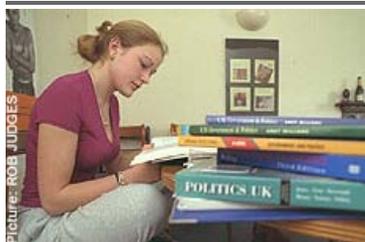


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Revision: a parent's guide

Eileen Tracy wades through exam misconceptions and suggests 10 ways to help your teenagers cope with the pressure



Positive reinforcement: work with your child in whichever method of study they feel suits them best

Eileen Tracy

12:01AM BST 27 May 2003

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It's not easy being a parent in the revision season. You want to help your teenager, but what do you know about revision? Under pressure, you blurt out the first thing that comes to mind, make statements not verified in fact and dish out opinions and advice that don't bear analysis. You are your child's best role model so the time has come to scrutinise some of the things you might be saying about revision. Such as:

"I don't see you working very hard."

The mistaken notion here is that exam success comes of hard work. In fact, success in exams comes from preparing intelligently, which isn't the same thing (although it may involve some hard work). Many students have very little revision to do because they know their subjects well enough. Others are able to catch up quickly by working effectively. Some develop study skills such as speed reading, mind mapping, mnemonics and keywording, which also save time.

"I bet you've lost that timetable I drew up for you."

Again, it's the quality of revision that matters, not the regularity with which it is done. You might think it reassuring to see your child work from dawn to dusk, week in, week out, but it is rarely a good sign.

"What's wrong with index cards? Your sister got an A with them."

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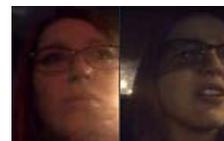
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Some people swear by index cards, others by mind mapping, others by the read-and-make-notes-on-A4 method. There are as many effective study methods as there are students. The good ones involve working actively - reproducing the information, usually in summary. Highlighting and copying notes are passive because they involve no summarising; jotting notes in the margin and practising past papers are active.

"Your files are a mess - I bet you've no idea what's in them."

The top complaint of examiners is that students don't answer the question. That's usually because students who know the contents of their files too well simply regurgitate these in the exam. Help your teenager find that syllabus and those past papers they secreted away at the beginning of the year. Look out also for examiners' reports and model answers. These show what scores points.

"You should be reading all your books at least twice over."

Rereading is by no means a foolproof way to revise because it often induces a mindless, passive state of mind. Students need to know their textbooks well enough to be able to answer a variety of questions on them. That means having a good overview and knowing key passages and themes very well, which isn't to be confused with reading from page one, line one onwards. Many English A-level students score top grades on books and plays they didn't read. They listened in class, watched the video, remembered a few lines and reflected on relevant issues.

"You'll never learn anything lying around like that . . ."

Some teenagers might do their best revision anywhere but at their desk. Some work better alone, others with friends. There are no rules, because it's all a question of personal preference. If you find your son prostrate on the floor, listening to Eminem, don't say:

". . . and turn that racket off!"

I wouldn't say that students work particularly well to music, but young people are addicted to a background of stimulation, without which they struggle to concentrate. If you haven't managed to get your teenager to enjoy peace and quiet, now isn't the time to start trying.

"But you haven't finished - where do you think you're going?"

Academic work is never finished. It's better to plan regular breaks, so as to work more efficiently to frequent deadlines. Breaks also offer an opportunity to absorb information on a deeper level (as when a name you were trying to recall pops into your head only when you start thinking about something different). The period after the break is an ideal time to review quickly before moving on. And don't let your teenager work late, because losing one hour's sleep out of eight reduces the IQ by one point the next day. For every additional hour lost, two more points are lost. Over a five-day week, losing two hours' sleep a night means dropping 15 IQ points.

"You'll forget everything unless you keep going over it."

People often fear that they will forget everything they learn and that the more they learn, the more they will burden their memories. In fact, with a little strategy, the opposite happens: the more you learn, the more associations you create and the easier it becomes to learn new concepts. The trick is to revise at ever-increasing intervals. Optimum revision points are after one day, one week and one term. No need to swot in between.

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"You need those top grades or you'll be in trouble."

Your adolescent will have been told again and again that exams matter, by fellow students, teachers, head teachers and the media. Try not to add to this list.

Plenty of adolescents fail to get to the best universities yet still survive. You probably did so yourself. But then, what kind of revision advice were you given?

How to motivate a stressed-out teen

- Emphasise that there is still enough time to do useful revision.
- Paint a picture of success as an outcome of every little bit of work well done.
- Encourage good work, not hard work.
- Check that your teenager has a syllabus and past papers to work from.
- Show interest in your teenager's work - your enthusiasm will be contagious.
- Wear your ignorance on your sleeve: your adolescent will feel encouraged that he or she knows more than you do.
- Rent videos of plays and books on the syllabus.
- Offer practical help by providing food/transport/treats.
- Encourage your teenager to talk about the stresses of exams.
- Point out that grades are not everything.

Eileen Tracy (www.eileentracy.co.uk) is a study skills counsellor and author of 'The Student's Guide to Exam Success' (Open University Press). It is available from Telegraph Books Direct (0870 155 7222) for £11.99 plus £2.25 p & p.

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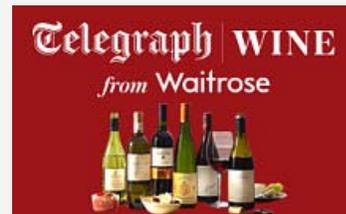
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