

GCSEs
What can a parent do?
REVISION GUIDE
Tips to ensure success

Section 1: Introduction

The most common frustration 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?.....

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

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

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

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....

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

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....

How can I make a difference?

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)*

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.

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 to do 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 us at Unity College. 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 and provides as many practical ideas to apply throughout the two examination years as we could cram in ('Tips for parents').

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

Yes, of course the college 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. New demands on your child are likely to include:

- Being more self-motivated and taking more responsibility for their own learning
- Asking when they do not understand.
- Developing their abilities to overcome frustration's 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.
- 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 for *GCSE* students 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.

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 examination years.

When you, your child and the college 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 other will require more support.

Your role may include some or all of the following:

- Making sure your child gets to college and lessons on time and understands the importance of making the most of lesson-times.
- 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.
- Paying for the equipment, files and revision guides they need.
- Showing an interest in the subject, helping with homework (but not doing it for them), testing them when they ask you etc.
- Sounding board and adviser - helping your child to break tasks down so that they are manageable, keeping an eye on progress and celebrating achievements.
- Agreeing the rules for homework or revision, helping them to make a realistic timetable, balancing work against the 'fun stuff' and revising the plans as necessary.
- Getting 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 a 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 a person who will love them and be proud of them whatever happens.

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'.

Tips for parents

Supporting your child in setting themselves up for revision:

- Talk to your child about how you can support them and what they would find helpful.
- The simplest things often get in the way of starting revision - weeks can be lost while students are 'going to get some folders soon..'. Get around these by simply providing the files, dividers, wall-charts etc. your child will need for the revision period.
- Encourage your child to empty their bag and file handouts and information from lessons at the end of each day. They won't seem important until they need them.
- Support your child in choosing one good revision guide for each subject - it's the best investment you will make. There are lots around so check with the subject teacher yourself if you are not sure which is best.
- Help your child to plan their revision timetable. It will take an investment of your time (probably several hours), but it is the single thing that will make the biggest difference to the effectiveness of the revision, and therefore the outcome. Children vary in the amount of support they need at each stage of the process.

Support your child in doing the revision:

- Support your child in sticking to their revision plan and keeping to the start and finishing times they have agreed. Praise them when they do it, and if necessary agree a reward structure. Don't make treats dependent on certain results - it will only add to their feelings of disappointment if they don't do as well as expected.

- Quietly top-up the 'workbox' with pens, rulers, paper pads etc. Don't get wound up about lost items if you can help it - motivation is hard enough to find for revision and arguments about a 50p pen just aren't worth it.
- Provide favourite snacks and water for revision periods.
- Be flexible - if they want to go out to a party on a revision night, agree when they will make the time up.
- Be sensitive to the pressure your child is feeling - let them know that if they are really not up to it on odd days, it isn't the end of the world - let it go when it really matters to them, and remind them of all the good work they have done, and will continue to do. It's the big picture that will count in the end.
- Keep up with regular 'check-ins' and don't nag in between times. Show an interest in how the revision is going, talk through any difficulties and be prepared to help them reschedule their planning as necessary.
- Keep things in perspective - your child may not be doing things the way you would do them, or as often as you would like, but they are doing the best they can in the way that works for them at the stage they are at.

How much revision?

It is also important to not leave revision to the last minute. The earlier your child starts their *GCSE* revision, the better. Many students underestimate the time needed for proper revision; this adds more stress and anxiety to the situation because they begin to overextend themselves to make up for the lack of time.

Here is a simple way to work out the least amount of revision time needed: For one GCSE subject, allow 1 hour of revision per topic. Therefore, the least amount of revision time needed for one subject is "1 hour X total number of topics". If a subject covers 50 topics, then that subject would require at least 50 hours of revision time. If your child is doing 8 subjects, he/she would need at least 400 hours of studying. Then, set aside 3 hours every day for revision. Your son/daughter will therefore need to start revising at least 5 months before the GCSE exams to cover all topics.

Do this exercise with your child to let them appreciate the number of hours it will take to revise their subjects and understand why it will benefit them to begin GCSE revision at the earliest possible time.

Planning GCSE Revision Time

Teenagers are not known to be the most organised individuals but effective revision first begins with organisation. So parents, hopefully you are more organised than your child and can assist them with planning their revision time.

