

What to Do When Your Child Has Test Anxiety



By Emma Martin LaPlant, MA, LAMFT

Test anxiety is the experience of extreme distress and anxiety in testing situations, which can have a negative impact on test scores. An estimated 16-20% of students experience high levels of test anxiety in school, with another 18% experiencing moderate levels of test anxiety. And yes, this does include younger children as well; students in elementary school can and do experience test anxiety.

What Can It Look Like?

Signs of test anxiety can come in four forms: physical, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional.

Physical symptoms include headaches, nausea, stomach ache, diarrhea, excessive sweating, shortness of breath, lightheadedness, fainting, rapid heartbeat, dry mouth, and extreme changes in body temperature. **Behavioral symptoms** including fidgeting, pacing, avoidance, and defiance. **Cognitive symptoms** include racing thoughts, “going blank,” difficulty concentrating, negative self-talk, feelings of dread, comparing oneself to others, and difficulty organizing thoughts. **Emotional symptoms** include excessive fear, disappointment, anger, depression, significant worry, uncontrollable laughing or crying, helplessness, and withdrawal.

What Can I Do If My Child or Student Has Test Anxiety?

Test anxiety may seem insurmountable and unfixable to a student when they’re experiencing it, but there are several things you can do and/or suggest as a parent or teacher to help:

- **Discuss upcoming tests and their formatting.** Review test-taking tips for that specific format so the student knows what to expect.
- **Guide your child to practice meditation and deep breathing prior to the test.** Guided imagery can help calm nerves and reduce symptoms like headaches and stomach aches.
- **Suggest your child listen to relaxing music or sounds prior to the start of the test.**
- **Teach and practice positive self-talk.** Ideas could include, “I am calm, focused and smart,” “I am prepared,” “I remember to breathe deeply during my tests,” “Being calm helps me remember more,” etc.
- **If allowed, either before or during the test, let the student have an item that helps calm them.** Things like a family photo, stuffed animal, blanket, or lucky charm can be helpful.
- **Provide options to make testing more relaxing in the classroom.** Stretching, taking deep breaths, relaxed seating, removing shoes, taking breaks for the restroom, drinking water, and carrying lucky charms are all de-stressors.
- **Remind students to keep healthy routines before going in for the test.** Make sure they’re getting enough sleep, eating a healthy breakfast, and coming in prepared with test materials such as pencils, paper, calculators, etc.
- **Know the IEP and 504 Plans for testing accommodations.** These can offer formal help for K–12 students with learning and attention issues.

And finally, having a child or student who experiences test anxiety can be stressful for you as a parent or teacher as well—so remember to extend yourself the same grace and compassion that you give to others.

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