

Five expert tips to successfully guide your teenager through the Leaving Cert

As exam tension mounts ahead of the Junior and Leaving Cert, mum and dad should stay silent, offer tea and then leg it, the experts tell say

Tanya Sweeney (independent.ie)

Most Irish people of a certain age equate the month of June with one feeling: the grim spectre of exams looming large. For around 120,000 school children, the wait is over. In the next couple of weeks, the fruits of their labour are either ripe for picking or will wither on the vine.

For their parents, who recall all too well the taste of low-level panic on their tongue (and probably still have nightmares about Maths Paper 1 to this day), exam day can be every bit as stressful. And when it comes to divining a fine line between motivating and aggravating, things can get very fraught at home.

Paul Gilligan, CEO of St Patrick's Mental Health Services, says: "Every young person approaches this life event differently... Unfortunately, giving advice that suits every single person is not possible, but we do know that these exams can be anxiety provoking for many young people and their parents."

Psychologist David Carey observes: "If you have one of those children who shines in exams, that's a wonderful thing, but with others who are better as free thinkers, you have to help them understand that they have to comply a little with the social norm, which is in this case, exams. "But ultimately, it's about reminding them to do the best they can, and to focus on the efforts made."

1. Speak only when spoken to

According to Carey, most parents would do well to simply keep calm and carry on. Hammering home the idea that exams are the singular most important event in a young person's life is... well, a bit ill advised.

"The one thing you don't do (during exams week) as a parent is get involved, asking incessantly if they're studying, as that will only raise their anxiety levels," he says. "The vast majority of young people will study according to how their own brain works. And motivating your kids to study should have started well before this week."

For Beatrice Dooley, vice president of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, silence is, indeed, golden.

"As a parent, you have survived the Leaving Cert, you know everything, you are older, wiser and your child should listen to you, right? Wrong," she says.

"As to when to help, the answer is simple - only when asked, otherwise reverse swiftly off stage. My advice is, for the next few weeks speak only when spoken to. Listen to your offspring even when they are silent. Say supportive stuff like 'I understand, that must be really difficult for you. I hear what you are saying. Would you like a cup of tea?' And then leg it. Things like door slamming, muttering, swearing, cursing, dirty looks, eye rolling, erratic mood swings and staring into space can be (overlooked)."

2. Focus on practicalities

Rather than impart their own wisdom on exam taking, parents can offer support during exam time in much more practical ways.

"Your job as a parent is to hide your anxiety, not transfer it on to them," notes Enda O'Doherty of StudySkillsIreland.com.

"Be the rock and the support and say things like, 'I'm so proud of you. Keep going.' Don't be the one to initiate post-mortems on exam day. On a more practical level, drive your child to the exam in loads of time (and have a Plan B in case of diversions), and on exam week, offer them the meals that you know that they like, almost as a small treat."

Adds David Duffy, education and research officer with the Teachers' Union of Ireland: "Some level of exam stress is inevitable and can be useful in spurring you on to perform at your best. However, if (students find themselves) becoming excessively stressed, eg losing sleep or becoming upset, then students and parents/guardians should talk.

"The simple act of a student telling people how they're feeling at the moment can often go a long way to relieving the pressure."

3. Encourage breaks

During revision, taking a breather is the best way to make sure that students don't feel overwhelmed.

"Usually five minutes every 35 minutes or alternatively 10 minutes every hour," says David Duffy. "Trying to plough through material without a break results in a lack of concentration."

Mindfulness is an easy and instantaneous way to ensure that youngsters don't feel overwhelmed by exams. Relaxation exercises can be as simple as sitting comfortably, closing the eyes, clenching fists while taking deep breaths, and then releasing breath and hands very slowly.

"As teachers, we are starting to talk to kids about wellbeing and mindfulness, and it's something that parents need to know, too," says Aine Devlin, co-founder of examrevision.ie.

"I think that not making things focused on the exams all the time is a really good way to boost confidence. As parent, talk to them about the small goals they have made. Just that sense of gratification will help them feel as though they are on the right track."

4. Bedtime reminders

"Parents need to be supportive too in how much sleep their child is getting," adds Devlin.

"Many parents will tell their kids to go to bed, and will hear back, 'But I need to study! Why are you telling me to stop studying!' But it's a parent's responsibility to ensure that the student goes to bed at a decent time, and that internet and devices are switched off 20 minutes before bed."

5. Lead by example

Far from leaving a student in isolation to cram in their bedroom, keeping the lines of communication open is hugely important.

"As students get more stressed and tense, we will notice that we have less patience than usual, their fuse is shorter and they tend to get upset more easily," observes Gilligan. "This is a totally normal response to the pressure and anxiety of such a large event. Make sure as a parent that your child knows that you love them."

Ultimately, taking a more relaxed approach to exams as a parent is a good way to lead by example. That way, students are more likely to let go of stress, anxiety and fear.

"Exams have been hyped up so much as a defining moment," Carey notes. "I don't deny the fact exams have some relevance in a person's life, but no one really asks, once you leave college, how you ever did in school exams."

"We may think of it as being hyped up to the level of national obsession, but exam performance has nothing to do with how happy or well-adjusted kids are, or how valuable people are as contributing members of society."

Beatrice Dooley's tips for students

* If you're... the perfectionist: "Remember the Leaving Cert is just a stepping stone to the next stage, you just need to get the points you need and to satisfy specific and minimum subject requirements for your course of choice. Try to enjoy the experience of going in to the exam and showing off all of your knowledge after all your hard graft."

* If you're... the high achiever: "Consider time management. Is there one subject that you are spending a huge amount of time on to the detriment of others? For example, are you spending one hour on one subject nightly and three hours on the other six overall? You have so much information in your head your biggest danger is that you might get lost in the detail."

* If you're... the grafter: "Do you know that personality and emotional intelligence are extremely important contributing factors to success in the workplace not to mention life? Do not be afraid to let your personality shine through in your answers."

* If you're... the anxious student: "Every time you catch yourself worrying, say 'DELETE'. Imagine you are walking into the exam, you feel good, you slept well and you are feeling confident. When you notice your mind wandering, try to stay present. Instead of worrying about stuff that has not yet happened, focus on what is actually happening."