

**Prepared for:**

**South Brunswick Public Schools  
Monmouth Junction, NJ**



# **How to Help Children Do Their Best on Tests**

**One of a series of Parent Guides from**



## **Parent Guide**

# **How to Help Children Do Their Best On Tests**

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*Publisher: John H. Wherry, Ed.D. Executive Editor: Jeff Peters. Writer: Carol Bruce. Senior Editor: Betsie Ridnour. Staff Editors: Pat Hodgdon, Rebecca Miyares & Erika Beasley. Editorial Assistant: Pat Carter. Marketing Director: Laura Bono. Business Manager: Sally Bert. Operations & Technical Services Manager: Barbara Peters. Customer Service Manager: Pam Beltz. Customer Service Associates: Peggy Costello, Louise Lawrence, Margie Supervielle & Cynthia Lees. Business Assistant: Donna Ross. Marketing Assistant: Joyce Ghen. Circulation Associates: Marsha Phillips, Catalina Lalande & Diane Perry.*

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South Brunswick Public Schools  
Monmouth Junction, NJ  
Order number: x02522009

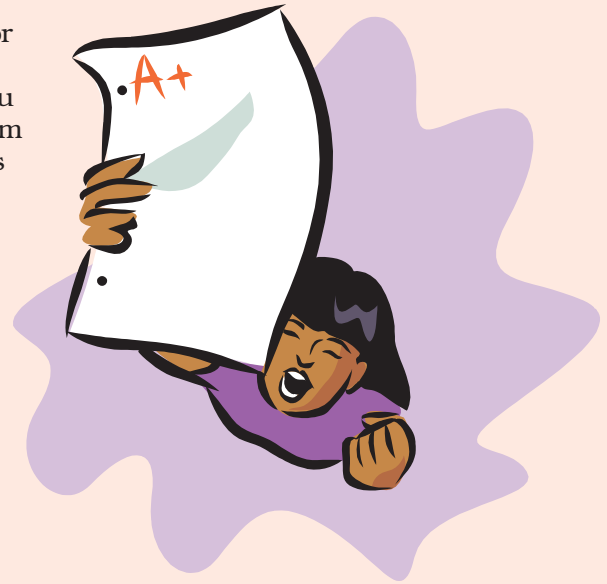
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## Introduction

From individual teacher-made tests to state and national standardized tests, students are being tested more today than ever before. And the stakes have never been higher. Test scores may determine your child's placement in school or whether she\* will be promoted to the next grade, graduate from high school, be admitted to college or trade school, or receive scholarship assistance.

This Parent Guide details many of the things you can do to help your child do her best on tests—from study techniques, to test-taking strategies, to ways to help her deal with pre-test stress.



### Teacher-Made vs. Standardized Tests

Most of the tests your child takes are teacher-made tests. Teachers create tests to measure student progress—to determine where each child is, who needs extra help and who is ahead of most of the other students. They use test results to guide their teaching plans, methods and strategies. And, of course, teachers use test results to help determine grades.

Standardized tests are used to measure student performance throughout a state or across the country. Each student takes the same test, under the same conditions and following the same rules. This allows each student's performance to be measured against the performance of every other student who took the test.

*\*Each child is unique, so this publication alternates using masculine and feminine pronouns.*

### Consider a Few General Pre-Test Strategies

Regardless of what kind of test your child is preparing to take, the following strategies can help ensure that he does his very best:

- **Make sure your child knows what the test will cover.** He should listen carefully when his teacher talks about the test. If he has questions, he should ask. Your child can't prepare effectively if he doesn't know what he is preparing for.
- **Ask your child's teacher to suggest activities** you can do at home to help your child prepare for the test.
- **Help your child develop a study plan.** Talk with him about what he needs to learn and the best way for him to go about learning it. Generally, it's best to plan for short (20- to 30-minute) study segments, with a brief break between each one.



