

GCSEs: What Can A Parent Do? 101 tips to ensure success

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Section 1: Introduction

The most common frustrations for parents

He always leaves everything to the last minute - one moment he has all the time in the world - the next it's all stress and stropping because it has to be in tomorrow and he hasn't got the stuff he needs to do it...

I didn't even do GCSEs - how can I help him?

I don't understand all this coursework, levels and module exams - it's completely different from when I was at school.

I can't stand the arguments and stress when I tell him exams are important and try to make him work - it always ends up with him saying it's his life and slamming the door.

There's a million websites to help but how do you know which are any good?

She's always got an excuse - I don't know what to believe.

She's always panicked in exams - when I try to help her it always ends in a slanging match - it always seems to end in me making her more stressed.

Surely she shouldn't be going out **again** when she's got exams coming up?



How can I make a difference?



Many parents feel at a loss when their children enter their examination years, known in schools as Key Stage 4 (Years 10 and 11, or 4th and 5th Year to those as old as me), confused by the complicated systems of choosing subjects and courses (GCSEs, vocational GCSEs, GNVQs, BTECs, VRQs - just some of the options available), coursework, entry tiers, modular

exams and practical assessments. If you feel like this you are **not** alone! The exam system has changed greatly over the past few years, and is continuing to change, and sometimes it feels as if it is best just to let the 'experts' at your child's school get on with it.

But your involvement during these crucial years can make an enormous difference - the difference between success and failure or between 'D' and 'E' passes and 'A's and 'B's.

*Parental support is **eight times** more important in determining a child's academic success than social class, according to a new study. The Campaign for Learning found that parental involvement in a child's education can mean the difference between an A* and an 'also-ran' at GCSE. (TES, 10 October 2003)*

And the good news is - you don't have to be an expert in any of the subjects your child chooses to make a real difference, and you don't have to become a 'super-parent' giving up your own life and responsibilities - you just need to know how best to spend the time you do have, at each stage of the process.

This booklet enables you do to just this - providing you with the clear and practical information you will need to help him

or her to meet the demands of the exam years, in partnership with the school. The booklet outlines exactly what your child needs to be able to do to succeed at each stage of the process to the best of their ability ('Key tasks for pupils') and provides as many practical ideas to apply throughout the two examination years as we could cram in ('Tips for parents').

As with all our books, the suggestions are down to earth and have been used by ordinary parents with busy lives, just like yours.

Isn't it the schools' job to get them through their exams?

Yes, of course the school has an important role to play and can provide the expertise and resources to help your child acquire the knowledge, skills and understanding they need to do their best in each subject. There will be many new expectations of your child in Years 10 and 11 - expectations which for many children, even the very brightest, are hard to meet. You don't need to know anything about maths, science or resistant materials to help them with these things - you've been doing it all their lives! New demands on your child are likely to include:

- Being more self-motivated and taking more responsibility for their own learning - this can be a big change from earlier years, with most teachers viewing it as the pupil's responsibility to attend and make the most of lessons once they get to Year 10.
- Asking when they do not understand. (This requires confidence and can be difficult at a time when friends' opinions hold such sway.)
- Developing their abilities to overcome frustrations, and strategies for persisting when they are learning material that they find challenging.
- Organising themselves, notes, handouts and information for different subjects, and different topics within these.

- Completing more work at home, independently.
- Organising and planning their time over longer periods, for example to complete a coursework project.
- Understanding the exam structure and the relative importance of each piece of work to their final grade.
- Planning and carrying out their revision.
- Perfecting their 'exam technique'.



Perhaps the hardest demand on Year 10 and 11 pupils is that of understanding the long-term importance of doing the best they can, and learning to shelve short-term fun at times in the interest of long-term benefits (not easy even for adults).

Unfortunately for us, from the teenage perspective, interest and effort in education and the long-term

benefits these can bring often come rather a long way down the priority list, after friendships, the 'right' clothes, social life, romantic concerns and hobbies.

In addition, children will differ in their levels of maturity, their ability to take responsibility for their learning, organisational skills and levels of motivation.

And this is where you come in. You are the expert on your own child and have always been his or her most important teacher. Your support, encouragement and interest can make a spectacular difference to your child's motivation and ability to cope with the academic and organisational demands of the exam years.

When you, your child and the school work in partnership, you can be sure that your child will achieve the best results possible.

So what is my role as a parent*?

Of course your role in helping your child to succeed will vary according to their needs and strengths. You will find that in the areas covered by some sections of the booklet you will have little to do, while others will require more support. All four of my own children have needed different levels of support in different areas - the final one getting on pretty much independently until her exams were looming, and then only needing support with drawing up a revision timetable and buying the files. With my older daughter it was a different story - although good at understanding the work she did in school, she needed much more support and structure - daily reminders to empty her bag of the day's stock of handouts and notes, help with filing them, endless supplies to replace lost pens, and, during the revision period, outright bribery to stick to the plan we had agreed.

Your role may include some or all of the following:

- Attendance officer - making sure your child goes to lessons and understands the importance of making the most of lesson-times.



- Partner with school and child - going to parents' evenings, asking questions and finding out how you can best help your child at home.
- Provider of the tools for homework and revision - a quiet space, a 'workbox' of pens, paper and other necessities.

- Banker - paying for the tools, files and revision guides they need.
- Study buddy - showing an interest in the subject, helping with homework (but not doing it for them), testing them when they ask you etc.
- Entertainments officer - finding out about TV programmes, theatre productions, films, exhibitions relevant to your child's learning and enjoying them together.
- Sounding board and adviser - helping your child to break tasks down so that they are manageable, keeping a subtle eye on progress and celebrating achievements, and seeing a positive way forward when things go badly.
- Project manager - agreeing the rules for homework or revision (they won't work if they're imposed), helping them to make a realistic timetable, balancing work against the 'fun stuff' and revising the plans as necessary.
- Go-between - for your child and the school when necessary; making sure problems are nipped in the bud and asking the questions your child can't or won't.
- Information provider and interpreter - finding copies of old exam papers, searching out websites, finding out about the subject, exam structures and content.



Whatever your individual child's needs your chief role will always be that of person who cares most in the world, champion of their needs and admirer of every achievement. The most important role you will play is that of person who will love them and be proud of them whatever happens.

* The word parent is used throughout the booklet, but of course you don't have to be a parent to make the difference - carer, older brother, grandparent or neighbour - it won't make any difference to the effect you can have.

Good exam results - what is the secret?

We tend to think of our children's results being down to what happens on the day of the exam itself. Will they be in the right frame of mind? Will they be lucky and get the right questions? Will they remember what they have revised? In fact the results of exams are generally determined well before they sit the exam itself. There are a number of stages in the process of achieving exam success. The secret of good results in exams is about getting things right (and being aware of what can go wrong) at each stage of the process. The broad stages are:

STAGE 1: Learning the content first time round

The process of revision (literally 'looking at something again') does assume that the content of the subject has been learnt in the first place - every lesson counts.

STAGE 2: Revision

Even the 'perfect student', who has attended every lesson and paid attention throughout the exam years needs to revise to achieve their potential. For the rest of us the need for revision is even greater. Revision can be done in many ways, some of which are more effective than others. The booklet offers a way of planning revision as well as tips for using the most effective techniques.

STAGE 3: The exam itself

Even with the first two stages successfully achieved, things can still go wrong. There are three sets of skills involved in taking exams - knowing the subject matter, organisational skills and 'exam technique'. These are dealt with in the booklet in the section entitled 'The moment of truth - sitting the exams'.