

# Revision and exam preparation - a guide for parents and carers

With the exam season approaching, it is natural for students to feel nervous and uncertain - but it is also natural for parents and carers to feel the same way. We all want to help students to achieve their best so we have collated some tips on how to support students during this period to ensure that it is as successful and stress free as possible.

## Creating a successful learning environment

Ideally students will have somewhere quiet to work, with access to online resources if necessary. However, this may not always be possible in busy family homes. Students are therefore welcome to book a place at the homework club which is held in the library after school Mon-Thur until 5pm. Students will have access to a supervised study space and to computers. Sign up sheets are on a noticeboard at the back of the library each week.

## Routines and good habits

Structured routines at home will also support your child's revision. This might include setting homework rules, motivating them to do revision tasks, implementing a consistent bedtime, ensuring they eat breakfast, talking through their worries or exercising with them.

## Supporting revision

Revision can be a solitary and lonely task. Students can benefit from revising with friends from time to time but also by discussing their revision with you. Parents and carers can actively help by being available to help with **Retrieval Practice**. Retrieval activities are proven to help students remember their learning more effectively than most other forms of revision. You could test your child with flashcards, or get your child to teach you a topic – this is an excellent way for students to secure their knowledge and identify where they may be less confident in a topic.

## Minimise stress

When students think of exams, the first thing that often comes to mind is stress. Even though a little bit of apprehension is good for students as it can help to motivate them, too much is harmful for both their mental health and academic achievement. Fortunately, we can help to reduce stress leading up to exams by encouraging students to:

- View stressful situations as a challenge rather than a threat
- Exercise regularly – even if it's just a short walk
- Rely on their support network (their parents or guardians, teachers, friends...) to talk things through
- Take regular breaks between study sessions
- Create a revision timetable that uses **spacing** to reduce procrastination and make the best use of limited study time
- Take time out for themselves to do an activity they enjoy
- Develop a consistent sleep schedule, getting at least the recommended 8 hours each night

## 4 effective study strategies

Your child's teachers will have recommended study strategies to them. Variety is important, as is making sure that revision is active rather than passive. Simply reading the textbook or notes, even highlighting them, is not an effective revision strategy. Students should be encouraged to use that information, present it in a different way (tables, bullet point summaries, essay plans etc.) and regularly test themselves to recall it. Here are some of the effective strategies you may see your child using or which you may want to encourage:

### Flashcards

This is one of the best ways to do retrieval practice. Put a question on one side of the card and an answer on the back. Look at the question and try to remember the answer - then flip it over to see if you were right. Regularly return to the cards, with more frequent practice of the cards which students got wrong.

### Past papers

Attempt practice questions or try past papers, then check the mark scheme to see what you got right and wrong, and learn from any mistakes. It is a good method of retrieval practice, but also helps students understand how the examiner wants answers to be presented.

### Blank page 'brain dumps'

A blank sheet of paper is a great study tool. Note down everything you can remember about a topic, then check your notes to see if you missed or misremembered anything.

### Q&A notes

Summarising information in note form can be helpful. Even more useful is to add opportunities for retrieval practice into those notes. Divide the page down the middle and put questions in the left-hand column, answers in the right. You can use your notes to test yourself by covering the right-hand column and trying to recall the answers. Or you can use it to let a friend or family member test you.



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## Retrieval practice

The most effective revision technique is retrieval - students testing themselves through flashcards, question prompts or tackling past exam questions.

Extra-neat, colour-coded study materials might look impressive, but they can take a long time to put together. Much better to make them fast and functional so revisers can move on to the self-testing stage as quickly as possible. The techniques listed on the previous page all focus on this retrieval process.

## Spacing

It's far more important to focus on the quality of revision rather than quantity, and aim for consistency. Little and often is more effective than huge blocks of study time (see the research, right).

Your child may need help with creating a revision plan which maps out what they are going to revise and when. You can help them to choose a mixture of subject topics to focus on each day to ensure they are spacing them out - and including the ones they feel



Spacing is a revision technique which is all about spacing revision so students don't get swamped and overwhelmed. It means introducing time intervals into their revision sessions as well as spacing out the days on which they revise for topics.

Research shows that doing something little and often is better than doing it at once, or cramming. For example, revising for eight hours in one day is not as effective as doing one hour of revision for eight days. This is because the time in between revising allows students to forget and re-learn the information, which cements it in their long-term memory.

The 'Spacing Effect' is one of the longest and most enduring findings in cognitive psychology. Research suggests there is an 'optimal gap' between revision sessions for students to retain information. In some studies, using spacing instead of cramming has resulted in a 10% to 30% difference in final test results.

less confident with or are less motivated to tackle, not just going over material they already know well.

Encourage your child to try to recall information after an interval using different revision techniques. 5-10 minutes reviews of topics, such as brain dumps or creating a mind map, gives an extra opportunity to embed that knowledge.

## How to make the best use of study guides

Study guides can be really useful but it's important that students use them effectively. Passive techniques like simply reading them, even highlighting them, are not anywhere near as effective as more active revision techniques. Here are some tips to make the best use of study guides:

- Students need to actively engage with the material. That means having a pen and paper and writing about what they read. Rather than copying it, they should use the information, summarise it or present it in a different format e.g. as a diagram, table or bullet point list.
- After reading a section of the study guide, ensure it is followed up with a retrieval activity e.g. self-quizzing, explaining that topic to someone, noting down the key points from memory. Maximise the benefit by repeating such tasks after intervals to improve recall.
- Encourage them to go through the contents page of the guide and rank their confidence/knowledge for each topic (out of 10 or red/amber/green). Add a star to the topics they find trickiest to help prioritise revision of more challenging areas.
- Help them break down their revision into more manageable chunks. 20 mins for learning or revisiting content can be ideal (although longer is needed to practise many exam style questions or past papers). (The Pareto Principle states that 80% of consequences can be attributed to 20% of causes i.e. 80% of the benefits can be gained from 20% of the work. So remember it's quality rather than just quantity of revision. Shorter bursts can ensure that revision time is focused and effective.)

## Top tips for students

### Focus on the process

Don't expend unnecessary energy on worrying about the final grade you want. Instead, focus on the task immediately at hand. Rather than thinking how am I going to make sure I get an 8, think how am I going to make sure I write this essay or answer this particular question as well as I can. Plan the things that are within your control e.g. how long you will spend revising that topic, which questions you will practise etc. The big picture will then take care of itself.

### Play the 'yet' game

Don't say "I can't", say "I can't yet". None of us like things we're not good at but, with a consistent study habit, you can and will get better at things that feel difficult today.

### Don't multitask

Get more done in less time by focusing on just one thing at a time - monotasking - and eliminating distractions wherever possible. Leave mobile phones in a different room: evidence suggests that, even if they are on silent, they still have a distracting effect and can undermine concentration.

### Just start

Getting started on revision can be the hardest bit. Set a timer for ten minutes and choose a task to work on for that time. This will often kickstart the drive to carry on and do more.

### Embrace your mistakes

They're an essential part of the learning process. We're more likely to remember the things we got wrong at first, so flip over the flashcard or check the mark scheme for a practice question and learn from your inevitable slip-ups.