

No-Stress Tests

Help your child study, stay calm, and ace her next quiz.

BY LORI MURRAY

Test taking is becoming routine for 6- to 8-year-olds, and for many of them, the anxiety that goes with it is just as common. "It's now the norm for students as young as first grade to have spelling tests, math quizzes, and end-of-unit exams," says Tammi Mackeben, a guidance counselor at the Ernesto Serna Pre-K Through 8 School, in El Paso, Texas.

There's also been a major increase in standardized assessments. "The No Child Left Behind Law requires testing for reading and math starting in the third grade, and many states have begun practice tests in kindergarten," says Bob Schaeffer, a spokesperson for the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, a nonprofit advocacy group in Cambridge, Massachusetts. So how do you help your child prepare—and relax? We've got answers to your toughest test questions.

TEST QUESTION: My second-grader has a math and spelling quiz every week. She puts tons of effort into studying, but she doesn't ever say a word about being nervous. I'm afraid she's just not telling me.

Correct Answer: You're probably the anxious one—your daughter may not be nervous at all. Believe it or not, some children actually like taking tests. The only way to find out how she feels is to talk to her. Wait for a calm moment and casually bring up the topic. "Do your friends get nervous when you have spelling tests?" is a good opener. If she says, "Emma and Lucy get crazy!" it's easy to ask, "What about you?" If her response is "Nah," you've got your answer. If she admits to feel-



ing stressed, find out why. Some issues may be easy to clear up: Maybe she's afraid that her pencil will break or that she'll have to use the bathroom and won't be allowed to. "Kids can have misconceptions that lead to unnecessary anxiety," says Samuel J. Meisels, Ed.D., of the Erikson Institute, a graduate school for childhood development, in Chicago. "Do your best to set her straight—the same way you would if she thought there was a monster under her bed. But if she tells you that she's worried there will be questions that she doesn't know the answers to, reassure her that it's okay not to know.

TEST QUESTION: My son is in the third grade and has to take our state's standardized test in a few weeks. He's freaking out. How can I calm him down?

Correct Answer: First you need to help him conquer his fear of the unknown. The best way to do that is to compare the

★ *In the past five years, the number of Americans who believe there's too much emphasis on testing has gone up 12 percent.*

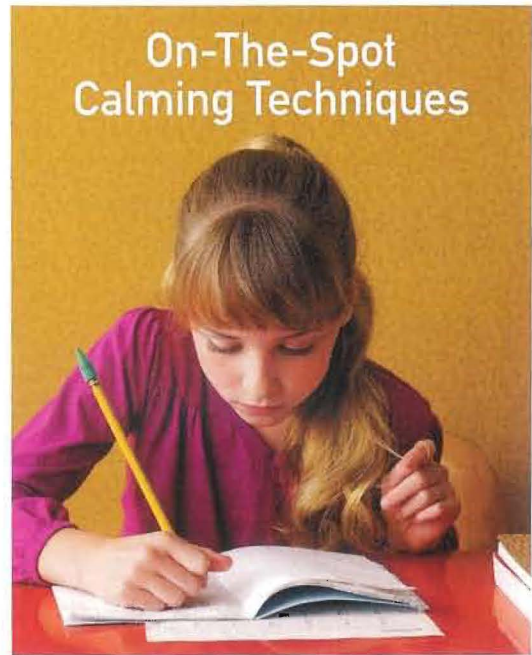
experience to an activity or challenge he's familiar with. For example, if your son's into video games, tell him that taking the test is kind of like playing his Wii—his job is to get as many points (right answers) as he can. Remind him how he feels when he's trying to win—his palms sweat, his heart races, and it's intense but not scary. If you help him think of the test as if it's a game, he'll be better able to focus on doing his best.

Your child will also look to you for his cues, so don't reinforce the general hysteria. "I know you can do a good job, and doing your best is all we're asking" should be your mantra. "Stay low-key so you don't add to his stress," says Dr. Meisels. And be positive. "Let him know that the test helps his teacher find out what the class knows," says Laurice Joseph, Ph.D., associate professor of school psychology at Ohio State University in Columbus. "That way the teacher will be able to figure out what her students need to learn." Hearing that will take the pressure off him.

TEST QUESTION: My first-grader has to take practice tests in preparation for the real thing next year. The school is judged on how kids perform, so her teacher treats these very seriously. How can I lighten things up without giving her a conflicting message?

Correct Answer: Talk to your daughter's teacher about it. She may not realize how nervous your child is. Come up with a successful plan that helps your child chill out; you both need to be involved. If you have a suggestion about what might de-stress your kid, don't hesitate to speak up. You could ask her teacher if the kids can do some stretches or jumping jacks before they start, play a quick game of "Simon says" during a break to calm their nerves, or even chew (sugarless) gum while taking the test.

Finally, schedule a post-test treat, since getting through the test is reason enough to celebrate. Go to a movie, head out for ice cream, or play a family game. Make sure your child understands that you're proud because she tried her best, which is the most important lesson at this age.



On-The-Spot Calming Techniques

Teach your child some simple ways to stay relaxed.

- ◆ **Positive Thinking** Tell your child to cheer herself on by saying stuff like "It's all right; I can do this."
- ◆ **Breathe Easy** Help her get her breathing under control with this calming yoga technique: Take a deep breath, hold it, and then let it out slowly.
- ◆ **Shoulder Shrug** Have your child periodically raise her shoulders up and then relax them. She might say to herself: "I'm going to finish this page, and then I'll do three shoulder shrugs."
- ◆ **Relaxing Muscles** Show her how to tighten the muscles in her fist so that her entire arm is flexed. Then have her release it slowly and shake it out.

Study Strategies

Preparing for a test is the best way to reduce your child's anxiety. These tips will make it fun.

1
Use words or pictures to help her remember important facts.

2
Turn studying into a game by setting a timer, which also helps your child concentrate harder and learn several facts in a shorter period of time.

3
Draw silly pictures that relate to the text in the margin of a page of notes—this will make the content more memorable.

4
When it's necessary to remember specific information, use mnemonics. For instance, to learn the names of the Great Lakes, it's easier to remember **HOMES** than to recall Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior.