



# Help Your Students do Their Best on Every Test

Strategies to overcome test anxiety and enhance confidence while preparing for the Texas Assessment of Knowledge & Skills

By Jolie Brams, Ph.D.

*You wake up two hours late in a panic. As you drive to school, your car will not accelerate no matter how hard you press the gas pedal. You enter a classroom, but it seems unfamiliar, and hundreds of students are sitting silently, working diligently on huge test booklets. You know that you only have a little time to complete this test. The questions have no relevance to anything you have known or studied. Others finish their test and walk to the front of the room where they put their booklets into a futuristic machine and out comes ribbons and diplomas. You haven't even started the first question as you search for something that you might know, and people start shouting for you to "Finish! Finish!" Sound familiar? While adult "nightmares" can be about current concerns, common terrifying dreams are about what frightened many of us (even teachers) as a child: test or performance anxiety.*

Elementary educators want their students to master the curriculum, but most of all they want them to master life. Obviously, the positive impact of good problem-solving skills goes far beyond immediate lessons. Learning how to tackle problems and cope with stress in elementary grades provides tools that students depend on as they progress educationally as well as socially.

It is through challenges, such as the Texas Assessment of Knowledge & Skills, that students change and grow for the better, provided that they are given the guidance and support to be successful.

Notably, achievement testing is stressful for teachers, and it is often very stressful for students as well. In fact, some students may be so overcome with test anxiety that they begin to feel

completely inadequate—that the test is an unachievable monster. However, there is good news. The challenges of standardized testing offers even the youngest students a unique avenue to develop a strong sense of confidence in themselves, and the competence to show what they know. Yet, some children will perform poorly, and as a result feel poorly about themselves, not because

of a lack of ability, but because their performance was compromised by test anxiety. It is clear that children who are not adept at coping with tests are at risk for a variety of difficulties, including “learned helplessness,” resulting in increased anxiety, avoidance, and possible depression. Children who feel they can face any challenge demonstrate better self-esteem and social skills even if their academic skills may only be average.

Test anxiety is not a complicated concept. Anxiety is a normal response to stress, and it has a definite usefulness in survival. All of us are wired to have a physiological response to stress that makes us more alert and ready to protect ourselves; that is why your heart races when you hear a suspicious noise at night. However, if you constantly awake at the slightest noise and have a startle reaction to the furnace turning on and cannot stop thinking about all the possible dangers lurking outside, then this might be considered an “anxiety disorder.” For your students, taking a test, or even the thought of a test, could bring strong negative physical or attitude changes. If it does, this should be of concern.

Problems with anxiety come from many sources. All of us are born with different temperaments and genetics which make some more prone to anxiety than others. Exposure to early trauma or unpredictability in the home can also set the stage for excessive anxiety. Likewise, so can just one highly significant negative experience such as being severely put down or punished for a bad grade, or being the only one in the class who fails a spelling test. Children who do not have solid problem-solving role models are also prone to test anxiety. And, as children mature, they actually increase their propensity for test anxiety. It is often at this time that they begin to consider their future and make comparisons between themselves and their peers.

Because test anxiety is such a com-

mon problem, particularly around achievement testing time, it is imperative to address this issue in your schools. Fortunately, it is not difficult to integrate strategies to “beat the test monster” into your daily teaching activities as well as TAKS preparation. Listed below are ten strategies to get you started:

**1. Share that some anxiety is a normal and expected response to many situations:** Letting your students know that *everyone* has anxiety at one time or another reduces isolation and opens the door for students to share their feelings and ask for help. You can do this by telling about your own experiences or that of a “famous” person (a movie star with stage fright, for example.) Open up a discussion about anxiety when starting a new, lengthy or complicated project. You can say to the students something like, “I bet a lot of you might think that there is no way you will ever read ten newspaper articles because you have never done it before and it is a lot of reading. How do some of you feel about that?”