There is the erroneous belief that "serious revision" equates to studying hours on end. Marathon studying sessions are certainly not recommended. Encourage 30-45 minute revision sessions with short breaks in between. Optimally, students should study for no more than 4 hours per day. Studying for long stretches of hours is counterproductive because the brain will become tired, they will experience difficulty in focusing and increasingly less and less information will be retained. The fundamental principle to revising is to do it habitually and constantly, little chunks at a time. A student who studies for 2 hours 7 days a week would be much better off than a student who studies 10 hours straight on Saturday and Sunday.

Revision planning begins with creating a revision timetable. To be consistent, students should strive to study at least 5 days of the week. On weekdays, this time would be after school and the choice is theirs on weekends. Advise

your child to breakdown the subjects by topics; so revising Mathematics on Tuesday night becomes revising quadratic equations instead. Give priority to the subjects and topics that are most difficult; this means placing them early on in the timetable and allowing more revision time.

Sometimes, it's good to plan a night off. This can be every other week. On these "off" nights, let your child have fun and relax. Maybe watch a movie or have a friend over. Allow them the opportunity to be stress-free in this stressful GCSE period.

Further support:

- www.gcseguide.co.uk - use the 'bookshop' option to see what revision guides are available in each subject area.
- Visit www.positivelymad.co.uk for some excellent and fun ideas for remembering information.
- Exam board websites:
 - www.aqa.org.uk
 - www.edexcel.org.uk
 - www.ocr.org.uk
 - www.wjec.co.uk
- For help with revision techniques visit www.gcse.com.

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### **I've left it too late to revise;**

- One of the biggest mistakes that students make is not allowing enough time for revision. This usually results, when they do realise what is involved, in demotivation and the attitude that there is no point in doing anything as the task is too big.
- The key point to remember is that it is never too late until you enter the exam room - with revision, a little knowledge is better than none, and could make the difference between a pass and a fail.

- Put in place a damage limitation plan. Help your child to make use of the time they have got, however little, by helping them to prioritise and structure revision tasks into manageable chunks. Focus on the subjects in which they are likely to get passes, ignoring those in which there is no hope, and rather than reading hurriedly through the whole syllabus, identify and agree on a few key areas and encourage them to revise these as thoroughly as possible.
- Keep up motivation and self-esteem by reminding them of how they have coped with difficult situations in the past, that the exam period will soon be over and by talking about the strengths and qualities that they have which will contribute to the best outcome in the circumstances.

### **Dealing with stress:**

- A degree of stress is normal and actually necessary for successfully tackling exams.
- Some of the symptoms of stress are listed below. However, you know your child best so any marked changes in behaviour are worth checking out.
  - Difficulty getting to sleep or waking up
  - Tiredness
  - Poor appetite
  - Loss of interest in things they used to enjoy
  - Headaches and other unexplained aches and pains
  - Irritability and frequent angry episodes
- If your child is stressed, try to encourage them to take time out away from work, doing something that they enjoy. Exercise promotes hormones that actively counter stress, so try to encourage this. Ensure your child eats well, and let them know that you are always there to listen.

(Try not to offer immediate solutions to worries or to give advice, unless they ask for it - what stressed people most need are somebody to listen and empathise with the feelings they express.)

- We have used each of the following strategies with students at different points with some success in helping them to regain a sense of perspective, but the important thing is to use the strategies that you know have worked in the past:
  - Reminding them what percentage of the final result the piece of work represents and talking about possible ways around the problem.
  - Asking them 'what's the worst that can happen?'
  - Reminding them of when they have overcome difficulties in the past.
  - Getting them to focus on what they have achieved, despite this 'blip'.
  - Pointing out that little is achieved without hard work and mistakes being made - it's part of life and learning and adults frequently make mistakes too.

### **Exams or coursework affected by adverse circumstances:**

- If your child misses an exam or doesn't do as well as they could have done because of illness, bereavement or other serious adverse circumstances, or if they are unable to complete coursework for similar reasons, the most important thing to do is to let college know immediately. Most examination boards will give special consideration in these circumstances and staff at college will be able to let you know the procedures to follow.

**GOOD LUCK!**