



PARENTS' GUIDE TO SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD THROUGH EXAMS



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Introduction

Passing an exam requires knowledge, but it also requires skills such as the ability to revise efficiently, to manage time under pressure and to concentrate for long periods.

You might not have the knowledge to help your child to revise for an exam, but you will be able to help them to gain the skills they need to maximise their success. You can also help to build their confidence, ease their stress and support them if things don't go quite to plan.

This guide will give you advice on how to help children between the age of 11 and 18 to prepare for the various exam challenges that they will face during their school years.

Teachers are frequently criticised for “teaching to the exam”. I can understand parents’ concerns, but it’s often necessary to focus on the exam to get students to understand what’s required of them. A child may have great knowledge, but they won’t be able to show it without the right exam skills.



Identify your child's learning style

Not everybody learns in the same way. Some people cement a topic in their minds when they hear someone talk about it or discuss it themselves. Others find the best way to remember things is to write them down.

Work with your child to help identify the best way for them to revise. Do they remember something better when you tell them about it or do they need to discuss a topic to grasp it fully? Some children are social learners who prefer revising in a group, while others need solitude and quiet to study effectively.

While it is worth identifying the methods your child feels most comfortable with, it is often best to combine a mixture of approaches to prevent boredom and to give your child the full range of skills they need for each subject.



Learning styles



Visual: Prefers pictures, diagrams, spatial information, demonstrations and videos

Tip: The [BBC education website](#) has a range of excellent videos that should suit a visual learner.



Aural: Has an affinity for music and sound

Tip: Pair each topic with a particular piece of music and play it while revising. Remembering the music during an exam should help recall the relevant facts.



Logical: Prefers using logic and reasoning to understand the overall relationship between ideas

Tip: Use [mindmaps](#) to explore connections between concepts.



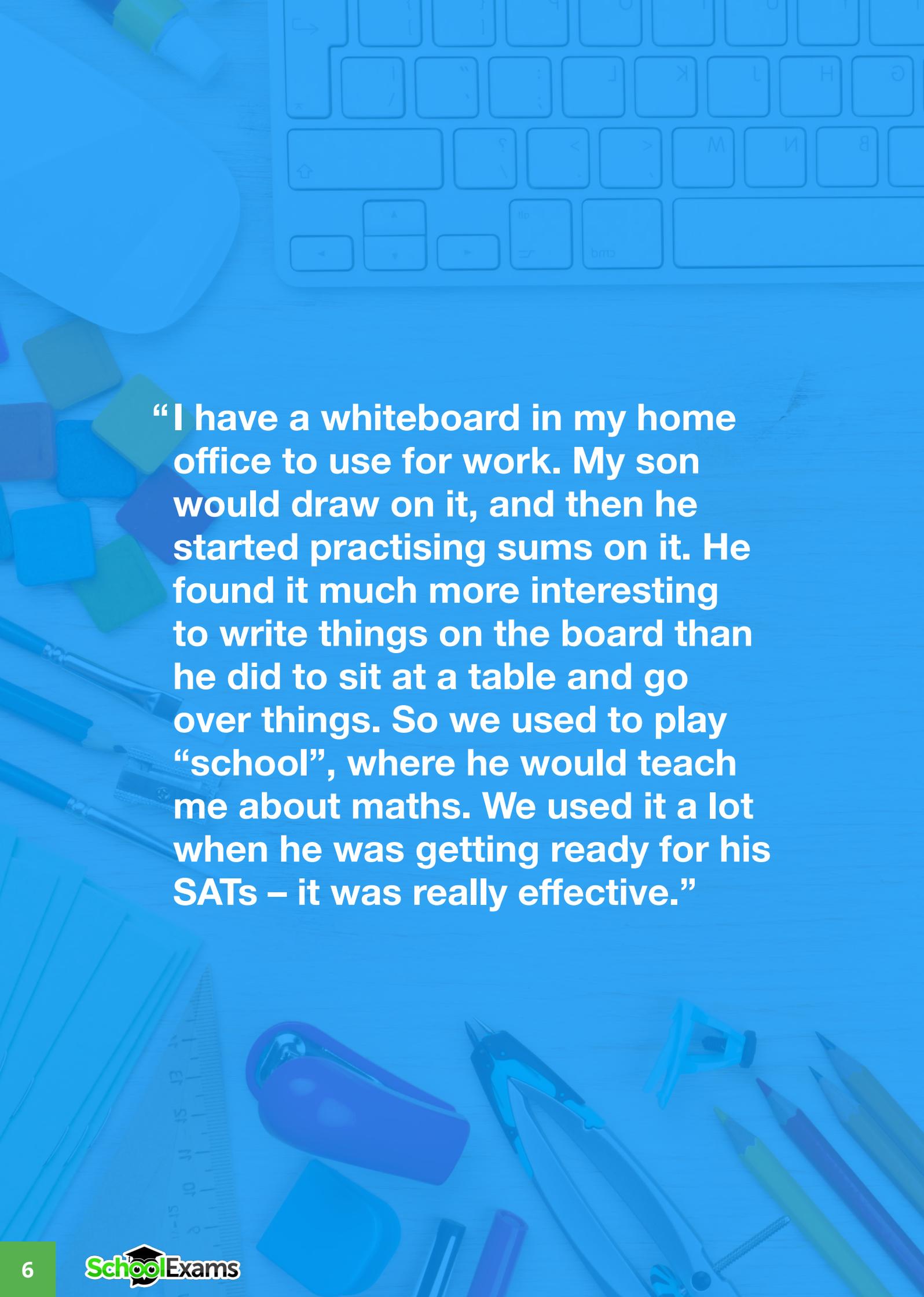
Physical: Prefers using the body, hands and sense of touch to learn