**2. Help students recognize all the times that they have successfully met a challenge:** Very often, students don’t recognize their “buried treasures.” Whether it is mastering the balance beam, going to a “haunted fun house” for the first time, or reading a “chapter book,” elementary students do have at least some experiences in overcoming fears or anxieties. Creating a writing exercise with a “treasure chest” of accomplishments may be useful in helping students feel generally more confident. Make a class list of all the challenges that you have faced as a group. Speak frequently of how much progress they have made even when times were hard.

**3. Recognize your own responses to stress:** You are a model to students in many ways. Think about your words, but also about your emotional expression and attitude. You will have days

that you as an educator feel stressed. Within reason, express to your students how you are feeling and how you are planning to fix the problem. Be appropriately open and when you can, verbally share how to address a problem. Better yet, ask for input if it is something that affects everyone. Oftentimes, children and adults will go through very similar experiences; they just deal with them in different ways.

**4. Help students “be their own cheerleader”:** Self-talk is a powerful tool for reducing test anxiety. It can be used in preparing for tests or during tests. Guiding students to pay attention to what they do well is key. Children tend to focus on the end result not the steps leading to success. Learning to say “Hey, I got 7 out of 10 questions correct...that is way more than half” puts a positive perspective on skill development. Self-reinforcement for small steps is crucial as well: “I answered the first question...a really good start!”

**5. Make sure your students know “It’s not the end of the world”:** Yes, the TAKS is important, and students need to take it seriously. However, they must truly believe that their supportive relationship with you or their parents will never change no matter how they do on a test. Make sure they know that you are striving for them to make their best effort, and that you care about doing *their* best, not *the* best.

**6. Discuss “emotional reasoning” with your students:** Children make the connection that if they feel it, then it must be real. Thus, if they feel anxious about a test, then the test must be too hard, or if someone hurts their feelings, then they must not be a very likeable kid. Learning to separate “reality” from feelings can significantly reduce test anxiety (i.e., “I am really feeling scared, but I am only going to have to write three paragraphs, and I have done that before.”) Just because you feel it doesn’t mean it’s true.

7. **Their worries will shrink if they share what they think!:** In weeks prior to TAKS administration, take each student aside and ask them how they feel about tests and the “big one” in particular. You will want to share ways that the student can manage anxiety, but remember that it has been shown that children and adults show increases in mental health simply from a listening ear.

8. **Show your students that some anxiety can actually be helpful:** Students who never experience some degree of anxiety will not demonstrate the persistence or motivation to do well. It is when anxiety becomes overwhelming that performance lags. Tell your students that it is fine to be a little worried about tests, as long as it is balanced with positive feelings about themselves and a reasonable understanding of what you expect from them.

9. **If your school allows it, consider finding ways to teach relaxation:** Anxiety is a physiological response to real or perceived stress. Anxiety is a circular phenomenon in which uncomfortable physical feelings reinforce thoughts of fear and failure, which in turn increase

physiological arousal, an ever intensifying cycle. Relaxation techniques are proven tools for anxiety management and have been easily taught to children as young as four years old. Simple breathing and muscle tension releasing exercises have great immediate and long-term benefits.

10. **Give your students test-taking strategies and opportunities to practice them:** Test-taking strategies are often as important as academic knowledge in reducing test anxiety and test success. Feeling comfortable and familiar with the test format (knowing how to fill in answer bubbles, write legibly, line up columns of numbers correctly, and checking answers, for example) are simple but powerful tools. Children who master these skills do much better on practice tests, which reduces their anxiety and increases their confidence. Learning how to pace themselves (not rushing, not “getting stuck”) will greatly reduce test anxiety. Skills such as carefully reading directions and questions, using “codes” to rate possible multiple choice responses, and writing “mind joggers” in the test booklet margins reduce anxiety by giving the student the

chance to think through their answers. Learning generally good study skills bolsters a child’s sense of competence and confidence over time. Setting a study schedule, finding a quiet place to study, being an “active” learner, and completing homework gives the student the feeling that they can do well on whatever task is in front of them.

Achievement testing, like all areas of testing, sets forth challenges for teachers and students, but also presents opportunities for students to acquire skills to confidently reach other goals. Learning to recognize and manage the anxiety produced by the “test monster” allows students to do their best on every test and ultimately, these lessons will carry them far in life.

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