

Helping Your Child Study for a Test Without Cramming the Night Before

Cramming can make a student feel busy without creating the strongest conditions for durable learning. The Institute of Education Sciences recommends spacing learning over time rather than concentrating all review in one sitting.¹ It also recommends using quizzes or other forms of active recall to help students retrieve key information instead of relying only on rereading.¹ Start by moving the first review session earlier. Even a short plan spread across several days can reduce the pressure to “learn everything tonight.” During each session, have your child close the notes and recall what they know from memory, then check the answer and correct gaps. APA guidance on research-tested study methods describes repeated spaced retrieval as more effective for later memory than massed retrieval in a single session.² Keep sessions focused. One short block can review vocabulary, another can practice problems, and another can explain key ideas aloud. Ask your child to mark material as “know,” “almost know,” or “need help” so the next session targets weak areas rather than spending equal time on everything. Research published in Psychological Science also shows that retrieval practice and spacing can work together to strengthen long-term learning.³ The night before the test should be a brief review and organization check, not the first serious study session. The goal is a repeatable routine: study a little, retrieve without looking, correct errors, and return to the material later.

Did You Know?

- ✓ IES recommends spacing learning over time and using quizzing or active retrieval to strengthen learning and memory.¹
- ✓ APA summarizes research showing that repeated retrieval is especially effective when practice is spaced rather than massed together.²
- ✓ Psychological Science research found that retrieval and spacing interact as important contributors to long-term learning.³

Research Sources

1. Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse. “Organizing Instruction and Study to Improve Student Learning.”
2. American Psychological Association. “Six Research-Tested Ways to Study Better.”
3. Soderstrom, N. C., Kerr, T. K., & Bjork, R. A. “The Critical Importance of Retrieval-and Spacing-for Learning.” Psychological Science, 2016.

Five-Day Test Study Plan

Use this page to spread studying across several short sessions and make active recall part of every review.

Child's name: _____ Test date: _____

Subject/test: _____ Study start date: _____

1. Identify What Is on the Test - Day 1

List the chapters, skills, vocabulary, notes, or problem types that need review.

Topics: _____

2. Recall Before Rereading - Day 2

Close the notes and write or say what you remember, then check what was missed.

I need to relearn: _____

3. Practice the Hard Parts - Day 3

Use practice questions, flashcards, worked examples, or problems on the weakest material.

Hardest area: _____

4. Mix and Retrieve Again - Day 4

Review several topics in a different order and answer without looking whenever possible.

What I can now recall: _____

5. Brief Final Review - Day 5

Check key points, organize materials, and stop before the review turns into a late-night cram session.

Final check: _____

What Parents Can Say: "You do not have to learn everything tonight. We're going to study in shorter rounds, test your memory, and come back to it again."