

# Surviving GCSEs - tips for parents

## Getting off to a good start:

- Use Parent Information Evening, Parent-Teacher meetings and mentoring appointments to ask questions or raise concerns to ensure that your son/daughter does the very best that they can. You can also always contact the Tutor or House Progress Leader for your son/daughter if you are worried that they are falling behind or not coping with the work.
- Try to understand the course structure and requirements, such as timings of coursework and exams, of the subjects your son/daughter is studying. We will issue information with key dates and will maintain contact with you, especially to let you know if your son/daughter is falling behind on coursework. But, if you know at the beginning when the deadlines are you can help your son/daughter meet them. It is much less frustrating to do this at the beginning than to get a letter saying no coursework has been completed!
- Help your son/daughter to organise a work-area, ensuring that they have all the materials and resources they need. Ideally they need a quiet work space where they can concentrate. This is not always possible, but all students are able to complete coursework or homework at after-school clubs.
- Talk about your own and your son/daughter's expectations about how much work they should be doing during the week and when the best time to do it is.
- Talk about whether or not music or TV will help or hinder them. If necessary, agree a trial period on their terms and review how they are getting on. It may be that music is okay, but that TV is too much of a distraction.
- Agree regular 'check-ins' where you are 'allowed' to discuss with your son/daughter where they are in relation to each subject's deadlines, areas they are enjoying, having difficulty with etc. Once a half-term is a good aim. Having a set time to discuss work beats 'nagging' which is often how teenagers perceive adult interest in their progress.

## How to cope with coursework:

- Your most important role, as always, is to encourage and praise your son/daughter. Show an interest by talking to them about what they are learning in different subjects and in their homework and coursework.
- A student's attendance at all lessons is one of the key factors in them achieving success. Missing one lesson can mean missing key information about coursework or the introduction to a topic - trying to catch work up is often very difficult. This can lead to a vicious cycle of not understanding, falling further behind, getting into trouble with teachers, dislike of the subject and, finally, failure. Encourage your son/daughter to see the relevance of every lesson to their end results. All lesson time counts during GCSE years.

- Put key deadlines and dates in your diary so that you can support your son/daughter before the 'panic stage'.
- If you have agreed regular 'check-ins' take the opportunity to discuss how the coursework is going, and if there are any difficulties you can help with.
- Some students are not as well-organised as others. If your son/daughter is one who struggles with their organisation, you may need to have more knowledge about specific coursework requirements in order to be able to support them fully. This knowledge may include how many marks are awarded for each question, the length expected etc. Subject teachers are likely to provide this information to the students, but if you haven't seen it, don't hesitate to ask for a copy for yourself if you feel your son/daughter needs this level of support. The internet is also a good source of specific information about different exam syllabuses - you need the name of the exam boards and exact title of the GCSE.
- Find out if there are any TV programmes, theatre productions, or revision guides to any of the GCSE courses your son/daughter is following. Books or plays on CD/video would also be useful.
- Help your son/daughter to use the internet to search for relevant materials and information. If you do not have internet access at home, students can use the ICT facilities at school and most public libraries offer access. The internet is a great resource, but the information it offers can be unselective and overwhelming. Support your son/daughter by finding appropriate websites or helping them to do so. It is also helpful to remind them that copying coursework or chunks of information (for coursework) from websites can lead to students being disqualified - examiners and schools have sophisticated methods of detecting plagiarism.
- Let your son/daughter's tutor, House Progress Leader or subject teacher know if they are experiencing any difficulties in their home circumstances or personal lives where appropriate - most schools and examination boards can be flexible in special circumstances. School deadlines can sometimes be extended if there is a good reason.

**Further help:**

- [www.sparknotes.com](http://www.sparknotes.com) - free downloadable information and study guides in many areas.

**Maintaining motivation:**

- Throughout Year 10 and 11 it is likely that all pupils will fall behind and they may feel de-motivated or overwhelmed. They may also struggle to find a balance between their social life, work and school demands. Talk to them about the issues, acknowledge their feelings and help them prioritise. If necessary talk to their subject teachers about rescheduling deadlines where possible.
- Agree the balance between work and social life and stick to the agreement. Again, flexibility is the key - if a special night comes up, agree that they can make up the work at a specified time.
- Consider using a reward structure to motivate your son/daughter. Rewards do not have to be financial or very big - talk to your son/daughter about what they would value - an extra night out, an extension to the time they can come in, a trip with friends, being let off household chores etc. Little and often (for small achievements) is more motivating than one big reward for good results in the future.

- Be flexible - use the 80/20 rule. If your son/daughter is sticking to what they are supposed to be doing 80% of the time, they will be doing alright.
- If they say they've got no homework - double check! In Year 10 and 11 it would be highly unusual for students not to have homework every night of the week. If you are concerned about this contact your son/daughter's tutor or House Progress Leader to clarify when homework should be set for each subject.
- If your son/daughter is anxious or withdrawn, encourage them to talk to you or a trusted adult, and let them know you are there for them and proud of them whatever. Talk about their successes and remember, the GCSE years are the most difficult that some students will ever face - there are a large range of subjects all making demands on their time. It is likely that they will be stressed at some points, and at others may feel that they are failing. It is important to try to maintain their self-esteem.
- If your son/daughter asks for your support, encourage them by helping them to see the difficulties in perspective. Teenagers often take an all or nothing 'catastrophic' approach to difficulties. 'I've messed up this essay, I might as well give up - I'll never get to college now' etc. If this happens, or if you are really concerned about your son/daughter's level of stress talk to the school so we can work together to support them and help them through the stressful times.

