



Matrix
Academy Trust
EDUCATION WITHOUT EXCEPTION

Preparing for Exams

A Guide For Parents and Carers

This Guide Covers:

- How what they eat and drink affects exam performance.
- The best ways to manage stress.
- Getting them to get enough good quality sleep.
- How to manage digital distractions (phones, video games) and how to do it for them if they aren't willing.
- How to tell if they're really revising – or just procrastinating.

We know you want the best for your child and will do whatever it takes to help them succeed. That's why we've put together this guide full of practical tips for helping them get the most out of themselves.

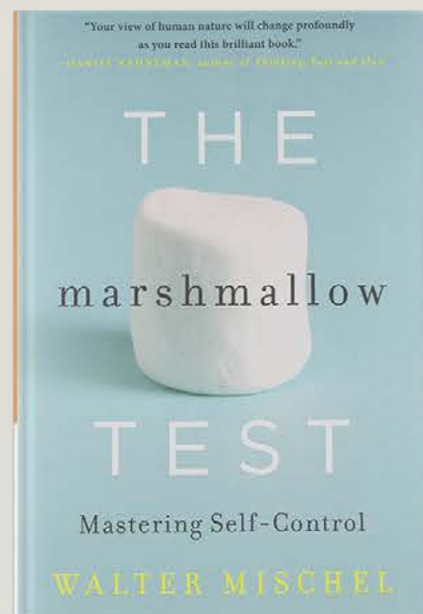
Each section has advice for 'On the day of an exam'. But for all of them, it's best if these things become habits long before your child is sat in the Sports Hall waiting to be told "you may begin".

**“BY FAILING TO PREPARE YOU
ARE PREPARING TO FAIL”**

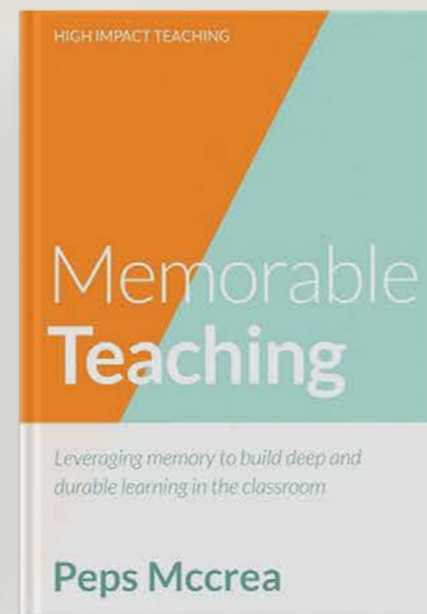
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

FURTHER READING

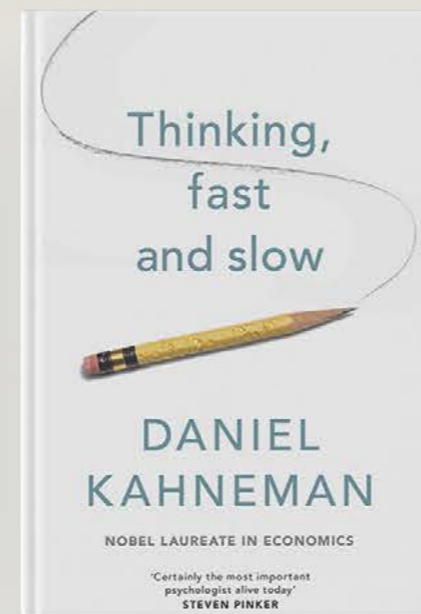
Everything in this booklet is informed by the latest research into neuroscience. If you would like to read more on any of the topics covered, this is our selection of popular reads:



The Marshmallow Test
Walter Mischel



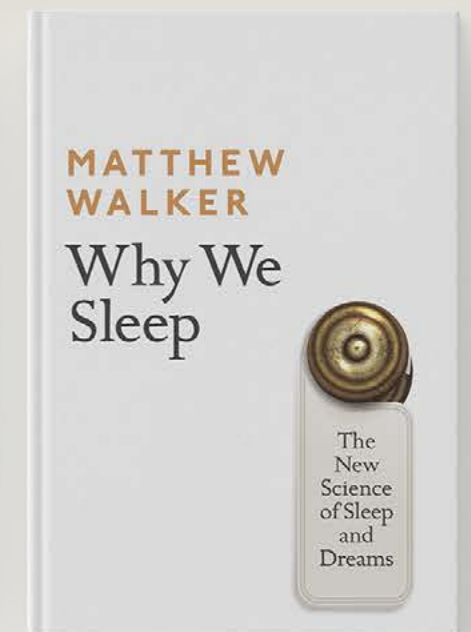
Memorable Teaching
Peps Mccrea



Thinking, Fast & Slow
Daniel Kahneman



:59 Seconds
Richard Wiseman



Why We Sleep
Matthew Walker

YOU ARE **WHAT YOU EAT.**

We all know the benefits of a balanced diet. But we also know that when we are under pressure or feel stressed we start craving junk food like crisps and chocolate bars. And yet, these have been proven to impair memory recall. Sugary foods also give us energy in the short term. But, after a couple of hours, we crash.