Tip: Use role-play and props to act out ideas, concepts and stories (e.g. using hoops and balls to model electron transfer in chemistry).



Verbal: Prefers words, both written and spoken

Tip: Develop narratives that tell stories about the facts. Discuss the stories out loud or write them down.



“I have a whiteboard in my home office to use for work. My son would draw on it, and then he started practising sums on it. He found it much more interesting to write things on the board than he did to sit at a table and go over things. So we used to play “school”, where he would teach me about maths. We used it a lot when he was getting ready for his SATs – it was really effective.”

Teach your child to revise

It is easy for a child to become overwhelmed when faced with a pile of facts to revise. You can work with your child to distil all that information into manageable chunks and to develop the skills needed to tackle the task in a sensible, efficient way. The [BBC education website](#) breaks down all the subjects into their curriculum areas, which is a great help in ensuring everything is covered.



Your child might have a particular way that they like to revise. Here is some advice you can give them if they are unsure:

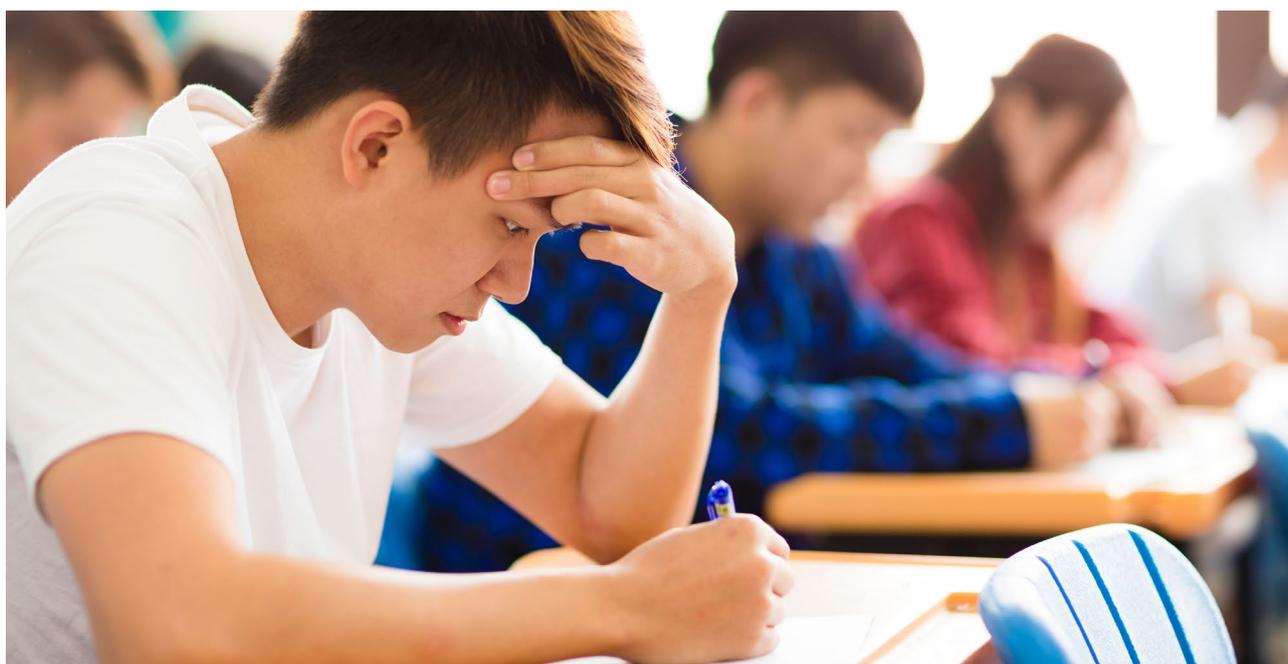
- ⚙ Don't leave it till the last minute. Research has shown students are significantly more likely to understand and remember material if they revise regularly throughout the year.
- ⚙ Focus on one topic of study, such as triangles in maths or poetry in English, at a time.
- ⚙ Get an overview of the topic. Read the information, make some basic notes and get an idea of how much you need to learn.
- ⚙ Look at exam questions. They will help you to identify exactly what you need to know about the topic.
- ⚙ Test yourself on what you already know by simply writing it down or by trying to answer an exam question. Identify the gaps in your knowledge.
- ⚙ Take it slowly. It is easy to get frustrated and to try to cover everything at once, but breaking down the information is likely to prove more successful.
- ⚙ Pay attention to the feedback your teacher gives you. Read the notes on your work and homework. Don't be afraid to ask if you are still not sure where you are going wrong – your teacher should be happy to help.
- ⚙ Actively engage with the material. Don't just sit and read – the chances are nothing will go in. Use a learning style that suits you – talk about the material, make notes or draw diagrams. It might help to revise with a school friend, as long as they aren't too distracting!
- ⚙ Take regular breaks. It can be tempting to “cram” if time is short, but cramming tends to be counterproductive. Make sure you have plenty to eat and enough sleep to maximise the quality of your revision sessions.
- ⚙ Keep testing yourself as you study. Ask yourself questions to see if you genuinely understand what you are revising. Go back and look at the material again if you can't answer a question.
- ⚙ It might be better to learn one or two topics thoroughly than to try to cover everything if you are very short on time.
- ⚙ Don't panic. It is just an exam. You may feel you will never know the material, and maybe you never will. That's okay. Failing an exam is not the end of the world.

Exam skills

Exams are how your child demonstrates they understand what they have learned. The good news is that you don't necessarily have to understand what your child is studying – but you can still help them in developing exam skills and in revising.

