

# Exam stress: don't make it any worse

Many parents get it wrong when trying to help — here's what to do during revision time

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Are we making our children more stressed about exams than they need to be? Experts believe that today's children are under so much pressure from schools to do well that they don't need it from parents as well.

Last summer ChildLine reported a 200 per cent increase in exam-stress counselling and the problem isn't going away. "Schools now put a lot of emphasis on the importance of GCSEs and A levels so a parent's role now

is almost the opposite — to de-stress the student,” says Dr Carina Eriksen, a consultant psychologist who works in schools and with families.

“Parents often inadvertently make their children more stressed,” says Julia Harrington, head of Queen Anne’s School in Caversham, Berkshire, which has been running de-stressing revision workshops with pupils that improved mock GCSE results. “They need a certain amount of stress to do well, but too much turns into anxiety, which floods the brain and makes them feel hopeless.”

Here are the key mistakes parents make — and what to do instead:

### **Be interested, don’t take over**

The most frequent complaint from teenagers to tutor Eileen Tracy is that their parents — mainly mothers — are too involved and simply care too much. This makes the child anxious and fearful about disappointing them. “The more the parent is invested, the less the teenager can be,” says Tracy, author of *The Student’s Guide to Exam Success* (Open University, £16.99). “I’ve found there’s often a fight for ownership of the exam and the grades. But it’s the teenager who needs to take ownership — they have to feel they are doing it for themselves, otherwise it introduces guilt and fear into their emotional state.”

The best approach is to be a non-intrusive, supportive presence. They like to hear you pottering about in the house, popping in very occasionally, offering tea, toast and sympathy, but not taking over revision schedules — interested but not invested.

### **Don’t nag them to work**

Even seemingly anodyne comments can be corrosive. “Every time a stressed-out mother says, ‘shouldn’t you be revising?’ the student gets a shot of adrenaline, which doesn’t make them want to work,” says Tracy.

“If you suspect they’re not working, use ‘I’ statements such as, ‘I’ve noticed you’re spending a lot of time on Instagram. How do you feel?’, or, ‘I’ve noticed you’re not working, can I help?’”

Don’t be tempted to make a barbed comment (“What, on Instagram again?”), says Janey Downshire, from Teenagers Translated, which runs courses for parents of teenagers. Pass the responsibility back to them. “I tell my children that I don’t want them to be disappointed by their results and berate themselves for not working hard enough. So I ask them if they are happy with their revision, are they finding it easy or would they like some help?” Save these conversations for calm times, not when you’ve just found them on Netflix.

### **Ask what you can do to help**

In our quest to be vaguely upbeat and motivational, we might try a “well, as long as you do your best”. However, even that can be anxiety-inducing to a teenager, whose seismic neural changes mean they often misread statements and look for hidden meanings. Harrington recalls that she once told a pupil, “you have great potential”, but the girl took that to mean “I’m failing”.

Instead, ask what they would like from you. “‘Tell me three things I can do to help’, or, ‘Tell me the things I say that stress you’. That way you are promoting a collaborative approach,” says Dr Eriksen.

### **Don’t expect them to work in their bedroom for hours.**

☑ Both the “bedroom” and the “hours” bit can cause children stress. Downshire thinks that revising in their bedroom is a bad idea — better to have a quiet corner of the house with a table and their books but no distractions to cause guilt and anxiety. “There’s one spot in our living

room where whoever is taking exams takes up residence.”

## If you suspect they're not working, don't be tempted to make a barbed comment

Jonny Mitchell, the star of Channel 4's *Educating Yorkshire* and head of the Co-operative Academy in Leeds, believes that telling a child — particularly a procrastinator — to go to their room for three hours and revise the moment they come in from school causes needless stress. “Let them come home, run around to let off steam first and eat something nutritious so they're not surviving on crisps and Red Bull. Then encourage 15-minute bursts of work broken up by breaks for social media or TV.” Don't be afraid to contact the school for help: “Teachers can be better placed than parents because they are one step removed.” We must be careful not to criticise when we hear them on the computer, says Harrington. “A parent might hear them listening to a podcast and say, ‘what are you doing on the computer? You're supposed to be working’. They might not be working but the chances are they are. The exam system has changed a lot — there is much more analysis and deep thinking now rather than rote learning of facts.”

### **Don't tell them their future depends on this exam**

“When teachers say teenagers' grades will determine their life's path they believe it,” says Tracy. “It's a parent's job to give the wider picture: life doesn't hang on any exam. Attitude makes much more of a difference – in fact, people who failed their A levels often say it made them more determined and focused later.” Remind them of their other skills (teamwork, networking, creativity), which will be important in later life but feel eclipsed now because of the focus on academics.