

Oldmachar Academy



SQA exams, what can a
parent do?

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Many parents feel at a loss when their children enter S3 and above, confused by the complicated systems of SQA exams, coursework and practical assessments.

If you feel like this, you are not alone! The exam system has changed greatly over the years, and is continuing to change, and sometimes it feels as if it is best just to let the 'experts' at Oldmachar Academy get on with it. But your involvement during these crucial years can make an enormous difference between success and failure or between 'C' and 'D' passes and 'A's and 'B's.

Parental support is eight times more important in determining a child's academic success than other factors, according to a study by The Campaign for Learning.

(TES, 10 October 2003)

The good news is - you don't have to be an expert in any of the subjects your child has chosen to make a real difference, and you don't have to become a 'super-parent' giving up your own life and responsibilities - you just need to know how best to spend the time you do have, at each stage of the process. Perhaps the hardest demand on students is that of understanding the long-term importance of doing the best they can, and learning to shelve short-term fun at times in the interest of long-term benefits (not easy even for adults).

Unfortunately for us, from the teenage perspective, interest and effort in education and the long-term benefits this can bring often come rather a long way down the priority list, after friendships, the 'right' clothes, social life, romantic concerns and hobbies. In addition, children will differ in their levels of maturity, organisational skills, levels of motivation and their ability to take responsibility for their own learning.

This is where you come in. You are the expert on your child and have always been his or her most important teacher. **Your support, encouragement and interest can make a spectacular difference to your child's motivation and ability to cope with the academic and organisational demands of the exam years.**

When you, your child and the school work in partnership, you can be sure that your child will achieve the best results possible.

Your role may include some or all of the following:

- **Attendance Officer** - making sure your child goes to lessons and understands the importance of making the most of lesson-times.
- **Partner with school and child** - going to Parents' Evenings, asking questions and finding out how you can best help your child at home.
- **Provider of the tools** for homework and revision - a quiet space, a 'workbox' of pens, paper and other necessities.
- **Banker** - paying for the tools, files and revision guides they need.

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- **Study Buddy** - showing an interest in the subject, helping with homework (but not doing it for them), testing them when they ask you, and so on.
- **Entertainments Officer** - finding out about TV programmes, theatre productions, films, exhibitions relevant to your child's learning and enjoying them together.
- **Sounding board and adviser** - helping your child to break tasks down so that they are manageable, keeping a subtle eye on progress and celebrating achievements, and seeing a positive way forward when things go badly.
- **Project Manager** – agreeing the rule for homework or revision (they won't work if they're imposed), helping them to make a realistic timetable, balancing work against the 'fun stuff' and revising the plans as necessary.
- **Go-between** - for your child and the school when necessary; making sure problems are nipped in the bud and asking the questions your child can't or won't.
- **Information Provider and Interpreter** - finding copies of old exam papers, searching out websites, finding out about the subject, exam structures and content.

Whatever your individual child's needs your chief role will always be that of the person who cares most in the world, champion of their needs and admirer of every achievement. The most important role you will play is that of person who will love them and be proud of them whatever happens.

Good exam results - what is the secret?

We tend to think of our children's results being down to what happens on the day of the exam itself. Will they be in the right frame of mind? Will they be lucky and get the right questions? Will they remember what they have revised? In fact, the results of exams are generally determined well *before* they sit the exam itself. There are a number of stages in the process of achieving exam success. The secret of good results in exams is about getting things right (and being aware of what can go wrong) at each stage of the process. The broad stages are:

STAGE 1: Learning the content first time round

- The process of revision (literally 'looking at something again') does assume that the content of the subject has been learnt in the first place - every lesson counts.

STAGE 2: Revision

- Even the 'perfect student', who has attended every lesson and paid attention throughout the course, needs to revise to achieve their potential. For the rest of us, the need for revision is even greater. Revision can be done in many ways, some of which are more effective than others.

STAGE 3: The exam itself

- Even with the first two stages successfully achieved, things can still go wrong. There are three sets of skills involved in taking exams - knowing the subject matter, organisational skills and 'exam technique'.

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Your most important role, as always, is to encourage and praise your child. Show an interest by talking to them about what they are learning in different subjects and in their homework and coursework. The most important thing is that your child attends lessons. Sometimes just missing one lesson means that they miss out on key information about coursework or the introduction to a topic - starting out behind often results in a vicious circle of not understanding, falling further behind, disagreements with teachers, an increasing dislike of the subject and giving up.

Make sure the 'workbox' is kept stocked and the workspace is suitable. Put key dates and deadlines in your own diary so that you can support before the 'panic stage'. If you have agreed regular 'check-ins', take the opportunity to discuss how the homework and revision is going, and if there are any difficulties you can help with.

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. All students will fall behind, feel de-motivated or overwhelmed, or struggle with the balance of social, work and school demands at times. When your child feels like this, berating and threatening them may have a negative effect. Talk to them about the issues.

Acknowledge their feelings and sensible attitude in wanting to find a solution; help them prioritise and if necessary talk to the school about rescheduling deadlines where possible. Consider using a reward structure to motivate your child. This is NOT bribery (bribery is generally for encouraging anti-social or illegal behaviour). It is a reward, just as you are rewarded by a salary or bonuses for working when you don't feel like it. Rewards do not have to be financial or very big - talk to your child 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 ... 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 child is sticking to what they are supposed to be doing 80% of the time, they will be doing alright.