- **Experiment with having your child study with a friend** and studying alone to see which works best. Sometimes two heads really are better than one. (Keep tabs to ensure that the pair actually is studying and not just socializing. Some children always study best alone.)
- **Show your child how to create a practice test.** As he reviews the material he needs to know, ask him to think of the questions he would ask if he were making up the test.
- **Help your child develop good test-taking skills.** Have him practice reading and following directions. Explain that, if he encounters a question that is difficult or that he is not sure about, he should move on to the questions he does know. Then, he can come back to the hard ones at the end.

- **Have your child write key words, facts and definitions on flashcards** and use them to test himself.
- **Have your child review his notes and the textbook chapters** that will be covered. Focus on key words and their definitions.
- **See that your child is at his best for the test.** Make sure he gets a good night's sleep the night before and that he has a healthy breakfast the morning of the test. Don't make any sudden, dramatic changes. If your child isn't used to eating a big breakfast, don't give him one just because it's a test day.
- **Make sure your child will be comfortable during the test.** Have him dress in layers. That way he won't be distracted thinking about how hot or cold he is.
- **Make sure he has everything he will need**—pencils, erasers or paper, along with any special items such as a dictionary or calculator.



## Know the General Strategies Your Child Can Use During Any Test

While there are specific ways to approach specific kinds of tests (standardized tests, true-false tests and essay tests, for example) there are some general strategies that will help your child do her best on any test. Make sure your child knows them and is able to use them. They include:

- **Reading the instructions carefully.** Then she should read them again to make sure she knows exactly what she is supposed to do.
- **Looking for direction words that tell her what she is supposed to do.** Direction words are words like *compare*, *list*, *describe*, *define* and *summarize*.
- **Reading through all the questions quickly before she starts.** She should think about how much time she has and decide how much time she can spend on each question.
  - **Reading each question carefully as she begins the test.** She should understand exactly what the statement or question says. Then she should determine what she thinks the answer is before she reads any choices provided.
  - **Skipping a question if she isn't sure of the answer.** She should answer all the questions she knows first. Then she can come back to the others.
  - **Allowing time to go back and check her answers.** Do they make sense? Are sentences complete? Did she leave out any key words, such as *not*, that might change her intended meaning?



## Prepare for Standardized Tests

### Well before the test:

- Find out when the tests will be given. Plan ahead to avoid scheduling appointments, extra activities or trips during those times.
- Ask her teacher for samples or find some at your local library if your child has never taken a standardized test before. Seeing a few tests in advance will make the real thing less intimidating.
- Encourage your child to read. Reading builds comprehension skills as well as vocabulary, and both will help her do well on any standardized test.

### Just before the test:

- Make sure your child follows the same routine she would adhere to before any important test—getting a good night's sleep, eating a nutritious breakfast, etc.
- Share a message of confidence. Tell your child that the test is important and you know she will work hard and do her very best.
- Remind her to check her answers carefully to be sure she has marked the space on the answer sheet that corresponds to the number of the question.

## Share Tips for Different Types of Tests

Here are some strategies that will help your child do his best on several specific kinds of tests. Review them with him as he prepares for each new test.

### True-False Tests

During the test:

- Have your child look for key words such as *always* or *never*—they often indicate that the statement is false. Words such as *often*, *usually* or *sometimes* can indicate that an answer is true.
- Tell your child to stick with his first choice for an answer. Studies have shown that the first answer that comes to mind is generally the correct one, so he should think carefully before changing an answer.
- Avoid getting caught up worrying about patterns. If he's pretty sure that the first five answers are true, he shouldn't second-guess himself because he thinks there are too many *True* answers in a row.
- If he isn't sure of the answer, it might be better to guess. After all, he has a 50 percent chance that his guess will be correct!



### Multiple-Choice Tests

During the test:

- Have your child read all the answers before he makes his choice. He may think the first option is correct but there may be another one that is even better.
- Have him eliminate the obviously incorrect answers. Then he can evaluate the remaining choices to determine which is the best fit.
- Be sure he checks the wording of the question carefully for qualifying statements such as "which of the following are *not* ... ."

