



How to talk to children during exam time

Exam time can be challenging for everyone, especially the child taking them. Supporting them through this period requires a careful balance of encouragement, reassurance, and practical support.

This guide, prepared with Dr. Fiona Pienaar, offers practical dos and don'ts, along with specific phrases to use (and avoid) in key exam season scenarios, helping adults provide the right support when it's needed most.



The dos and don'ts for communicating effectively



Acknowledge their feelings instead of dismissing them

Try saying: "It's okay to feel nervous. It means you care about doing well."

Avoid: "If you had revised more, you wouldn't feel nervous."

Acknowledging their feelings makes them feel heard and validated, while dismissing them can make anxiety worse.

Help them to focus on effort, not just results

Try saying: "You've put in the effort, and that's what matters. Just do your best."

Avoid: "You must get an A."

Emphasising effort over outcomes helps reduce fear of failure and boosts resilience.

Reassure without comparison

Try saying: "I'm proud of how hard you're working - it's your effort that counts."

Avoid: "Your sister worked really hard and her marks improved, so you should too!"

Comparing your child to others can damage self-esteem and create unnecessary pressure. Focusing on individual effort builds confidence.

The dos and don'ts for communicating effectively



Emphasise personal growth, not perfection

Try saying: "Exams are just one part of your journey, and we'll figure things out no matter what."

Avoid: "Your whole future depends on this!"

Putting too much emphasis on exam outcomes can increase stress and make failure feel catastrophic. Reassuring them helps keep things in perspective and reminds them that they're not alone in this journey.

Suggest relaxation, not pressure

Try saying: "Let's take a few deep breaths together, it will help keep you calm."

Avoid: "If you don't calm down, you won't be able to think properly."

Pressure to calm down can actually increase anxiety. Offering a calm moment together shows support and gives them a tool to manage their emotions, their thoughts and what they're feeling in their body.

Support effective study, without encouraging burnout

Try saying: "Do you want to teach me something you've revised? Sharing what you've studied can be a powerful way of reinforcing what you've learned."

Avoid: "You need to study all day to make sure you're ready."

Long hours without breaks can lead to stress and exhaustion. Instead, encourage active revision techniques like quizzing - these help strengthen memory and make studying more engaging.

Other things to consider that can **make a difference**



Create a supportive environment

Offer a **quiet study space** and **jointly plan structured revision time**. Discuss with them what might be helpful and what you can do to support them, for example, when they would like to stop for meals.

Try and stay calm

If you're visibly anxious, that's not going to help them. **Make sure you have personal strategies to cope** and people you can talk to.

Be available for emotional support

If they are feeling overwhelmed, ask them what they need and how you can support them. **Be available as much as you can and offer to talk** about what is on their mind.

Help with time management and healthy habits

Offer structure but **don't micromanage**. Encourage regular breaks, eating well, and sleep.