

Reduce children's test anxiety with these tips—and a re-think of what testing means

February 15 2019, by Louis Volante And Christopher Deluca



Credit: Ketut Subiyanto from Pexels

The term "test anxiety" typically conjures up images of a high school or university student obsessing over an upcoming exam.

Certainly, older students have been the focus of more than a half a century of research examining test and assessment anxiety and its impact on grades. Researchers know that such test anxiety generally has [a negative impact on academic achievement](#).

Yet we also know schools and [parents](#) are recognizing [anxiety in younger children](#). Researchers have probed how, in particular, a rise in test anxiety in schools [corresponds to an increase in the use of standardized testing](#) increasingly mandated for accountability and evaluation purposes.

Coupled [with growing awareness of responding to mental health challenges in schools](#), educators and [policy-makers](#) need to understand how to confront and minimize the effects of testing on students' anxiety.

In the big picture, current assessment methods must adapt to reflect contemporary knowledge of both children's diverse cultural contexts and a more nuanced understanding of developmental competencies.

In the day-to-day, parents and teachers can empower themselves to be better prepared to support student well-being by re-thinking their own approaches to tests, and what adults are modelling.

What is test anxiety?

Test anxiety is generally regarded as a "nervous feeling" that is excessive and interferes with student performance. Symptoms of [test anxiety may fall into four broad physical, emotional, behavioural and cognitive categories](#).

Children could exhibit physical symptoms such as headaches, nausea, sweating and shortness of breath or feelings of fear, depression and helplessness. Behaviours might include fidgeting, pacing and avoidance. Cognitive disruptions could look like "going blank," racing thoughts and

negative self-talk.

Although not all students experience each of these problems, the impact of one or more of these symptoms can be debilitating. Left unacknowledged or unaddressed, in time such symptoms may lead to personal negative outcomes or harm, and difficulties at school.

The trouble with testing policy

Our research in Canada and abroad has consistently found that when policy-makers seek school reform, there is an ensuing emphasis on testing for accountability.

In these contexts, teachers and school administrators will [focus classroom and school instruction on select areas and ultimately undermine a more holistic approach to children's education.](#)

Standardized testing for accountability is also associated with heightened educator and student stress.

A narrow sense of "achievement"—such as is measured via standardized tests in select subject areas—is inadequate to capture key knowledge, skills and dispositions children need to be successful in contemporary schooling and life.

For these reasons, policy-makers would be wise to consider multi-dimensional approaches to holding schools accountable. For example, educational reforms [are more likely to be successful when they use collective processes that incorporate perspectives of educators and communities.](#)

What parents and teachers can do

In the context of these systemic and long-term issues, parents and teachers can intervene to reduce test anxiety for young children in the following ways:

1. Offer positive messaging

One of the simplest and most effective ways parents can combat test anxiety is through positive messaging.

For example, research demonstrates positive benefits when [parents encourage positive self-talk, offer relaxation techniques](#) and reassure children that anxiety is a natural feeling. Parents should know that psychological research suggests a certain amount of [heightened arousal is necessary to perform well, a state of balance-in-tension](#).

2. Keep communication open

Parents also need to maintain open lines of communication with their child's teachers—particularly since students do not necessarily exhibit test anxiety in all subjects.

3. Lower the stakes

Too often parent expectations increase the perceived "stakes" of the tests for students, assigning additional consequences or judging a child's merit and ability on the outcome of a single test.

Instead, it is important for parents to understand and also convey to their child that tests are one indicator of their performance in a subject. No test is a perfect reflection of what a [student](#) knows or is able to do.

Seeing tests as one piece of information about how a child is

progressing, and seeking out additional information as needed, will help parents gain perspective.

4. Take care of yourself

Ironically, one key issue both parents and teachers need to consider when attempting to assist students with test [anxiety](#) is to first take care of themselves.

Just as parents must be aware of what messages they send, teachers also need to attend to their own well-being and avoid inadvertently transmitting their own anxieties to students.

For example, the relationship [between teachers' math anxiety and student math anxiety is well-established](#) prompting some researchers to explore ways of breaking a [mathematics anxiety cycle](#).

Similarly, [teacher](#) worry about large-scale test results, such as provincial or state-wide assessments, can transfer to students.

Thankfully, a positive development to emerge from some of these troubling findings is that there is a [growing recognition of the relationship between teacher and student well-being](#).

5. Emphasize test skills, not drilling

Teachers can also help students combat test concerns by offering test-preparation skill development and reviews before important assessments.

The latter should not be confused with ["teaching to the test," which both narrows curriculum and may relentlessly drill test content](#).

Rather, practicing strategies such as re-reading difficult questions, writing brief outlines beside short answer questions and managing time during tests will be helpful.

Preparing students to write tests effectively also includes teaching students about test structures —question formats, the rationale of scoring schemes and common pitfalls with different question types.

Collectively, these skills can be applied to any curriculum or test. Students who have been prepared in both content and skills tend to have lower levels of [test anxiety](#) and are more capable of managing their time and responses.

Not surprisingly, these types of strategies are more effective when they are supported by parents and caregivers.

Optimally, parents, teachers and policymakers can work in their various roles to support children's success while learning about possibilities for more [complex and intelligent forms of accountability](#).

Overall, we need to re-think what matters in schools and what's worth measuring.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Reduce children's test anxiety with these tips—and a re-think of what testing means (2019, February 15) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-02-children-anxiety-tipsand-re-think.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.