### Essay Tests

Essay tests are designed to do more than make sure your child knows the facts. Essay tests measure not only how well your child understands the material, but also how well he can make connections to what he already knows. Making charts and graphs can be good ways to prepare for an essay test.

During the test:

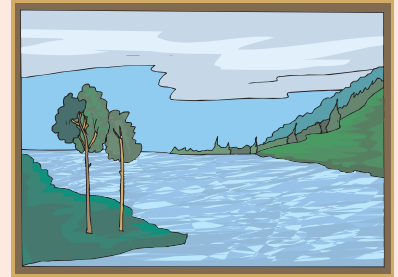
- Have your child take a few minutes to organize his thoughts before he begins to write. He can make a rough outline on a piece of scrap paper. Or he can write down the words or ideas that come to mind.
- Have him write neatly. Even the best response won't be worth much if it is illegible.
- Encourage him to pay attention to spelling and grammar.
- Have him begin his answer by restating the question, just as it appears on the test. It can help to get him started and keep him focused.



## Overcoming Test Anxiety

It's normal to get a little nervous before a big test, but many children suffer from excessive test anxiety. They worry so much about taking the test that their performance suffers. While it may be helpful to simply *tell* your child to relax or stop worrying, there are other things you can *do* to help him diffuse those pre-test jitters. For example:

- **Make sure your child spreads study time out** over time. True learning requires time to study, review and think about the content. And knowing the material is the best way to reduce anxiety and stress.
- **Discourage your child from cramming** the night before a test. Cramming does little but increase the level of anxiety, which can interfere with clear thinking. The most important things your child can do the day before a test are to review and then get a good night's sleep.
- **Show your child how to relax.** Some children find it helpful to close their eyes and take a few deep breaths before starting a test. Others like to visualize a relaxing place, such as a peaceful river. Encourage your child to keep a positive outlook. Have him envision himself doing well on the test.
- **Remind your child that test scores aren't everything.** There are other things that are important, too—things such as having a good attendance record, a good attitude and completing homework assignments, for example. Test scores are just one part of the total grade.
- **Help your child keep things in perspective.** Make sure he knows that, while you want him to *do* his best, he doesn't have to *be* the best. Assure him that your love for him is not dependent on his test grades.



## Make Sure Your Child Knows How to Study Effectively

The real secret to your child's success on tests—and in school in general—lies in establishing good study habits. Developing good study habits requires:

- **Organization.** Teach your child to use assignment notebooks and a calendar to schedule study time. Making a daily "to-do" list also can work well.
- **Participation.** Expect your child to listen in class and to take good notes. If she is confused, she should not be afraid to ask questions. Make sure she understands that, if she is confused, it's very likely other kids in the class may have the same questions.
- **Dedication.** Make homework part of your child's daily routine. Help her find a quiet, comfortable spot where she can study. If she doesn't have specific assignments every day, she can use that time for extra review and practice.
- **Review.** Your child should spend at least some time each day reviewing what she has already covered. She can look back through the previous chapter or look over recent class notes, for example.
- **Correction.** Have your child correct the answers she missed on tests and homework assignments. This reinforces learning and ensures that she has the correct information.





### Teach Your Child the SQ3R Method

Doing homework every night is one of the most important things your child can do to prepare to do well on tests. And the SQ3R (survey, question, read, restate and review) method is a great way to make sure that time spent on homework is productive time. Here's how it works:

**Survey.** Have your child skim over a reading assignment to figure out what it is about. She can use headings, pictures and bold face type as clues.

**Question.** Next, have her list all the questions she has about the material. You might want to have her make a chart with the following headings—*who, what, when, where, how* and *why*—to help her organize her questions.

**Read.** Now she should read the assignment carefully. As she reads, she should try to answer the questions on her list.