Snacks of nuts and seeds have been scientifically proven to help sharpen people's minds when they need to revise. Yes, they aren't as exciting, but they release energy more slowly, which helps us avoid the crashing effect of sugar. Fruit contains natural sugar but it's still better for us than crisps and chocolate. Bananas have been shown to be the best for exam performance.

ON THE DAY OF THE EXAM

For a morning exam, a breakfast which releases energy slowly is best, like granola/oats with yoghurt/milk and some fruit. Intensely-coloured fruits like blueberries and strawberries are good. If that doesn't sound very appetising, any breakfast cereal or bar which is low in added sugar is an alternative. Whatever they have for breakfast, **DO NOT** let them skip it entirely. This would be the worst thing they could do.

For an afternoon exam, they should consider eating a bit less lunch than they usually do. Having an overfull stomach will cause blood to be directed to help digestion rather than being in their brain where they need it. Being full will also make them sleepy, which is never a good thing for an exam (see 8 hours a night).

Nuts & Seeds
Plenty of Fruit
Especially Bananas!



Sugary Foods
Crisps
Chocolate



ENERGY DRINKS DO NOT GIVE US WINGS

(OR HELP US SUCCEED)

Energy drinks are the worst thing your child can consume when they're trying to study as these make our brains behave completely differently. They will get a sugar high crash AND the massive amounts of caffeine will make it harder to concentrate. Coffee and tea aren't good for them either. They might feel like they're waking up and more alert but they're actually making it impossible for their brain to function normally. Caffeine is a diuretic too, which means it draws water out of them and makes their brains less active.



MORE CAFFEINE
MEANS MORE TRIPS TO THE TOILET!

**ON THE DAY
OF THE EXAM**

A non-caffeinated hot drink (such as herbal tea) is fine, though they need to be careful drinking anything which is labelled decaffeinated as it is not uncaffeinated: it still has some caffeine in it. Being a diuretic also means caffeine sends us to the toilet more frequently, which is obviously not a good idea during an exam!

Boring as many people find it, water is always best. Sipping water throughout an exam is strongly recommended as it keeps the brain hydrated. Just remind them to bring in a clear bottle with the label removed.

8 HOURS A NIGHT?

Neuroscientists now know for certain what a lot of people have been suspecting for years: getting fewer than **7-8 hours sleep** is really bad for our health. One of the most important functions of sleep is transferring information from our short term store (the hippocampus) to **long term memory** (the cortex). Without enough sleep, our short term memories become overloaded and we can't take on-board new information.

Sleep is regulated by two things. The first of these, our circadian rhythm, is our body clock and it changes slightly throughout our lives. For teenagers, their rhythm makes **their ideal sleep window 11pm-7am** (adults run about an hour earlier, so please be reassured that going to bed sooner is just a natural feature of being an adult!). Going to bed much later than 11pm means they won't sleep as deeply as they should to get maximum sleep benefits. Anyone who has ever experienced jet lag (which messes up the circadian rhythm), knows how annoying this can be. Most deep sleep occurs in the 11pm-3am window so if your teenager is having trouble remembering things or learning new information, it may be because they are going to bed too late.

The second thing that regulates sleep is the release of the chemical **adenosine**. This builds up while we are awake and sends us off to sleep when enough has accumulated. Another reason caffeine is so bad for us (see above) is because it blocks the adenosine receptors, holding off sleep for a while, although the adenosine continues building up all the time. This means that when the caffeine wears off, we suddenly crash into sleep mode and lose any energy to do anything.

GIVE YOUR PHONE A REST.



SLEEP HYGIENE



Stay away from caffeine late in the day.



Relax and clear your mind in the evening.



Avoid naps. Especially in the afternoon.



Exercise regularly, but not before bed.



Stick to a sleep schedule.

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE EXAM

The worst thing your child can do for their sleep is to keep their **phones** or other electronic devices within reach of their beds. Exposure to any kind of **light** prevents adenosine being absorbed normally. TVs and computer screens aren't good, but the 'blue light' from phones and tablets is the worst. It should go without saying that no one should have notifications going off in the middle of the night but some teenagers struggle with turning on the 'do not disturb' mode. If they do, encourage them to put the phone on charge in a different part of their room, out of physical reach. And definitely switch off any pings, beeps or vibrations.

