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British Educational Research Association

Parents and teachers often apply the wrong type of pressure before exams, study finds

Teenagers have for years told anxious parents to "back off" in the run-up to exams as the pressure they apply only makes matters worse. Now researchers have confirmed that their protests are justified.

Parents are not, however, the only ones who apply the wrong type of pressure, says a team of researchers from Edge Hill and Manchester universities. Teachers who try to scare students into swotting for exams should also rethink their tactics because higher anxiety usually leads to lower scores.

Dr Dave Putwain and his colleagues analysed the association between teachers' and parents' behaviour and the anxiety levels of 175 sixth-form college students. They also measured the anxiety of 224 GCSE candidates and compared them with their exam scores. Some GCSE students reported that they were suffering from headaches and muscle tension, and even had trouble breathing, as the exams approached.

"Parental pressure never really works," Dr Putwain will tell the British Educational Research Association conference in Manchester today (September 5). "Parents need to be very careful about the messages they are conveying. For example, they should be aware that comparing their child with other, academically capable children can add to the pressure. They should make it clear that young people can still feel good about themselves even if they do not do so well in examinations."

Teachers should also emphasise the benefits of learning and achieving rather than the consequences of failure, he says. However, Dr Putwain, a senior lecturer in psychology at Edge Hill University, says that most schools do not take exam-related anxiety sufficiently seriously.

Some conclude that it is something that young people need to go through. "They reason that exams are stressful but that's part of life. Life is stressful," he says.

Some schools do make an effort to ease exam nerves. "I know of one school that gives anxious children chocolate and a pat on the head immediately before an exam," Dr Putwain says. "Pupils at another school I have visited can spend some time in a relaxation room that has soft lighting, comfortable furniture and soothing sounds."

"Our GCSE study showed that such relaxation exercises probably help, provided they are offered far enough in advance of the exams. But in general the stress-reducing tactics that schools employ are very hit and miss. I don't think there is much understanding that many teachers could reduce their pupils' anxiety levels by adjusting their own practice.

"They might also improve their pupils' performance in the process. Exam stress may not always have a big impact on exam scores but it can make the difference between one grade and the next."

Dr Putwain and his colleagues believe that schools should provide more guidance for parents on how to avoid increasing children's stress levels. They should also try to gain a "student's eye view" of examinations.

"For example, we know that many students do not like sitting examinations in a big hall -- they prefer small rooms. In large halls they can get the sense that everyone is working except them and panic can set in. They also dislike the impersonality of this type of exam-taking, particularly if they do not know the invigilator. Just having an invigilator who is familiar to them can help."

Clashing coursework deadlines is another common stressor in the lead-up to exams. "Some schools very sensibly try to ensure this does not happen but others say they cannot interfere with what individual subject departments are doing," Dr Putwain says. "I think they should."

Further information from:

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Notes for editors:

1. Self-report data for test anxiety were collected from 224 students in two schools in the North-west of England approximately six weeks before GCSE examinations began. Examination performance data were collected in mathematics, English language and science. The sixth-form research involved 175 students in one college in the South-east of England. They were following A-level and AS-level courses in psychology and sociology. Both surveys were carried out in 2008.

2. " 'If I can't answer this question, I'll fail the whole exam': examination anxiety, GCSE achievement and tendency to draw the worst possible conclusion", by Wendy Symes (University of Manchester), Dave Putwain (Edge Hill University) and Liz Connors (Edge Hill University) will be presented to the British Educational Research Association conference this morning (Saturday, September 5). The companion paper on sixth-form college students, "Do teachers and parents influence a students' tendency to perceive examinations as threatening?", was co-authored by Dave Putwain, Kevin Woods (University of Manchester) and Wendy Symes. It will also be presented at the conference today.
3. The annual conference of the British Educational Research Association is being held at the University of Manchester from Wednesday, September 2 to Saturday, September 5. About 700 research papers will be presented during the course of the conference. The conference programme can be accessed via the BERA website <http://www.beraconference.co.uk/>