**Restate.** Have your child test herself by describing in her own words what she has just read. Help her learn to identify and focus on the main points.

**Review.** At the end of her study session, make sure your child glances over the new material again.

### Review Test Results With Your Child

Review with your child the results of the tests she takes. Especially when it comes to teacher-made tests, such a review can be an excellent way to focus on areas where your child needs to spend more time. First, talk about the things that your child did well—even if her overall performance on the test was not as good as you both would have liked. At the very least, let her know that you know she can do better, and that you will work with her to find ways to help her improve.

Then, talk about the answers she got wrong and why she answered the way she did. Review the teacher comments with her. They can be especially helpful. In some cases, your child may need additional work in basic areas (she may need more practice in basic math functions, for example). In other cases, she simply may have misunderstood a question.

Reviewing test results also can be a good way to help your child learn how to pace herself as she works her way through the questions on the next test she takes.

### Conclusion



While taking tests is no one's favorite activity, tests are an essential part of education and it is important for students to know how to do their best on any test. Some test-taking strategies, like getting a good night's sleep the night before, seem almost too obvious to mention—but it is often such simple things that trip up many students.

As with many challenges, good preparation is often more than half the battle. The best foundation for test success is always paying attention in class, doing the assignments, asking good questions and participating in class every day. If the learning foundation is in place, the specific test-taking skills detailed in this Parent Guide will help students make sure the test actually measures what they know and have learned to do.

## For More Information

**10 Secrets to Acing Any High School Test**

by Lee Wherry Brainerd and Ricki Winegardner  
Learning Express

**Getting Straight A's**

by Gordon W. Green  
Carol Publishing Group

**"Help Your Child Improve in Test-Taking"**

U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement  
<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/TestTaking/index.html>

**"Help Your Child in Testing Times"**

The ParentCentre  
<http://www.parentcentre.gov.uk/publishContent.cfm?topicAreaId=179>

**"Helping children and teens cope with test or exam anxiety"**

<http://www.livingeffectively.com/public/examanxiety.htm>

**"Helping Children Master the Tricks and Avoid the Traps of Standardized Tests"**

ERIC Digest ED429987  
<http://www.ericfacility.net/ericdigests/ed429987.html>

**Student Success Secrets**

by Eric Jensen  
Barron's Educational Series  
1-800-645-3476  
<http://barronseduc.com>

**Super Student Happy Kid!**

by Sally D. Ketchum  
Summer Island Press

**"Taking Tests"**

Helping Your Child  
Patchogue-Medford Congress of Teachers  
<http://pmct.org/helpsucceed/testing.html>

**Test Smart! Ready-to-Use Test-Taking Strategies and Activities for Grades 5-12**

by Gary W. Abbamont and Antoinette Brescher  
The Center for Applied Research in Education

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*Common Discipline Problems of Elementary School Children and How to Solve Them*  
*31 Alternatives to TV and Video Games for Your Elementary School Child*

### **School Success—Set 2**

*Give Your Child the Edge: Teachers' Top 10 Learning Secrets Parents Can Use*  
*How to Help Children Do Their Best on Tests*  
*Helping Children Get Organized for Homework and Schoolwork*

### **School Success—Set 3**

*Help Your Child Develop Good Learning Styles*  
*How to Instill the Character Traits of Success in Your Child*  
*Seven Proven Ways to Motivate Children to Do Better in School*

### **When There is a Problem—Set 1**

*Help Your Child Deal With Bullies and Bullying*  
*Help Your Child Deal With Peer Pressure*  
*How to Help Your Struggling Student*

### **Other Important Titles**

*Common Discipline Problems of Teenagers and How to Solve Them*  
*What to Do If Your Child Has ADD/ADHD*  
*Common Discipline Problems of Middle School Children and How to Solve Them*  
*Making a Smooth Transition to Middle School*

*For more information about these and other materials for  
parents to encourage learning in their children:*

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