

Teachers' scare tactics may lead to lower exam scores

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As the school year winds down and final exams loom, teachers may want to avoid reminding students of the bad consequences of failing a test because doing so could lead to lower scores, according to new research published by APA.

"Teachers are desperately keen to motivate their students in the best possible way but may not be aware of how messages they communicate to students around the importance of performing well in exams can be interpreted in different ways," said lead author David Putwain, PhD, of Edge Hill University in Lancashire, England.

The study, published in APA's *School Psychology Quarterly*, involved 347 students, average age 15, of whom 174 were male. They came from two schools that offer an 18-month study program for the [exam](#) leading to a General Certificate of Secondary Education, the equivalent of a [high school diploma](#) in the U.S.

Students who said they felt threatened by their teachers' messages that frequently focused on failure reported feeling less motivated and scored worse on the exam than students who said their teacher used fewer fear tactics that they considered less threatening, the study found.

A message such as, "If you fail the exam, you will never be able to get a good job or go to college. You need to work hard in order to avoid failure," was an example of attempting to motivate by fear. Messages focusing on success might include, "The exam is really important as

most jobs that pay well require that you pass and if you want to go to college you will also need to pass the exam," according to the study.

"Both messages highlight to students the importance of effort and provide a reason for striving," said Putwain. "Where these messages differ is some focus on the possibility of success while others stress the need to avoid failure."

Twice over 18 months, students responded to a teacher at the school who was provided a script of questions to ask when other information was collected for registration and administration. The teachers asking questions were not the students' exam-preparatory instructors. The first set of questions asked how frequently their teachers attempted to motivate them with fear of failure, such as, "How often do your teachers tell you that unless you work hard you will fail your exam?" Students' level of feeling threatened was measured with questions such as, "Do you feel worried when your teachers tell you that your exam is getting nearer?" The teachers asked students to rate each item on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "never" and 5 being "most of the time." Three months later, students completed a questionnaire with the base question, "What is the reason for doing your schoolwork?" The students had several answer options representing different types of motivation, including rising from within or from an external source. At the end of the 18-month program, researchers collected the students' final grades.

"Psychologists who work in or with schools can help [teachers](#) consider the types of messages they use in the classroom by emphasizing how their messages influence [students](#) in both positive and negative ways and by recommending they consider the messages they currently use and their possible consequences," Putwain said. "Teachers should plan what types of messages would be the most effective and how they could be incorporated into the lesson plans."

More information: "The Scare Tactic: Do Fear Appeals Predict Motivation and Exam Scores?" David Putwain, PhD, Edge Hill University, and Richard Remedios, PhD, Durham University, School Psychology Quarterly, published online April 15.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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