

# For Test Success, Get Rid of the Stress!

Ben Bernstein, PhD, has been helping children take tests for over 40 years. The most important thing he has learned is that test performance is directly affected by stress levels. If stress is too high (or too low), your child's performance will suffer.

In his new book *Test Success! How to Be Calm, Confident and Focused on Any Test*, he helps parents help their children do well on tests. He identifies nine key tools for test-taking success based on a balanced mind-body-spirit approach that boils down to being calm, having confidence, and maintaining focus.

Here are a few of his invaluable suggestions on how parents can help their children deal with the four primary causes of poor scores.

## Trouble with the Content

Understanding the material is the first and the most key issue.

- Ask your child the following questions:
  - Is there something in the material you specifically don't understand?
  - Do you feel like this material is just too difficult for you?
  - What doesn't make sense to you?
  - Are you having trouble memorizing?
  - Are you just bored with this material? (Caution: When children say something is "boring," they might mean that they don't understand it or like it.)
- Ask the teacher to shed light on the situation. The teacher may be familiar with your child's learning style, so ask for his observations. Also, see if he can explain the material to you. Do the explanations seem clear? Can the teacher show you a way to help your child?
- Consider arranging for a tutor to work with your child. Tutorial resources are increasingly available and don't have to be costly, such as peer tutors (fellow students), after-school programs that include a homework component, and college students looking for extra income.

## Physical Tension

Jitters and tension make it hard for anyone to concentrate. A bad case of nerves can seriously undermine students' test performance because it robs them of their concentration.

- Make sure your child gets enough regular physical exercise. Physical activities release tension and give your child the opportunity to let off steam and "restart" her system. Watching TV, talking on the phone, and playing video games are not aerobic. All too often kids try to study after long hours of these activities when their energy is already zapped.
- Check whether your child is getting enough sleep. Children need at least nine to ten hours of sleep a night, and anything less can severely hamper their school performance. Recent research shows that inadequate sleep can cause problems that look like attention deficit.

- Review your child’s diet. Unfortunately, a diet high in carbs, sugar, and caffeinated drinks is all too common in our culture. A healthy, balanced diet keeps glucose levels from going on a roller coaster and has a positive effect on metabolism, energy levels, and brain function.
- Learn to calm down yourself. You can increase your chances of reducing your child’s stress if you learn how to keep yourself calm no matter what is going on with your child.

### Issues of Self-Doubt

Your child’s doubt in himself and his abilities may cause his confidence to plunge both before and during a test.

- Ask yourself if you are the right person to be your child’s confidant. You might think of yourself as your child’s best friend, but you may not be the first choice as a confidant. If that’s the case, you have to give up the idea that your child should confide in you about this issue.
- Think of someone else your child can talk with. Enlist the support of a teacher she respects, a school counselor she trusts, a clergy member, or one of her close friends. Encourage her to share her deepest thoughts with that person. Make supportive but accurate statements to your child: “You can do it.” “I believe in you.” “You have what it takes.”

### Difficulty Staying on Task

If your child has difficulty becoming motivated, find out what is getting in his way. Is it an overall sense of helplessness that even if he tries, he won’t get anywhere? Has *achievement* become a negative word?

- Ask yourself whose goal it is that your child succeeds. Of course, you want her to do well, but if she doesn’t have that goal herself, you might never win this battle. A straightforward discussion about her goals can go a long way toward clarifying why she needs to work harder.
- Notice the ways that your child becomes distracted. Does he stay on the phone, text, log onto the web, e-mail, play video games, watch TV, eat—all instead of doing his homework? Can you help him set realistic working periods with breaks for “treats” and distractions?
- Consider how focused you are. If you have clear goals and minimize distraction, you can be a good role model for your child. She can see the effects for herself.

Remember: cultivating good work habits is ultimately something children should learn to do for themselves because they see the positive results and feel good about having accomplished a goal. Though you may have to encourage and mentor them through this process, they are doing the work so that they can go on to lead a more fulfilling life.

For more information, for a copy of *Test Success!*, or to interview the author, please contact Mary Ellen Gross, 858-456-0707, [sizzle@san.rr.com](mailto:sizzle@san.rr.com), or visit [www.testsuccesscoach.com](http://www.testsuccesscoach.com).