

State Test Anxiety

Tests are important to help us understand a child's current levels and developmental progress, as well as to develop appropriate treatment plans for those children in need. However, as a frequent test administrator, I am also well versed in the limitations of testing. No one number can be descriptive of a child's true functioning level. Tests are only one piece of data amongst many other pieces of information. Furthermore, many factors can contribute to poor test performance on any given day, including test anxiety, distractibility, motivation, nutrition, sleep, illness, allergies, and even question comprehension.

As a child, I recall various state testing. Yet, I don't recall many of my friends experiencing much stress about them. I don't remember "preparing" in any way for them. Throughout the school year, teachers never mentioned that "this" or "that" would be on the state test. Times have definitely changed. These days, it is hard to find many 3rd, 4th, or 5th graders including my own children, who aren't concerned on some level about their performance on the state tests. So if your child is somewhat nervous, he/she is certainly not alone.

Why is there such a high level of anxiety surrounding the state testing? Think about the message our children are being given either directly or indirectly. They spend months "preparing" for the test. They are getting sample questions of items that "might be on the test". They take benchmarks for "the test". They must be offered assistance the next year if they don't reach a certain level on "the test". Their teachers are even being evaluated on their test performance. All the teachers are telling the students not to worry and just do the best they can. Yet, despite teacher's reassurance, the circumstances surrounding state testing is causing unnecessary stress and anxiety for many children and their parents.

I asked some of our students at Seaman what worries them about the state tests. Some thought that their performance determines whether they will be able to go on to the next grade. Some thought it would impact their report card grades. Some children were afraid they would run out of time. Still others were afraid of disappointing their teachers or parents if they didn't perform well. Classroom tests were reported as overall less stressful because most children said they knew how to study and prepare for classroom tests. It is possible to have all the correct answers on classroom tests. They explained that the questions on classroom tests can usually be predicted. In contrast, they feel that the questions on the state test are made to trick them and are unpredictable.

If your child is like some of the children I spoke to, and is feeling some pressure in regards to state testing, first and foremost, help them put things into perspective by addressing the common concerns. Let them know that they are not expected to know everything. It is not the kind of test they would ever be expected to get a perfect score. Let them know that their scores will not prevent them from moving to the next grade. Their test scores do not determine report card grades. Everyone will have a significant amount of time to complete the test. The test will be hard for EVERYBODY, so they

shouldn't panic if it feels difficult. All that is expected is that they do the best they can. Their test scores are just one number. Reassure them that their teachers have taught them the strategies that work best. Tell them that their teachers are aware of their capabilities regardless of their test performance.

The following are some strategies that you can use with your child to help them cope with feelings of anxiety that can be especially useful during the testing weeks:

- **Visualization Techniques** Visualization of a calming or positive memory is a great way to help children relax in the midst of tension or general feelings of anxiety. I like to call it the child's "happy place". Have your child choose a special memory of a happy time or place. Children have come up with all sorts of calming memories in my office such as playing a sport, a relaxation vacation, or one of my favorites, the visualization of a fish tank. Once the child has chosen their relaxing picture, they should practice visualizing every detail of the experience – the sight, smell, sound, etc. I find that for some children drawing their "picture" helps to make their visualization clearer. The practice of visualizing the picture should take place at a time that they are not worrying. After much practice, they can close their eyes in the midst of anxiety, and relax by thinking of the happy or serene picture that they have created.
- **Positive self talk-** This is a cognitive strategy that can build a feeling of confidence before a test. Practice positive messages your child can say to himself/herself, almost as a mantra. This can be something such as, "I know the strategies to use for the test", or "I am very prepared for this test." If your child has made negative comments about their abilities, help them rephrase their statements in a positive manner. For example, the thought, "I'm going to fail this test" can be replaced with, "I will do just fine on this test."
- **Deep Breathing and Progressive Muscle Relaxation** - A person cannot physically be relaxed and anxious at the same time. This is called the principle of competing demands. So it is important to have children first recognize their own body signs of stress (e.g. heart racing, butterflies in the stomach, headaches, etc). Once they have an awareness of their own body signs, they are ready to address them with relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation. For deep breathing, have your child breathe in and out slowly at least five times (in through the nose and out through the mouth). The general premise for progressive muscle relaxation is to practice tensing and relaxing the different muscles of the body starting at the feet and working their way up or vice versa. Feel free to visit the website www.innerhealthstudio.com for free scripts to use to assist you with some deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation techniques that you can do at home.

If you need any additional assistance in helping your child cope with anxiety in regards to the current state testing, feel free to contact me and I will be happy to assist you.

Elyssa Crimeni
School Psychologist
203-3600 ext. 5286

