Handling Test Stress
Practical Tips to Help Your Child

Students take a lot of tests in high school, including midterms, finals, the ACT® and the SAT®. So it’s important that your child learn how to stay focused when taking exams.

Good Stress and Bad Stress
It’s normal for students to feel a little anxious about tests. It can even be helpful — it motivates them to work harder. But too much anxiety can undermine students’ confidence and affect their performance. Stressed-out students may find themselves unable to concentrate or to remember things they’ve learned.

Tips for Calming Test-Time Jitters
If your child is experiencing too much test stress, you can help. Share the following tips and strategies for keeping anxiety down and energy up for the next big exam.

Before the Test
Start studying several days before: Cramming the night before an exam can leave your child exhausted and more stressed out than before. It’s better to study in small doses over several days.

Take practice tests: Getting familiar with the format and style of a test can reduce anxiety, so have your child take practice exams if they’re available.

Get a good night’s sleep: Lack of sleep contributes to anxiety. Be sure your child goes to bed early the night before an exam.

Eat a healthy breakfast: This is especially important if the test is scheduled for the morning. To think and solve problems effectively, your child needs a good breakfast.

Exercise: Activity can reduce stress and tension. Encourage your child to do something physical earlier in the day—for example, take a brisk walk or jog.

Come early and prepared: By arriving for a test early and with the right supplies, your child can avoid worrying about details and focus on the test itself.

During the Test
Look over the whole exam before starting, then budget time: After previewing the test, your child won’t be surprised by unexpected question topics or formats. This also gives your child the opportunity to budget time and not spend too long on any one section.

Jot down notes: Writing brief notes right away can help your child feel less anxious about forgetting important facts or key information.

Read all directions: Some students are so anxious to get the test over with that they fail to read the directions.

Answer easy questions first: Getting the easier questions out of the way lets your child focus energy and time on the harder questions.

Rephrase difficult questions: Reworking a question can help your child slow down and really think about the problem. Of course, it’s important not to change the questions’ meanings.

Organize thoughts before writing: Your child should organize responses to short-answer and essay questions before diving in. Having a plan will help your child feel confident while writing.

Think positively: Negative thoughts during a test (e.g., "I’m going to fail") can destroy confidence. Encourage your child to override negative thoughts with positive ones (e.g., "I studied hard and I know my facts. I’ll do great on this test.")

Relax: These quick relaxation techniques may help if your child starts to feel anxious during a test:

- Take a deep breath, and let out tension while exhaling. Repeat several times.
- Tense muscles for five seconds and release. Repeat three times.
- Visualize a peaceful and relaxing setting.

Using some or all of these strategies should help lower your child’s anxiety over tests — and will give your child the tools to manage test stress when and if it does surface.