenagers' mental health last year with Emma Thompson: "You could say something like, 'Give me five things you want me not to say over the next five weeks.' Or, 'If I think you are

not doing enough work, am I allowed to say anything, and what's a good time to say it?'"

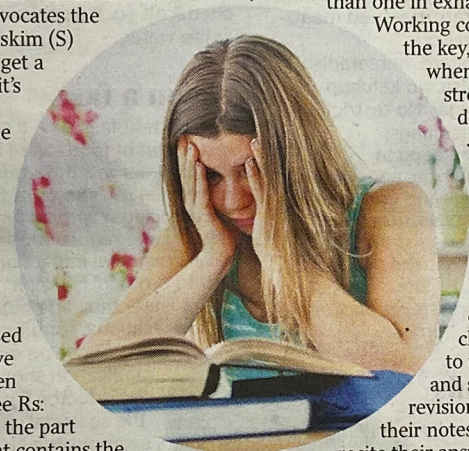
Don't be afraid to set boundaries: if they're not revising use sanctions like taking their phone away, says child psychologist Professor Tanya Byron. Parents of boys may need to supervise revision more actively, believes Janis-Norton, author of *Calmer, Easier, Happier Boys* (Hodder, £14.99): "Boys are generally less willing and are more likely to cut corners — for example passively re-reading their notes rather than doing something more useful like working sample questions."

## When does help become 'help creep'?

When support turns into sitting with them, or writing their revision notes, it constitutes stepping over the line into what American academics have termed "help creep". Hilary Wilce, author of *The 6 Secrets of School Success* (Endeavour Press), says: "There's real danger in saying, 'Can I help with that physics assessment?' Schools I visit comment that parents are becoming more and more hysterical about exams. But too much pressure and 'help' produces passive learners who expect adults to give them the answers, which is a big complaint at universities now. It's also undermining their sense of their own capability."

Sir Anthony Seldon, master of Wellington College, pointed out recently that we can coach and cajole a natural B student into an A or even A\* one — but we risk damaging their self-esteem if they fail to get into top universities or struggle to keep up when they're there.

Check a child's GCSE revision notes if you think they are not revising, says Professor Byron, even if it causes conflict. When they get to A level, though, parents may judge that they need to fail so a lesson is learnt. "It's



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express disappointment but say, 'Let's see what's possible in the time available' — a kind of 'It's you, me and the school against the exam board' approach," suggests Pettitt. "Hold their hand as much as you can and be stoical — it's not the time to be critical or go in hard."

## Is it too late for outside help?

Experienced tutors say they can bring up a subject score by an average of 30 to 40 per cent by seeing a pupil two or three times a week between now and May 11. At this stage, it's a matter of calming them down, helping them to consolidate their knowledge and practise exam technique. Sometimes a left-field intervention can fire up a recalcitrant reviser: such as Tassomai, a multi-choice questionnaire for GCSE science designed to be addictive like computer games as players strive to get to the next level; Elle Macpherson recently credited it with bringing her son's science GCSE up from a C/D to A\*. "It works because it uses the key principles of good revision: asking questions, being tested, and breaking it up into lots of micro sessions," says founder Murray Morrison.

## When it all goes wrong

Even with huge parental effort, a child without the will to work may not get the grades. Wilce says: "You cannot actually make the child put stuff into their brain. It's worth remembering that it's not the end of the world if they mess up."

"My son will not thank me for saying this but he and his friends partied hard and did not revise nearly as much as they should have done for their A levels, so they didn't get the As and A\*s they should have done. At the time we were very upset and I thought it was my fault for not being on his back enough."

"But he did manage to get into one of his university choices, loved his course and came home after the first term having worked hard, unlike others on his course."

"You can't make them take responsibility for their work until they are willing to do it. But life does not hang on one GCSE or one SAT and research continually shows that inner resilience is more important to a child's future than exam results."

hard as a parent to stand back and watch them fail but worse things happen in life," she says. "Teenagers now do not get exposed enough to failure. We have to mess up sometimes in order to grow."

## What teenagers want from their parents

We may assume they want to be left alone in their rooms to work with the bare minimum of input, but the truth is surprisingly different, says Pettitt. He asked a class of Year 11s what they wanted while revising and found they wanted parents to be "a presence". He says: "They didn't necessarily want them in the room with them, but liked them on the same floor of the house to provide a kind of non-intrusive monitoring. If the parents are at work and can't be there, the pupils wanted them to show an interest when they got home and ask how it went. They were vehement about not wanting parents to tell them what to do or when to do it, but they do like the idea of parents being interested, testing them at their request and holding them to account."

Robert Blakey, now 22, who got ten A\* GCSEs, three A\* A levels and has

written a self-published bestseller, *How to Achieve 100% in a GCSE*, says teens want a little TLC: "It's great if the parent can bring little unexpected rewards and treats at tough times during revision: cups of tea, favourite meals. It's just nice to know someone is thinking of you."

## A decent place to work in

This is where parents are most useful: providing a quiet space to work with no distractions. Remove mobiles and games consoles from bedrooms if that's their work space, cook their favourite meals, have some good snacks in the fridge, relax the rules about tidy bedrooms and make sure they get regular exercise and enough sleep. Indeed, many experts recommend nine hours of sleep. "This is a sleep-deprived generation," Professor Byron says, "but research shows that sleep is an important part of memory and learning: that's when memories are laid down. They should also continue at least one of their other interests to give themselves a break. Not thinking about what we have learnt is as important as thinking about it — it gives the brain time away to consolidate and lay information down."

## How to manage their stress

Watch out for the perfectionist (often a girl) who works too hard. "These children keep working until absolutely everything is perfect and A\*," says Professor Byron. "I see them in my clinics looking like middle-aged executives with burn-out. But their grades will suffer if they are so stressed, so parents must make sure they are taking regular breaks and not working late at night."

Don't play up the significance of any exam at any age, as it will switch them off, she says — especially Year 6 SATs. "These have become a public, life-defining exam, a bigger deal than when my children were at primary school."

Show them how to deal with stress: if they can reframe their anxiety as energy and focus they will do better in an exam. Deep breathing calms anxiety: take ten deep breaths, slowly in through the nose and out through the mouth.

For a child who hasn't put in the work and is now in meltdown, it can help for parents to step in and provide structure: break the subject into topics, write two or three on a giant sticky note and stick it to the revision timetable. "Never