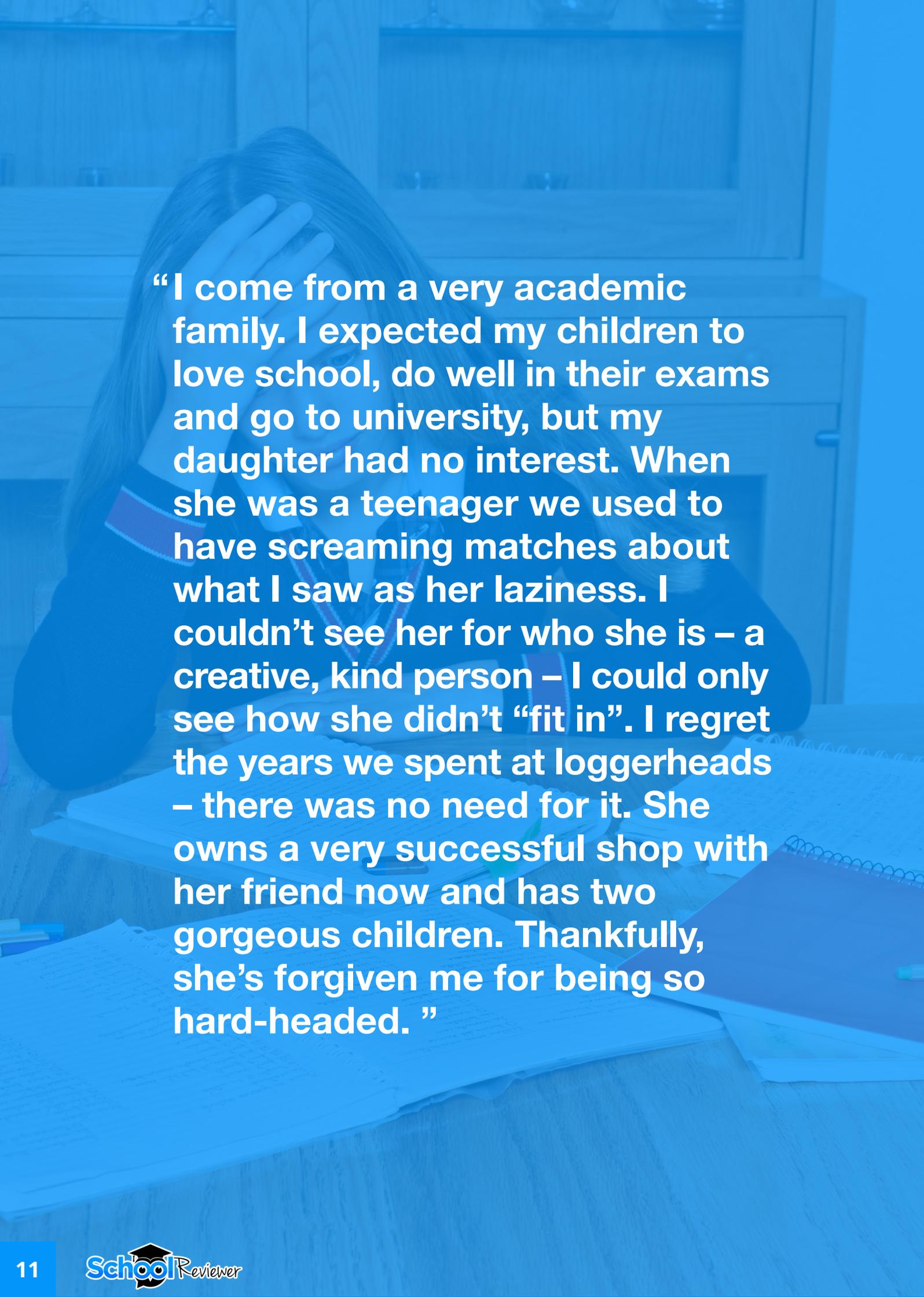
Younger children in particular may struggle with the pressure of exams and may do poorly – not because they don't know the information but because they fail to answer questions in the time they are given. You can practise exams at home with your child to get them used to an exam-like setting.

My daughter is clever but never did very well in exams. I used to get frustrated with her, and she would get upset. Her Year 8 teacher sat her down one day and went through exactly where she was going wrong – she was spending far too much time on certain questions and missing out on marks. That solved the problem entirely. Such a simple solution!



Here are some important tips to give your child:

- ⚙ Don't look at anybody else in the exam hall – and don't allow others to distract you.
- ⚙ Pause for a second and take a breath if you feel yourself getting stressed.
- ⚙ Quickly look through the paper from cover to cover at the start of the exam to remind yourself of the layout and how many questions you need to answer.
- ⚙ Read the questions carefully. Nothing is more frustrating than writing a great answer only to find it is a great answer to an entirely different question or that you have given one reason when you should have given three. Aim to get as many marks as you possibly can.
- ⚙ Answer all the questions you are sure of first. Leave anything you are struggling with and come back to it later. You don't want to run out of time and end up not answering a question you could have done well on.
- ⚙ Use the marking scheme. It will let you know how much time you need to spend on each question. Don't agonise over or give a long answer to a two-mark question – no matter how good it is, you will only get two marks. It is far better to half-answer a 20-mark question and get 10 marks than it is to waste time writing a very long answer that only gets you two marks.
- ⚙ Examiners are desperate to give you marks, but they can't give any to a blank space. Remember this if you have answered everything you know and are still left with some time and some unanswered questions. You should write something – anything – for these questions, even if it amounts to a total guess. You never know – you might be right. And you will have lost nothing if you are wrong.
- ⚙ Check your answers if you have time. See if you can add something to the answers that attract higher marks.