Although this is particularly essential for the night before any exam, it's best to develop a set sleep routine as early as possible. Scientists and doctors call this 'sleep hygiene'.

DIGITAL DISTRACTIONS

The key to exam success is turning revision into a habit. Unfortunately, revision is boring, especially compared with social media and video games. And boring habits stick less easily than fun habits, at least to start with.

Scientists have shown that we all receive a quick burst of **serotonin** when we hear a notification on our **phones**. This 'happy chemical' is highly addictive. Our brains will do whatever it takes to obtain another hit. So the simple solution is: turn the notification sound/vibration off. Not everyone has the willpower to do this however. If your child has their smartphone in arm's reach when they are doing their revision, they will almost certainly not be concentrating hard enough to get information to stick in their heads. The best thing to do is take care of it for them while they work. Note, that is the best thing, but perhaps not the easiest thing. Yes, we live in the real world! Some will find that just being encouraged to leave their phone out of arm's reach with the notifications off will be enough to help them manage the distraction. However you do it, making sure your child is not checking their phone every five minutes is essential for exam preparation success.

Similarly, spending hours and hours on **video games** will not set your child up for achieving their best. The solution for this is just as simple as it is for phones. All modern video games consoles have parental controls so you can limit their playtime. You can find straightforward guides on how to do this here: www.esrb.org/about/settingcontrols.aspx

Of course, you could just take their controllers/consoles off them, although this may be easier said than done.

Like any form of entertainment, video games are fine in modest doses. But if you think your child is addicted to gaming, get in touch with your child's Head of House and we'll do whatever we can to help.

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE EXAM

Using your phone or playing a game long into the night before an exam is clearly a recipe for disaster (see '8 hours a night?'). On the day itself, there's not much you can do. Managing digital distractions needs to be a habit formed before the exam period begins. One way to instil this habit is to see social media and games as rewards for completing revision. Eventually, the brain will be tricked into finding revision as pleasurable – because it leads to a reward. Do everything you can to make sure your child does **revision before rewards** and not the other way around.



EXERCISE BEATS ANXIETY & STRESS

Some pressure is essential for exam success, but anxiety needs to be kept at manageable levels. By far the best solution is doing a bit of exercise.

Intensively revising can make it seem like their body is just a support system for their big, overflowing brain. But being physically active is essential to keep their brains at peak performance levels. If they're not a fan of exercise, just walking to the shops will clear some space in their head so they can take on-board new information. If your child is already fairly active, going for a jog or doing some press ups/sit ups will have the same effect. Exercise also helps them to sleep if they do it 2-3 hours before their bed time.



EXERCISE
15-30 MINUTES



**ON THE DAY OF
THE EXAM**

Doing a little exercise on the morning of an exam is a better use of time than trying to do some last minute cramming of information. Cramming will only lead to further anxiety and a feeling of losing confidence in themselves.

ARE THEY REALLY REVISING? OR ARE THEY PROCRASTINATING?

We devote a lot of time to making sure our pupils are taught HOW to revise. There is no way they will achieve their best if they don't revise outside school time. And yet, some are reluctant to do real revision but, instead, do the things they find easier. In other words, they are procrastinating: putting off doing something that will take a lot of effort by doing something that will take less effort.

The golden rule is: if it takes more effort it will stick in their memory more effectively. The best strategies are quizzing (because retrieving something from our memories creates new neural pathways) and turning words into images (the posh term for this is 'dual coding').



THE NIGHT BEFORE THE EXAM

Trying to get any information to stick that isn't already stuck is not a good idea. It will probably cause your child to panic. Some friendly quizzing is okay but frantically reading over notes/revision guides is just a sign that they haven't prepared properly for the exam. They are usually best doing no revision at all on the day of an exam.

PROCRASTINATING VS. REVISING

IF YOUR CHILD IS DOING THESE THINGS, THEY ARE PROBABLY JUST PROCRASTINATING...

Just reading through their notes/revision guide.

Highlighting

(unless they are very precise about what they're highlighting for).

Copying out big chunks of information

(and maybe adding lots of colour/bubble writing which just makes it look pretty).

...WHEREAS DOING THESE THINGS WILL REALLY HELP INFORMATION STICK IN YOUR CHILD'S HEAD.

Testing themselves using the questions in their revision guide.

Selecting the key information they need to remember and turning into

- Pictures
- Diagrams
- Acronyms
- Stories

Quizzing themselves and others.

(repeated retrieval beats re-exposure)



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