### **Excuses, excuses...**

During Year 10 and 11 you will probably hear them all

- My work's on the computer at school...
- We didn't get homework because there was a cover teacher...
- I'm doing that with a friend and he has the book..
- It doesn't have to be in for ages - I've got loads of time...
- I need to be in the library at school to do it - I'll do it tomorrow...
- He/She never sets us homework.

### **Strategies for dealing with excuses:**

- Keep track of the 'excuses' (they won't be able to!)
- Agree or suggest a solution - e.g. that s/he brings the work home and shows you the next day.
- Follow up without fail.
- In the last resort, explain that you are concerned about the problem, for example that the school 'isn't giving your homework' and that you will need to contact us.
- Remember, the aim is to get the work done, not win the battle. Let your son/daughter save face, as long as they agree to do the work and stick to it.

### **Trouble-shooting: what to do when it all goes wrong.**

#### **I hate this subject/teacher - I'm going to drop it.**

- Students at exam age often take an 'all or nothing' approach to problems. They may exaggerate incidents or resort to extreme strategies such as 'giving it all up', running away or having an all-out argument in an effort to solve a problem. This is because their emotions are so strong at this age and their strategies for dealing with them are limited.

- Try to find out exactly what is causing the problem by encouraging your son/daughter to talk about what happens in the class, what is it that the teacher does or says that your son/daughter objects to. Don't minimise their feelings as this leads to the 'you don't understand' response. Accept that their feelings are real and that the problem needs to be sorted out, just not in such an extreme way!
- For teenagers, problems often seem permanent ('I will never be able to understand this, I will never get on with that teacher, the subject is boring/difficult/stupid, the teacher hates me'). The trick is to talk to them using language that makes the problem more manageable, by making it seem:
  - Specific rather than global (What is it specifically that you find difficult/don't like?)
  - Temporary ('How long have you been feeling like this about the subject/teacher?')
  - Solvable (What would you like to happen? What would make it more bearable?)
- If, after discussion, there does seem to be an underlying personality clash, rather than a temporary hiccup in the relationship, or if the work really does seem to be beyond him/her, it is always a good idea to talk to the teacher concerned, where your son/daughter's worries can be explained in a calm environment. If this doesn't resolve the situation contact your son/daughter's House Progress Leader or Tutor for further advice and support.
- If your son/daughter is really struggling with a subject, and it is not essential to the qualifications they absolutely need, it is worth discussing the possibility of them dropping the subject as a last resort (probably in Year 11, not before), once all other avenues have been explored. Remember, however, that English, Maths, Science, PE, ICT, Citizenship & RE are compulsory subjects - all students must study these.

#### **Coursework not on target:**

- The key to coursework issues, as with so many others, is catching the problem early. If, despite your best efforts, there are deadlines looming and work has still not started, you will need to address the issue with both the school and your son/daughter.
- Encourage your son/daughter to talk about the problems honestly. You will not accomplish this by sighing loudly and saying, 'I told you this would happen', throughout the conversation. Instead, accept how things are and look for a workable solution. The problem may be one of too many deadlines coming together so that the tasks seem overwhelming. When you have a clear idea of the problem, contact the school and ask for an appointment with the subject teacher.
- There will sometimes be some flexibility around school deadlines which the teacher may have discretion over. However, exam boards set the final deadline and these cannot be changed by the school.
- If there is the possibility of extra time, find out exactly what the coursework entails, and draw up a plan with your son/daughter so that they know what needs to be done and when.

#### **Dealing with stress:**

- A degree of stress is normal and actually necessary for successfully tackling exams. Some of the symptoms of stress are listed below. However, you know your son/daughter best so any marked changes in behaviour are worth checking out.

- Difficulty getting to sleep or waking up
  - Tiredness
  - Poor appetite
  - Loss of interest in things they used to enjoy
  - Headaches & other unexplained aches and pains
  - Irritability & frequent angry episodes.
- If your son/daughter is stressed, try to encourage them to take time out away from work, doing something that they enjoy. Exercise promotes hormones that actively counter stress, so try to encourage this. Ensure your son/daughter eats well and let them know that you are always there to listen. Try not to offer immediate solutions to worries or to give advice - what stressed people most need is somebody to listen and empathise with the feelings they express.

**Exams or coursework affected by adverse circumstances:**

- If your son/daughter misses an exam or doesn't do as well as s/he could have done because of illness, bereavement or other serious adverse circumstances, or if they are unable to complete coursework for similar reasons, the most important thing to do is to let the school know immediately. Most examination boards will give special consideration in these circumstances, and the school will be able to let you know the procedures to follow.