

Helping Kids Manage Test Anxiety Through Reading

What Is Test Anxiety?

It's normal for children to feel a little nervous before a test. But when worry becomes overwhelming, it can make it difficult for children to focus, remember what they know, or show what they've learned. Test anxiety often appears as stomachaches, headaches, racing thoughts, frustration, or fear of making mistakes. Building strong reading skills and confidence over time can help children feel more prepared and less anxious when it's time to take a test.

Build Reading Confidence Every Day

Children become more confident readers through regular practice. Reading together for even 15–20 minutes each day strengthens vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and overall confidence. As reading becomes easier, children are more likely to approach assessments feeling calm and capable rather than overwhelmed.

Try this:

- Set aside a consistent daily reading time.
- Let your child choose books that match their interests.
- Celebrate effort and progress, not perfection.

Choose Books That Are "Just Right"

Children learn best when books provide an appropriate level of challenge without causing frustration. Reading texts that are too difficult can increase stress, while books that are too easy may not build new skills.

Look for books that:

- Your child can read with confidence while learning a few new words.
- Match their interests and curiosity.
- Include a variety of stories and informational texts.

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Practice Reading Without Pressure

Not every reading experience should feel like a quiz. Low-stress reading opportunities help children develop skills naturally while building positive feelings about reading.

Try activities like:

- Reading aloud together.
- Talking about favorite characters or interesting facts.
- Asking open-ended questions about the story.
- Playing simple comprehension games such as predicting what happens next or retelling the story.

Teach Simple Ways to Stay Calm

Children benefit from learning strategies they can use whenever they feel nervous, including during a test.

Practice together:

- Take three slow, deep breaths.
- Use positive self-talk such as *"I can do hard things"* or *"I'll do my best."*
- Picture yourself feeling calm and successful.
- Pause for a moment if you begin to feel overwhelmed before moving on.
- The more these strategies are practiced at home, the easier they become to use at school.

Use Stories to Talk About Big Feelings

Books provide a safe way for children to explore emotions like worry, frustration, and self-doubt. Seeing characters overcome challenges helps children recognize that everyone experiences difficult feelings.

While reading together, ask:

- Have you ever felt like this?
- What helped the character feel better?
- What could you do if you felt this way?
- These conversations build emotional awareness while strengthening reading comprehension.

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Test Day Tips

Small routines can help children feel prepared and confident.

Before school:

- Make sure your child gets a good night's sleep.
- Eat a balanced breakfast.
- Keep the morning routine calm and predictable.
- Offer encouragement by saying things like, *"Do your best"* or *"I know how hard you've worked."*
- Avoid adding extra pressure or focusing only on the test score.

Remember...

Confidence doesn't develop overnight. It grows through consistent reading, supportive conversations, and opportunities to experience success. By helping children enjoy reading and recognize their progress, families can reduce test anxiety while building skills that last far beyond a single assessment.

Family Challenge

This week, spend 15 minutes reading together each day. After each reading session, ask your child:

- What was your favorite part?
- What was something new you learned?
- What are you proud of today?
- Small moments of encouragement help build confident readers, and confident test takers.

*Adapted from the RIF blog [Helping Kids with Test Anxiety: Reading-Based Strategies for Families](https://www.rif.org/literacy-central/helping-kids-with-test-anxiety-reading-based-strategies-for-families)