“I come from a very academic family. I expected my children to love school, do well in their exams and go to university, but my daughter had no interest. When she was a teenager we used to have screaming matches about what I saw as her laziness. I couldn’t see her for who she is – a creative, kind person – I could only see how she didn’t “fit in”. I regret the years we spent at loggerheads – there was no need for it. She owns a very successful shop with her friend now and has two gorgeous children. Thankfully, she’s forgiven me for being so hard-headed. ”

Revision tools

Websites and apps can be useful in supporting your child's revision. Below is a selection of some of the many tools available.

Websites

The [BBC education website](#) includes material covering all primary stages and up to GCSEs. Each subject is broken down into curriculum areas, with video clips and guides relating to each area. There are also links to other websites that provide practice questions and further information.

[AQA](#) provides some basic revision resources. More usefully, it also offers access to past AQA papers.

[Get Revising](#) offers an enormous range of resources for every subject and level. You are required to register to gain full access. Although the sheer quantity of information available can mean it is sometimes difficult to find what you are looking for, the search function is good and the material high-quality.

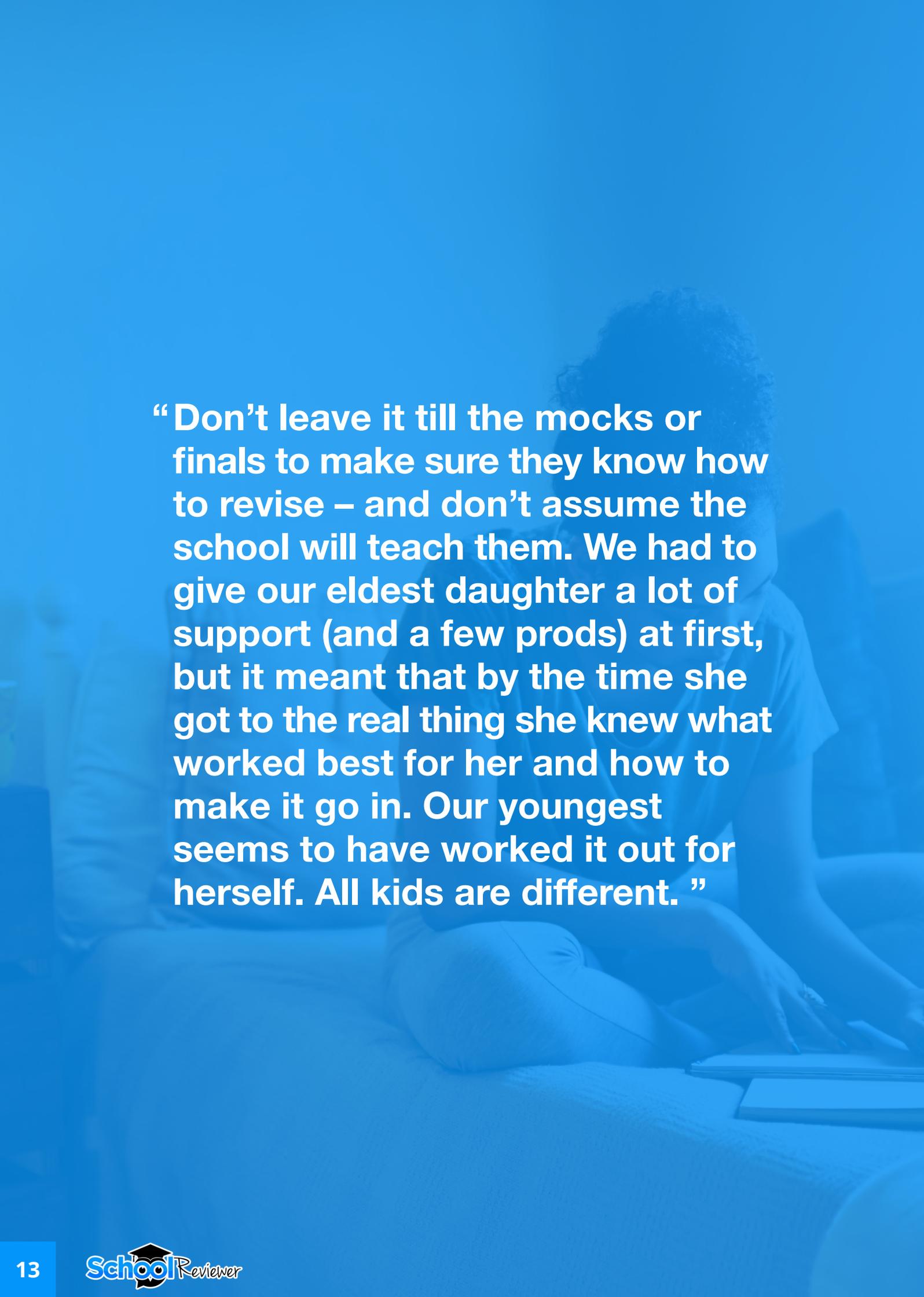
[Revision World](#) breaks down courses into sections and provides short explanations for various topics. It is good for quick revision when you don't have much time to cover a subject.

