

# Help Your Child Improve in Test-Taking

**American children must be ready to learn from the first day of school. And of course, preparing children for school is a historic responsibility of parents.**

**Test.** It's a loaded word. Important...something to care about...something that can mean so much we get apprehensive thinking about it.

Tests are important, especially to school children. A test may measure a basic skill. It can affect a year's grade. Or, if it measures the ability to learn, it can affect a child's placement in school. So it's important to do well on tests.

Besides, the ability to do well on tests can help throughout life in such things as getting a driver's license, trying out for sports, or getting a job. Without this ability, a person can be severely handicapped.

Your child can develop this ability. And you can help the child do it. Just try the simple techniques developed through Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) research. This leaflet tells you how.

## Why Test?

It's helpful for a child to understand why schools give tests. And to know the different kinds of tests.

Tests are yardsticks. Schools use them to measure, and then improve education. Some tell schools that they need to strengthen courses or change teaching techniques. Other tests compare students by schools, school districts, or cities. All tests determine how well "your child" is doing. And that's very important.

Most of the tests your child will take are "teacher-made." That is, teachers design them. These tests are associated with the grades on report cards. They help measure a student's progress--telling the teacher and the student whether he or she is keeping up with the class, needs extra help, or, perhaps, is far ahead of other students.

Now and then your child will take "standardized" tests. These use the same standards to measure student performance across the country. Everyone takes the same test according to the same rules. This makes it possible to measure each student's performance against that of others. The group with whom a student's performance is compared is a "norm group" and consists of many students of the same age or grade who took the same test.

## **Ask the School**

It could be useful for you to know the school's policies and practices on giving standardized tests and the use of test scores. Ask your child's teacher or guidance counselor about the kinds of tests your child will take during the year--and the schedule for testing.

One other thing: some schools give students practice in taking tests. This helps to make sure that they are familiar with directions and test format. Find out whether your child's school gives "test-taking practice" on a regular basis or will provide such practice if your child needs it.

## **Avoid Test Anxiety**

It's good to be concerned about taking a test. It's not good to get "test anxiety." This is excessive worry about doing well on a test and it can mean disaster for a student.

Students who suffer from test anxiety tend to worry about success in school, especially doing well on tests. They worry about the future, and are extremely self-critical. Instead of feeling challenged by the prospect of success, they become afraid of failure. This makes them anxious about tests and their own abilities. Ultimately, they become so worked up that they feel incompetent about the subject matter or the test.

It does not help to tell the child to relax, to think about something else, or stop worrying. But there are ways to reduce test anxiety. Encourage your child to do these things:

- Space studying over days or weeks. (Real learning occurs through studying that takes place over a period of time.) Understand the information and relate it to what is already known. Review it more than once. (By doing this, the student should feel prepared at exam time.)
- Don't "cram" the night before--cramming increases anxiety which interferes with clear thinking. Get a good night's sleep. Rest, exercise, and eating well are as important to test-taking as they are to other schoolwork.
- Read the directions carefully when the teacher hands out the test. If you don't understand them, ask the teacher to explain.
- Look quickly at the entire examination to see what types of questions are included (multiple choice, matching, true/ false, essay) and, if possible, the number of points for each. This will help you pace yourself.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, skip it and go on. Don't waste time worrying about it. Mark it so you can identify it as unanswered. If you have time at the end of the exam, return to the unanswered question(s).

## **Do's and Don't's**

You can be a great help to your children if you will observe these do's and don'ts about tests and testing:

- Don't be too anxious about a child's test scores. If you put too much emphasis on test scores, this can upset a child.
- Do encourage children. Praise them for the things they do well. If they feel good about themselves, they will do their best. Children who are afraid of failing are more likely to become anxious when taking tests and more likely to make mistakes.
- Don't judge a child on the basis of a single test score. Test scores are not perfect measures of what a child can do. There are many other things that might influence a test score. For example, a child can be affected by the way he or she is feeling, the setting in the classroom, and the attitude of the teacher. Remember, also, that one test is simply one test.
- Meet with your child's teacher as often as possible to discuss his/her progress. Ask the teacher to suggest activities for you and your child to do at home to help prepare for tests and improve your child's understanding of schoolwork. Parents and teachers should work together to benefit students.

- Make sure your child attends school regularly. Remember, tests do reflect children's overall achievement. The more effort and energy a child puts into learning, the more likely he/she will do well on tests.
- Provide a quiet, comfortable place for studying at home.
- Make sure that your child is well rested on school days and especially the day of a test. Children who are tired are less able to pay attention in class or to handle the demands of a test.
- Give your child a well rounded diet. A healthy body leads to a healthy, active mind. Most schools provide free breakfast and lunch for economically disadvantaged students. If you believe your child qualifies, talk to the school principal.
- Provide books and magazines for your youngster to read at home. By reading new materials, a child will learn new words that might appear on a test. Ask your child's school about a suggested outside reading list or get suggestions from the public library.

## **After the Test**

It's important for children to review test results. This is especially true when they take teacher-made tests. They can learn from a graded exam paper. It will show where they had difficulty and, perhaps, why. This is especially important for classes where the material builds from one section to the next, as in math. Students who have not mastered the basics of math will be unable to work with fractions, square roots, beginning algebra, and so on.

Discuss the wrong answers with your children and find out why they answered as they did. Sometimes a child misunderstands the way a question is worded or misinterprets what was asked. The child may have known the correct answer but failed to express it effectively.

It's important, too, for children to see how well they used their time on the test and whether guessing was a good idea. This helps them to change what they do on the next test, if necessary.

You and the child should read and discuss all comments written by the teacher. If there are any comments that aren't clear, the child should ask the teacher to explain.

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