Don’t stress about the test

Some students thrive on test stress; others experience intense anxiety that leaves them physically ill — stomachaches, headaches, etc. — and unable to sleep.

With state standardized tests on the horizon, you can help your child prepare mentally and physically to face the task head on. These tips and techniques may not completely eliminate your child’s stress, but they are tools that can empower your child to confront this challenge and others they will face in school and beyond.

• **Get enough sleep.** One study showed that students who got eight hours of sleep the night before a test were three times more likely to answer a question correctly than those who didn’t. Adequate sleep — 8-10 hours per night — helps ensure children have the energy and stamina to make it through the test in top form.

• **Eat a healthy breakfast.** Start the day with a meal that includes complex carbohydrates and protein so energy lasts as long as possible. Eggs, cereal, and whole-wheat toast give the brain what it needs to help you think more clearly and much longer compared to high-sugar selections. A healthy breakfast can boost memory and help a child be more alert — a definite recipe for test success!

• **Exercise.** Studies show that physical activity helps improve attention and how fast students process information. Exercise leading up to test day can be excellent mental preparation — not to mention fresh air helps clear the head.

• **Have fun.** Encourage your child to do something enjoyable the night before a big test — whether it’s playing a board game or riding bikes together as a family. Having fun is a helpful distraction from stress.

• **Write it out.** Writing about test stress can be a great way to conquer it. The idea is to get rid of stress by putting it all down on paper. Suggest your child write for 5-10 minutes about test stress. It can be an empowering way to frame positive thoughts about accomplishments as well, such as “I do a good job on math facts homework” or “I did a really good job on the ELA practice test.”

• **Think positive thoughts.** Science shows that thinking positive thoughts can actually help the brain function. Help your child practice this: When you start to feel stressed, take slow, deep breaths and think of something that makes you happy — petting your dog, playing a game with friends, hanging out at the beach in summer — for 10-20 seconds. Remind children that they can use this same technique in the middle of the test if they feel stressed. Taking 20 seconds to relax can help regain focus.

• **Do the best you can.** That’s all that is expected of students — to do the best they can on a test. Let your child know there may be questions they don’t know the answer to or don’t understand. Suggest they skip these questions and move on, coming back later when they can perhaps spend a little more time.

The bottom line is that taking any test can be stressful, invigorating or scary. But with the right approach, children can feel they are mentally and physically ready to handle the challenge.
Getting to the core of Common Core Learning Standards

The Common Core State Standards are important because they will help all children – no matter who they are – learn the same skills. They create clear expectations for what your child should know and be able to do in key areas: reading, writing, speaking and listening, language and mathematics. If you understand what these expectations are, then you can work with your child’s teacher and help your child learn.

What do these changes mean for our children?

The Common Core standards ask teachers and students to dig deeper into the core skills and concepts for each grade level. This means that students will learn much more about fewer topics. It also means that teachers will have more time to cover subjects in greater detail. This gives your child an opportunity to really understand what is being taught. These changes are called Common Core “shifts.”

For example:

In English Language Arts (ELA), students will:
- Read more non-fiction;
- Learn about the world by reading;
- Read more challenging material;
- Talk about reading using evidence gathered from the text;
- Learn how to write based on what was read;
- Learn more vocabulary words.

In mathematics, students will:
- Build on learning year after year;
- Spend more time on fewer concepts (dig deeper for better understanding);
- Develop speed and accuracy in solving math problems;
- Understand why math works and be able to prove their understanding;
- Learn more vocabulary words.
- Memorize math facts;
- Use math in real-world situations.

Questions we’ve been asked

Q. Will this mean more state tests?
A. No. But there will be different, more rigorous tests. And test scores could drop in the first couple of years as students and teachers adjust to the new standards. This doesn’t mean they’ve failed in any way. The tests will help teachers understand where their students need added support to reach the new expectations for their grade level.

Q. Will new standards in ELA and math limit my child’s access to other subject areas, such as the arts or career and technical education?
A. Common Core will actually help teachers integrate learning across subject areas. This means that students will be given lessons that bring together mathematics, science, social studies, English language arts and other subjects.

Q. What about students with disabilities and English language learners?
A. There is a clear guide for applying the standards to English language learners and students with disabilities. The standards allow teachers to slow down and cover subjects in greater detail. This will give students a better opportunity to really understand what is being taught.

Q. Won’t raising the standards make dropouts more likely?
A. There are many factors that can cause a student to drop out of school. However, 7 in 10 young dropouts said they were not motivated or inspired to work hard in high school. Two-thirds of dropouts said they would have worked harder if more was demanded of them.1


New York State’s Education Department has created a website (www.engageny.org) where parents can find more information about Common Core and how it will help prepare students for a successful future.

Parent Today is a powerful tool for schools to have in their communications arsenal to more effectively engage parents in their child’s education. Learn more at www.parenttoday.org.