Apps

Flashcards+ is a free app that enables the creation of custom flashcards on a phone. Children can create flashcards when they are studying and then review them on the way to school to give their memory an extra boost.

Gojimo is a popular app that is free to download but requires small payments for access to different resources. It features some useful quizzes to help children to review their knowledge.

Revision app is free to download but involves some expensive in-app purchases. It has a very large quantity of material developed by teachers and is useful for revising all parts of the curriculum.

A young girl with curly hair is sitting at a desk, looking down at a book or paper. The background is a solid blue color. The text is overlaid on the image in white.

“Don’t leave it till the mocks or finals to make sure they know how to revise – and don’t assume the school will teach them. We had to give our eldest daughter a lot of support (and a few prods) at first, but it meant that by the time she got to the real thing she knew what worked best for her and how to make it go in. Our youngest seems to have worked it out for herself. All kids are different.”

Dealing with stress

Within the school system there is a great deal of emphasis on exam success. Teachers are under pressure to produce good results and can inadvertently pass that stress on to students, who can start to feel terrified by the prospect of not doing well in an exam. They can develop tunnel vision, where all they can focus on is the exam.

Such a level of stress can be extremely damaging to a child's mental health. It is vital to help your child to maintain perspective. Exams are important, but sacrificing your child's happiness for them is simply not worth it.

When my daughter was doing her GCSEs she would get stir-crazy. Each night she would want to go for a walk. I didn't like her walking through the local nature reserve on her own, so my wife or I would join her. It became a routine, and we all slept better for the exercise. It was a time when she would unload her stresses, too.

Some tips:

- ⚙ Not every child will do well in exams. Heaping expectations on a child who doesn't have the ability or motivation to meet them is only likely to cause stress and conflict. Come to terms with what your child can achieve. Accept them for who they are.
- ⚙ Don't engage in comparisons between a child and their sibling or their friend. Such comparisons can be very upsetting and are likely to demotivate a child rather than help them.
- ⚙ Help your child to explore other talents in areas such as music, art or sport if they aren't especially academic.
- ⚙ Ensure that your child has a hobby or activity that they enjoy so that they get a break from exam preparation.
- ⚙ Encourage regular exercise. This will help with stress, concentration and sleep.
- ⚙ Don't assume your child is being lazy if they become disengaged and uncooperative. They could be depressed or demotivated and need some support. Talk to them and find out what they need.

Exams test a very particular, narrow range of knowledge and ability. They are a necessary part of the school system, and children should be encouraged to do their best in them – but being unable to pass exams should not be seen as a sign that a child will never be successful. Many of the world's most successful people, including Richard Branson and Alan Sugar, did very badly in exams.

Other attributes, such as confidence, courage and a willingness to try new things, are important for long-term success. Help your child develop a range of skills and give them faith in their own abilities.



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