

Anxiety in Schools
(Indianapolis Woman Blog Post, 2010)

We all experience anxiety – and anxiety does play a positive role in our lives. For over 100 years, psychologists have recognized that some level of arousal or anxiety is needed to spark motivation to perform at our best. Feeling nervous before a big meeting, presentation, or athletic contest helps us to energize and focus our attention on the task. However, too much anxiety or arousal has a negative influence – drawing our attention away from performing well and focusing on the anxiety itself. Such is the case with academic anxieties.

Academic anxiety is a new concept – proposed in the past year as a way to help us think about all the various types of anxiety that learners experience in academic settings. Common examples are math anxiety, science anxiety, computer anxiety, and of course test anxiety. One of the main ways test anxiety impacts performance is by pulling our attention away from the test and turning it toward the worry, tension, or fear imposed by the upcoming test. Another thing that happens is we avoid the test (including studying for it) in an attempt to alleviate the anxiety we feel. In both of these situations, the end result is pretty obvious – we don't do as well as we could if we weren't distracted or avoiding learning.

So... ISTEP. Feel anxious yet? The term alone raises heart rates of children, teachers, and parents alike around the state of Indiana. When I was in high school in the 1980s, ISTEP was just being introduced and the level of tension about the test was much like a standard classroom test. That is, some kids were anxious and uneasy about the mere presence of a test (the truly test anxious group), some did not worry about it and just did their thing, and some paid it no attention (making patterns out of their bubble sheets, marking C for all the answers, or sleeping). In that situation, test anxiety was experienced by a standard number of people – there are always a few in a room who get anxious about a test. Interestingly, our research has shown that they even have greater trouble on tests where there is no way the test will be scored and used in grades – it's just that there is a test to be completed that sparks the anxiety.

Today, we have a whole different situation. ISTEP+ is now a “high-stakes” test – in every sense of the word. Student scores on the test can impact school credentials (even school closure), graduation requirements, funding for schools, and if things keep on the current pathway may eventually impact teacher pay and employment. That's a lot of pressure tied to a test. While that is an important topic in our state – there are other folks who are better suited to guide policy and debate on that topic. My work focuses on how to help learners cope with their academic anxieties – particularly test anxiety. So, what can we do to make sure our kids do their best on the upcoming ISTEP+ assessments? Some tips:

When it comes to the individual child – help them see that ISTEP (or any test) is something to be taken seriously, but not something that is “life and death.” Give them the impetus to get “up” for the test, but not see the test as something that will ruin their life if they don't do great.

If the child expresses concern over the test, help them to build confidence in the upcoming assessment by reminding them of how well they have done on other things. If they did well on ISTEP last year, remind them of that (“It's just like last year, and you did great on that”).

If they have shown any improvement in an area of academics – point that out (“Look at how much better you are doing in math this year – you are ready!”).

Help them prepare for the test – not in the ways you normally think. I don’t recommend a “cram session” before your third grader runs out the door for ISTEP testing. But, I do recommend that they get a good nights rest, have a healthy breakfast, and don’t carry any “excess baggage” to school with them before the test.

As for helping them with the content, there are several ISTEP preparation guides for parents and practice items that schools can provide. Using these resources can help a child see what types of questions they will be asked on the test as well as how they will answer the questions during the testing session. If they get stuck on an item, walk through the process with them – again praise effort, persistence, and when they do well remind them that they will do just as well or better on the test itself.

Reward their positive attitude or performance. While I don’t recommend raising anxiety unnecessarily with discussions of how they do will impact their school getting closed, their teacher getting a raise, or graduation from high school – it is useful to let them know that you value when they “do their best.” How you determine what to reward – like all things, it depends on the child. Recognize their effort, improvement over last year, meeting a certain standard, or ability to shine in a particular area on the assessment. You won’t know actual outcomes right away – so particularly with younger children, reward their attitudes and positive behavior during the testing week itself.

Finally, be sure you know the schedule so you can prepare them for the changes that come with ISTEP testing. Knowing up front that the schedule of the day is different is critical for many children, and will go a long way to them being comfortable and confident during the test. The more you can help them feel confident, secure, and capable during the test, the better they will be able to focus and succeed.

BIO:

Jerrell Cassady, Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology in the Department of Educational Psychology at Ball State University. He serves as the Director of the Academic Anxiety Research Consortium (AARC), an interdisciplinary and internationally represented group focused on highlighting the forms of academic anxiety and disseminating information on supporting learners. He has published over 35 articles in journals, several book chapters, and is the editor of 2 recent books, including “Anxiety in Schools: The Causes, Consequences, and Solutions for Academic Anxieties.” (available at www.peterlang.com). For more information and support on academic anxiety, you may contact Dr. Cassady at jccassady@bsu.edu or access information through the AARC website (www.academicanxiety.org).

***Note – this is an outdated reprint of an old blog post on the Indianapolis Woman website, but has useful information. My email is the same, but if you are looking for a web address: <http://espace.bsu.edu/aarc>**