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Exam survival tips: the Mumsnet guide

Exams and teenagers go together like revision and teenagers. As in, they don't.

If you've got a child taking GCSEs, Highers, AS-levels or A-levels (or even 11-plus for secondary school entrance), then you're also in for a testing time. Our round-up of Mumsnetters' tips on how to survive exams and revision should help.

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'Yeah but it's not like I need to revise or anything'

Um, hello? No one, not even an all-round A-grade super-geek teen, can just stroll into the exams without having done any revision. So, it is your undodgeable duty as Unfairest Parent in the World to insist on some degree of sitting in a room with a pile of textbooks. You could take a (breathtakingly cool) hands-off approach, like this Mumsnetter:

"Just let them get on with it. You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink." *maltesers*

Or, if your parental stress levels would hit palpably fatal heights without some kind of "direction-setting", you might prefer to...

"Get them to draw up a revision timetable, so they are doing different subjects every two hours or so. Or it just gets dull and you stop taking it in." *SirBoobAlot*

But be careful that you don't organise them too much - taking breaks in the form of seeing friends or watching rubbish telly is important, too.

'Yeah but I don't know how'

Some schools 'teach' students how to revise, but many don't. So, even armed with the swankiest revision timetable in the world, it's entirely likely your child won't have a clue what to do once you've locked them in their room they've actually deigned to do some exam prep. Mumsnetters say:

- Teach them some revision techniques: mind mapping; flash cards; making notes; drawing flow charts and diagrams. Teach them how to turn diagrams and pictures into words, and words into diagrams. Teach them how to test if their revision has worked: you test Q&A style; they speak for two minutes on a topic; they write as much as they can about a topic for two minutes and so on.
- If they're going to be answering essay-based questions in the exams, they need to practise writing essays. It's all well and good trying to cram facts in, but knowing how to write a good essay is a skill in itself.
- Past papers, past papers, past papers.
- Suggest they assemble all the notes on one topic, then condense them down to four sides of A4 by reading through the original notes and prioritising the most important arguments, evidence etc. Then reduce those reduced notes to one side of A4. This A4 sheet of notes can then be reduced again to a filecard with key words on, for last-minute revision.
- The Beeb's [GCSE Bitesize](#) is an amazing site for revision online, and also for downloading audio bites in an MP3 format so you can listen to them whenever.

'Yeah but what's the point?'

Revision timetable done? Revision technique down pat? Oh, your work is so not done. Now comes the unadulterated un-pleasure of Persuading Your Child to Keep At It. Over and over



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again.

"Build breaks and treats into revision time, and mix the subjects up, so they have a mix of stuff they like/like less on same eve/day. And make a long list of 'things to learn': the enormous pleasure of ticking stuff off is not to be underestimated." *CarrieMumsnet*

"If they get stuck on something, suggest you discuss what they are learning. It really helps. Particularly finding someone who doesn't know that subject at all, and then explaining it to them." *AbsOfCroissant*

"Don't ever say to them, 'O-levels were so much harder than this' or point out newspaper articles which explain how 'easy' GCSEs/A Levels are these days. And if another family member/friend says it, make sure you show you're on your children's side - they are not easier, they are definitely just as hard as they ever were, and take just as much working through." *PixieOnaLeaf*

And, if all this falls on still-can't-be-bovvered ears, you may need to resort to the good old stick...

"With a very reluctant boy, I shared my bank statement with him. Showed him really how much a mortgage was, plus our TV package, broadband, utilities etc. Showed him my finances clearly. He was so shocked, a sudden realisation hit him that he was going to need to work hard to get a wage that could afford him the internet, a place, a car, his insurance and HDTV. He made his decision and worked his socks off. Pretty drastic but he really did have no idea!" *MammaK*

...or the equally effective carrot:

"Give them a promise of a present/holiday/iPod/day out/whatever at end of exams – not when results are announced but when exams are over. This is for working hard and trying their best - more important than whether 'success' is achieved or not." *pippop1*

Four (rather non-PC) home truths for the die-hard shirker

1. Revision is your job, not your parents' or your teachers'.
 2. It is bloody dull and hard work. It was bloody hard work and dull for your parents and it will be for you. Suck it in and get on with it.
 3. The worse you are at a subject, the more effort you need to put into it. There are no short cuts. This is a fact. Live with it.
 4. The more work you do, the better you will do in your exams. And potentially the easier the rest of your life will be.
- Full stop, end of story. Trust me on this one.
- *durrobbvious*

'Yeah but I'm so going to fail'

Allow us to introduce you to Too-Laid-Back-To-Revise-Teen's alter ego: Too-Het-Up-To-Revise-Teen.

