

Take Out Your No.2 Pencils: Taking the Stress Out of Standardized Tests

By [Donna L. Clovis](#)

American students may be the most tested kids in the world, taking more than 100 million standardized tests every year, according to Teachers College at Columbia University in New York City. The results of these tests are taken very seriously by educators, parents, administrators, and even local government officials, for they are viewed as a measure of teacher and school competence and, in some cases, can affect a child's future placement in a school. "Scores are analyzed to the nth degree and published in newspapers, with banners given to exemplary schools," says Charlotte Sassman, a kindergarten and first-grade teacher in Texas, where youngsters in elementary grades take the TAAS, or Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. "Parents buy and sell houses just to be in the neighborhood with the best test scores!"

All this pressure is not lost on children. Even good students who are well prepared can be derailed by the general air of anxiety surrounding the tests. "When my homeroom teacher told us to take out our No. 2 pencils for the ITBS [Iowa Test of Basic Skills], I immediately started sweating," says Matthew, a seventh-grader in a Philadelphia middle school. "I got cramps in my stomach. I thought I was really going to get sick."

Ann Brown, a school nurse and health teacher in New Jersey, notes, "It's natural to feel anxiety before you take a test. But some children experience a level of nervousness that interferes with their performance. And I know some of them are quite capable of doing well on the tests."

What makes standardized tests stressful? A major factor is the actual method by which they are administered. They are rigidly timed, the instructions are complicated, and the rules are inflexible. For most students and teachers, this differs greatly from day-to-day classroom life. Often the room itself needs to be rearranged. Kids who've been sitting in circles and groups all year may suddenly find their desks lined up in straight rows. And their teacher will be acting differently, too.

"I feel bad that I can't help my students during these tests," says Carmen Rodriguez, a third-grade teacher at P.S. 9 in New York City. "With my own tests, I can give them extra time to finish if they need it. But during a standardized test, I just say, 'Do the best you can.' Then they look up at me helplessly and fidget."

What's a teacher to do? Here are practical solutions from educators and test experts to help take the stress out of testing.

Create a Positive Atmosphere. "I try to strike a balance between 'Relax, it's only a test' and 'Let's take this seriously,' " says Bob Krech, a second-grade teacher at Dutch Neck School, in Princeton Junction, New Jersey. Speaking with his class informally beforehand, he reassures students and allows them to express their concerns. "I try to maintain a calm, friendly atmosphere in my classroom." Carmen Rodriguez diverts her kids' attention with reading material. "I keep my classroom stocked with fun books to read between tests," she says. "Elective reading really helps my kids relax."

Replace Dread With Anticipation. Wendy Weiner, a third-grade teacher at Parkview School, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, says, "I give my students new, 'magic' pencils to help them change their attitude." Other options are buttons or stickers with cartoon characters or positive messages like "you're the best." Instead of dreading the test, children focus on the rewards.

For more confident students, says Krech, a little encouragement to think of the test as a chance to "show off their smarts" can transform anxiety into excitement. It's important not to "make a big deal about it,"

cautions H.D. Hoover, senior author of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and a math professor at the University of Iowa. "Standardized tests don't judge everything about a student."

Practice Time Management. Throughout the year, give a few tests with time limits, so that when faced with a timed test, children don't panic. "I do a daily timed test after lunch," says Marianne Chang, a teacher at Schilling Elementary, in Newark, California.

Involve Parents. Before the test, send a letter home explaining which test will be given, for what reason, and when. Remember, parents are often anxious about their child's performance, particularly if test scores are a factor in determining school placement. Explain that their anxiety can rub off on their child. Encourage them to help children do well in school all year. According to a study by the U.S. Department of Education, nearly 90 percent of the difference in eighth-grade mathematics standardized-test scores can be attributed to parental control over three factors: school attendance, varied reading materials at home, and regulated television watching. Good advice for the whole year!

Now what can you do for yourself? The kids' anxiety can be contagious, but it will be easier to get them to relax if you're relaxed. "When your job and performance are on the line, it's awfully difficult not to be stressed out from these tests," says Ann Brown. "I recommend relaxation techniques, such as meditation. Do these during preparation periods or in your car, the school library, or a quiet classroom with the door closed when the students are at lunch." You might also go to your principal or supervisor for tips on how to reduce stress.

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Before You Hand Out the Tests

To give your children the best possible preparation, explore these Web sites on standardized testing:

Educational Testing Service: <http://www.ets.org>. The ETS does test research and development.

National Assessment of Educational Progress: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/site/home.asp>. The NAEP's testing program tracks student achievement across the curriculum.

Educational Resources Information Center Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation: <http://www.ericae.net>. Links to assessment-related resources.

U.S. Department of Education: <http://www.ed.gov>. Great information on educational policy, statistics, and research.

Kids' Tips for Test Success

"I answer the questions I know first and skip over the ones that I don't know. Then I go back to finish them later."

— Carlos, grade 2

"I try to listen to my teacher's instructions carefully and read all the directions. Then I don't make silly mistakes."

— Michaela, grade 5

"Even when I think I know the right answer, I read all the answer choices anyway. I don't want to miss anything."

— Angelica, grade 6

"If I finish early, I look over my answer sheet to make sure no question has two answers, my test bubbles are completely filled, and there are no stray marks."

— Matt, grade 7