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A child's academic performance is directly affected by his or her stress level. If stress is too high or too low, your child's performance will suffer.

I have seen how people can overcome their handicaps. I watched a student's low SAT scores rise dramatically once he learned how to calm down during the test.

I saw the utter joy of a rower when she finally learned how to focus her energy throughout the entire race.

I was particularly moved when I watched the parents of a student I was coaching learn to build their son's self-esteem instead of tear it down, by relaxing their completely unrealistic expectations of him.

Parents can have a tremendous impact on how a child handles stress. Here are some key tools for success using a balanced mind-body-spirit approach that boils down to being calm, having confidence and maintaining focus.

Physical Tension

Jitters and tension make it hard for anyone to concentrate. A bad case of nerves can seriously undermine students' test performance because it robs them of their concentration.

Make sure your child gets enough regular physical exercise. Bike riding, working out at the gym, running and swimming are all tension-releasing activities that give them the opportunity to let off steam and "restart" their system.

Watching TV, talking on the phone and playing video games are not aerobic. All too often, kids try to study after long hours of these activities and their energy is already zapped.

Check whether your child is getting enough sleep. Is he going to bed too late? Does he have a hard time getting out of bed in the morning? Does he appear tired at other times of the day, like after school?

Children need a lot more sleep than adults do, at least nine to ten hours a night, and anything less can severely hamper their school performance because their tired minds aren't paying

attention. Recent research shows that inadequate sleep can cause problems that look like attention deficit.

Review your child's diet. A diet high in carbs, sugars and caffeinated drinks is, unfortunately, all too common in our culture. While sugary foods and "energy drinks" appear to keep the engine stoked, they are actually wearing your child down.

A balanced diet keeps glucose levels from going on a roller coaster and has a positive effect on metabolism, energy levels and brain function.

Learn to calm down yourself. As a parent, you can very easily pick up on what your child feels and start feeling the same way yourself. (Also, of course, you have your own adult problems to cope with.)

If your child is anxious or sad or angry, you may quickly begin feeling the same way, even if you were feeling quite calm just moments before. In psychology, we call this an "induced reaction" — you are induced into your child's state. This is a very human response, especially with people who are close with one another, like parent and child.

You increase your chances of reducing your child's stress if you learn how to keep yourself calm no matter what is going on with your child.

Issues of Self Doubt

Your child's doubt in himself and his abilities may cause his confidence to plunge both before and during a test.

Ask yourself if you are the right person to be your child's confidant. You might think of yourself as your child's best friend, but you may not be the first choice as a confidant. If that's the case, you have to give up the idea that your child should confide in you about this issue.

Think of someone else your child can talk with. Enlist the support of a teacher she respects, a school advisor or counselor she trusts, a clergy member or one of her close friends who is a responsible individual. Encourage her to share her deepest thoughts with that person.

Make supportive — but accurate — statements to your child: "You work hard." "You've taken on big challenges before and succeeded." "You can do it." "I believe in you." "I know you've got what it takes."

Difficulty Staying on Task

If your child has difficulty becoming motivated, find out what is getting in his way. Is it an overall sense of helplessness that, even if he tries, he won't get anywhere? Has achievement become a negative word?

Ask yourself whose goal it is that your child succeeds. Of course you want her to do well, but if she doesn't have that goal herself, you are going to be in an uphill battle that you might never win.

Talk with your child about this. A straightforward discussion about her goals can go a long way toward clarifying why she needs to work harder.

Notice the ways your child becomes distracted. Does he stay on the phone, text, log onto the web, e-mail, play video games, watch TV, eat – all instead of doing his homework?

Can you help him set realistic working periods with breaks for "treats" and distractions? Consider getting a timer as a tool so he can focus better and more consistently.

Consider how focused you are. If you have clear goals and minimize distraction, you can be a good role model for your child. She can see the effects for herself.

Remember: cultivating good work habits is ultimately something children should learn to do for themselves because they see the positive results and feel good about having accomplished a goal. Though you may have to encourage and mentor them through this process, they are doing the work so that they can go on to lead a more fulfilling life.

Four Bad Parental Behaviors; What to Do about Them

• Are You Comparing Your Child to Others? Stop! The best thing to do is to focus on what is going on with him and what he needs, not on what anyone else is doing or has done.

Go out of your way to ask your child questions so you can understand his needs.

• Do You Have Unrealistic Expectations for Your Child? Sometimes parents idealize their children and see them as mini superheroes capable of doing just about anything. This mentality gets in the way of seeing your child for who she is.

Be her greatest advocate and most enduring source of support. But be realistic by recognizing her true strengths and weaknesses. You have to acknowledge and – this is harder – accept the things she likes and the things she doesn't and be honest about her possibilities and limitations.

• Do you think your child's performance is a reflection of your parenting? If your child performs poorly on a test, it doesn't necessarily mean you have done a bad job as a parent. It could just mean your child needs some help.

Don't take it personally! Find the real problem and get the right help. If you have difficulty separating your child's performance from your own self-esteem or from your own performance as a child, you can avail yourself of different forms of support such as parenting books, online help, peer counseling (talking with other parents) or professional therapy.

• Are You Micromanaging Your Child? Stop helicoptering to rescue your child from every little thing! Give your child room to grow. It's hard to watch him make a mistake, or make the wrong choice, but true learning and growth come only through personal action. Wind him up and let him go. Let him fall and learn to pick himself up again by himself, on his own

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