

Helping a Child Manage Test Anxiety Before It Takes Over

Some nervousness before a test is common. The problem begins when worry becomes so strong that a child cannot prepare effectively, sleep normally, think clearly during the test, or recover afterward. Start by separating preparation from panic. Ask what the child is predicting: “I’ll forget everything,” “I’ll fail,” or “Everyone will know I’m stupid.” Do not dismiss the feeling, but do not confirm the catastrophe. The American Psychological Association recommends patience, normalizing mistakes as part of learning, gently challenging unhelpful thinking, and helping students make a concrete plan for the task.¹ The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends predictable routines, adequate sleep, physical activity, and practical support for school-related anxiety; it also advises seeking additional help when anxiety persists or interferes with functioning.² Child Mind Institute guidance on test anxiety emphasizes preparation, practice with the test format, study strategies, and calming skills such as slow breathing, and notes that some students with significant anxiety may need school accommodations.³ At home, begin early enough that studying does not become a last-minute emergency. Divide material into short sessions, include retrieval practice or sample questions, and stop studying at a reasonable time the night before. Practice one calming routine when the child is already calm: slow breathing, relaxing the shoulders, reading the directions once, and starting with a manageable question. Keep your own language proportionate. Avoid statements that make one score sound like a verdict on the child’s future. After the test, ask first about the process—what helped, what was difficult, and what could change next time—before focusing on the grade. If test anxiety repeatedly causes panic, physical symptoms, avoidance, or significant impairment, involve the school and the child’s health professional.

Did You Know?

- ✓ APA guidance recommends validating anxiety, gently challenging unhelpful thinking, and helping students make a concrete plan.¹
- ✓ AAP guidance emphasizes routines, sleep, activity, and additional support when anxiety persists or interferes with daily functioning.²
- ✓ Clinical guidance on test anxiety supports preparation, practice, realistic coping strategies, and accommodations when appropriate.³

Research Sources

1. American Psychological Association. “Students Experiencing Anxiety.”

2. American Academy of Pediatrics. “Help Your Child Manage Anxiety: Tips for Home & School.” [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org/Updated/September/2024/). Updated September 24, 2024.

3. Child Mind Institute. “Tips for Beating Test Anxiety.” Reviewed August 14, 2026.

Ten-Minute Test-Anxiety Preparation Plan

Use this page before a test. The goal is to turn a vague fear into a realistic preparation and coping plan.

Child's name: _____

Date: _____

Test or subject: _____

Test date: _____

1. Name the Worry - About 2 Minutes

Write the specific prediction that is making the test feel threatening.

My worry says: _____

2. Check the Prediction - About 2 Minutes

Check the prediction and write a more balanced thought.

A balanced thought: _____

3. Choose One Study Action - About 2 Minutes

Choose one useful preparation step instead of trying to study everything.

Today I will: ☐ review ☐ practice questions ☐ make flash cards ☐ other

4. Practice One Calm-Body Skill - About 2 Minutes

Practice one brief calming strategy while the child is already calm.

My calm-body cue: _____

5. Make the Test-Day Plan - About 2 Minutes

Choose what the child will do if anxiety rises during the test.

If I get stuck, I will: _____