

GCSE study skills masterclass for parents



As we approach the GCSE exam season for our year 11 students, we asked Maximise your potential, a company specialising in study skills, to run a webinar to help parents support their children in the run up to and through the exams.

We know that not everyone could attend so wanted to share the headlines, key resources and main tips from Jeremy's session. We have run sessions with Jeremy many times in some of our schools and feedback from the students has always been very positive, so we

hope you find this useful.

Context

There might not be many school days left before the exams start, but the biggest changeable factor that can impact on your children's grades now is you. They won't necessarily tell you this, but surveys constantly report that you, whether you are a parent, stepparent, carer, grandparent or someone close in their support network, are their biggest motivators, and cheerleaders. They don't need you to be the experts in their subjects, but they need your support, advice and comfort - it makes a huge difference.

What you can do to help

There are two big categories of support you can give your children in the run up to their exams: pastoral and educational. Pastoral care is the practical and emotional support you give, including ensuring they:

- Stay hydrated: a dry roof of the mouth means they are 2% dehydrated, which doesn't sound like much but means a 20% loss in ability to focus. Make sure they take water into every exam, and drink plenty while revising.
- Exercise: children should take a break every 30 minutes or so to move and ideally get some fresh air. This is proven to improve concentration and memory, vital for revising.
- Eat well: breakfast in particular is important before exams but they should eat a balanced diet throughout to aid concentration and mental alertness, avoiding too much sugar and caffeine.
- Get enough sleep: the NHS recommends 8-9 hours minimum per night for teenagers and avoiding devices such as phones and laptops for at least one hour before bed. If possible, keep devices out of bedrooms to remove temptation.
- Maintain a positive mindset: setbacks are inevitable, but it is crucial that students can accept and learn from these. If they're struggling with a topic, or don't score as well as they want to in a past paper, practicing and revising this area is much more important than the areas they are confident in.
- Revise in a quiet, calm place with no music. Listening to music while they revise is proven to negatively impact the ability to memorise and recall, and of course makes the environment less like the exam.
- Practice resilience: they are very likely to have difficult moments in the next few weeks, and maybe even in the exams themselves. Their ability to pause, think, regroup and start again will help them get more marks.

A lot of these things can seem obvious, but they all add up to making a big difference to your child's ability to concentrate, memorise and recall information.

From an educational perspective, there are two big things you can do.

Firstly, help them revise effectively. This means:

- Making a revision plan that takes account of days out, football matches and other social plans, focuses more time on their weaker areas and is specific to a part of the subject, so not just 'English' but 'Macbeth' or even better an aspect of Macbeth.
- Using resources such as GCSEpod, Seneca learning and Quizlet. The second two of these are free (some content on Seneca is paid for but most is free) and cover all GCSE topics. There are also some good channels on YouTube including Dr Frost for maths, Free Science Lessons, and Stacey Reay for English (some content may be paid for but again most is free).
- Doing past papers, ideally timed, as this is the best way to learn the biggest lesson in taking exams: to read the question properly and ensure they understand what it is asking them to do. More information on this is below.
- Revising using active recall techniques. This includes mind maps (especially those in colour as it really helps recall), but also creating flashcards or posters with key information. It can aid recall by 20% over reading something four times.
- Continuing to read, preferably around the subjects they are studying, but any reading that broadens their vocabulary, outlook and comprehension improves their grades.
- Try having a whiteboard to hand: popular with A Level students, these can be used for writing to do lists, formulae, key vocabulary and of course wiped clean and used again.

Secondly, encouraging them to get the most out of their subject experts, their teachers. Engage with the lessons they have left, attend the revision sessions and ask questions if they are not sure.

The number one way to lose marks

Jeremy shared videos from examiners and teachers in a number of subjects in the webinar, and this is their biggest tip: read the question properly and ensure they understand what it is asking them to do.

This is harder than it seems; if we believe we already know what we're being asked to do, our brains do not take in new information, especially when we are in a hurry or in the pressurised situation of an exam.

Exam boards publish lists of the 'command' words that students must understand and be clear on the difference between (e.g. 'evaluate' rather than 'describe'). Students can print these out and stick them up where they revise, checking they properly understand what each word is asking them to do.

In addition, exam boards also publish their specifications and examiners reports for each subject. Teachers can share the codes for these, and they really help students understand how to get the extra single marks here and there that can add up to a whole grade or more.

And finally...

Every member of the school community wants your children to do their very best in the exams, so if we can help in any way, please ask. If you're not sure who to ask, contact their tutor or even the school Reception and we will be really pleased to help.