Spotted at unpredictably random intervals (but very fond of appearing just as you're going to bed or when you've got something really rather important to do), Too-Het-Up-To-Revise-Teen is brimming over with despair, dread and dire predictions of abject failure in every single exam *in the world ever*. Time to put into action Operation Rebut and Reassure. Wise words from this Mumsnetter's mum:

"When I was writing essays and taking exams (some years ago now!) and getting very stressed about it, my mum just used to let me talk about what I had learned. I'd start by saying, "I don't know anything – I'm going to fail" and she would gently ask questions about the subject I was revising, acting all interested, and I would tell her what I did know, until I realised that I actually knew quite a lot. It helped me to get things organised in my head and also made me feel very secure and loved at those difficult times." *greenbananas*

It's definitely also worth making sure, in a back-to-basics parenting kind of way, that they're eating and sleeping properly and getting some fresh air and exercise...

"Insist on them finishing the revision at least half an hour before bedtime and doing something else to relax will help make it easier to get off to sleep." *AMumInScotland*

"Sleep is the most important thing. I never understood why people would study the whole night through and completely exhaust themselves. This is the time when your brain processes all the information you have taken in during the day and organises it." *AbsOfCroissant*

"Short walks are a good way to relax the tension and break up the day. Ask them to post a letter for you or accompany them on a walk around the block – but don't talk about exams!" *pippop1*

.. and doling out a bit of TLC on the domestic front:

"I relax the helping round-the-house rules at exam time and put up with Maths books completely covering the kitchen table. Also, I'm available for testing and chatting about bits that are difficult to understand." *webwiz*

'Yeah but the exam's today'

So, the day of the first exam dawns and your job is now to look cool, calm and utterly convinced that all will go wonderfully well - without for one minute letting on that the butterflies in your stomach appear to have mutated into bald-headed eagles...

"My mum always told me before my exams that she loved me more than the world and that, when the exam finished, she would love me more than the world. I got a good grasp of what was really important to me through her kind words and reassurance."
MammaK

Make sure you've covered all the practical bases:

- Find out in advance which exam is when and make sure that you have everything they need (pens, maths instruments, calculator, colouring pencils) for each exam ready the night before.
- Plenty of water, physical activity and leg stretching (especially for boys) does wonders. They tense so easily in a 'fight or flight' kind of a way in exam situations.

Rein in the urge to dish out lots of last-minute advice and stick instead to the crucially important ie read and answer the question, don't just put down everything you know.

And then pack 'em off to the exam hall with something nice to look forward to when it's over:

"I like the idea of some kind of special celebratory meal/ceremony to mark the end of each subject. My son has suggested a massive textbook bonfire; I've countered with a BBQ in the garden."
Porpoise

And a little bit of parent protocol

It goes without saying that pretty much anything you do and say between now and the exams is Unreasonable, Annoying and Unfair.

Much as you'd like to ~~clip 'em round the ear~~ point out the egregious faults in their thinking, now's really not the time. Instead, summon up heroic amounts sweet-voiced calm and...

"Don't nag. You can suggest they revise, or ask if you can help at all, but you can't force them to revise." *SirBoobAlot*

"Accept that some days there will be 'too much work to do' and they are 'paralysed with stress', whereas, the next day, it's OK to go and meet friends because they are 'completely on top of their work and they need a break'. Hmm." *webwiz*

And, when the whole infernal cycle of revision/panic/exam/revision/panic/exam starts to take its mood-sapping toll on the lot of you, cling tight to this home truth from Mumsnetter maryz:

"I have learned over the years that there are far more important things in life that educational achievement. Happiness is what they should be aiming for. So, try to convince them that their best is good enough – trying to do more than they can do is not physically possible."

Thanks to all who [shared their tips](#) with us. And don't forget that you can beat your parental breast about all things exam, classwork and school-related on [Mumsnet Talk: Education](#).

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