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A strategy for dealing with excuses

"My work's on the computer at school... We didn't get homework because there was a supply teacher... I'm doing that with a friend, and she's got the book... I need to be in the library at school to do it - I'll do it tomorrow...it doesn't have to be done for ages...I've got loads of time..."

Here are some ideas you may think of using if excuses become a way of life.

- **Keep track** of the 'excuses' (they won't be able to!), writing them down with the date and subject.
- **Agree or suggest a solution** - e.g. that he or she 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 you homework' and that you will need to contact them.
- **Remember the aim is to get the work done, not win the battle.** Let your child save face, as long as they agree to do the work and stick to it.

If your child 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 avoid damaging their self-esteem by always talking about behaviour rather about them (e.g. 'you're lazy', 'you'll never amount to anything').

If your child 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 on this essay, I might as well give up - I'll never get to University now".

Supporting your child in setting themselves up for revision

- Talk to your child about how you can support them and what they would find helpful.
- The simplest things often get in the way of starting revision - weeks can be lost while students 'are going to get some folders soon...'. Get around these by simply providing the files, dividers, wall-charts etc. your child will need for the revision period.
- Encourage your child to empty their bag and file hand-outs and information from lessons at the end of each day. They won't seem important until they need them, at which point they are likely to be lost under a mountain of random papers.
- Support your child in choosing one good revision guide for each subject - it's the best investment you will make.
- Help your child to plan their revision timetable. It will take an investment of your time (probably several hours), but it is the single thing that will make the biggest difference to the effectiveness of the revision, and therefore the outcome. Children vary in the amount of support they need at each stage of the process.

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Supporting your child in doing the revision

- Support your child in sticking to their revision plan and keeping to the start and finishing times they have agreed. Praise them when they do it, and if necessary agree a reward structure. Don't make treats dependent on certain results - it will only add to their feelings of disappointment if they don't do as well as expected.
- Quietly top-up the 'workbox' with pens, rulers, paper pads etc. Don't get wound up about lost items if you can help it - motivation is hard enough to find for revision, and arguments about a 50p pen just aren't worth it.
- Provide favourite snacks and water for revision periods.
- Be flexible - if they want to go out to a party on a revision night, agree when they will make the time up.
- Be sensitive to the pressure your child is feeling - let them know that if they are really not up to it on odd days, it isn't the end of the world - let it go when it really matters to them, and remind them of all the good work they have done, and will continue to do. It's the big picture that will count in the end.
- Keep up with regular 'check-ins' and don't nag in between times. Show an interest in how the revision is going, talk through any difficulties and be prepared to help them reschedule their planning as necessary.
- Keep things in perspective - your child may not be doing things the way you would do them, or as often as you would like, but they are doing the best they can in the way that works for them at the stage they are at.
- The exam period can be very stressful for students. Encourage your child to keep a positive perspective - soon they will be on the other side of the 'exam mountain'.
- Try not to add to the stress levels in the house by 'rising to the bait' when your child pushes the limits. None of us is at our best under stress and it is likely that their behaviour will be challenging during this time. Pick your battles carefully, shelving any issues that are not of immediate importance. Now is not the time to bring up the issue of the untidy bedroom or the washing up being left again!
- Ensure that your child is prepared for the exam and talk through where and when it is, what they need to take, etc. On the day of the exam, make sure they have a watch and supplies of pens, pencils etc.
- Try to keep routines the same, and not to introduce any instability unless it is absolutely necessary. On exam days, try to ensure they have a good breakfast (or suggest that they take a banana or other source of energy-food if they can't eat first thing).
- Before the exam, remind them that you love and value them whatever happens. Remind them of any strategies they have for keeping calm, and wish them good luck.

After an exam, ask how it went but don't insist on a long post-mortem. Be available but respect your child's wishes to deal with their feelings in their own way. Try to adopt an attitude of 'tomorrow is another day', if things have gone badly.

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A trouble shooting guide

Tips for parents - I hate this subject/teacher - I'm going to drop it.

- Children at exam age are often prone to 'all or nothing' thinking, leading them to exaggerate the importance of incidents and resort to extreme strategies such as 'giving it all up' 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 limited.
- Try to find out exactly what is causing the problem by encouraging your child to talk about what happens in the class, what is it that the teacher does or says that your child objects to. Don't minimise the feelings that your child is experiencing as this leads to the 'you just don't understand' response - accept that the feelings are real and that the problem to be sorted out is one of finding a less extreme strategy.
- For teenagers, problems often seem permanent ('I will never be able to understand this subject/get on with this teacher'), global ('I hate everything he says/does' or 'Everything about science is boring/difficult/stupid) and insoluble. 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 about what she says/does?')
 - **temporary** ('How long have you been *feeling* like this about her/the subject?')
 - **solvable** ('What would you like to happen? What would make it more bearable?')
- If the work really does seem to be beyond him or her, it is always a good idea to talk to your child's Pupil Support teacher. While the temptation may be to show your indignation and to 'protect' your child (a natural inclination) do try to listen to the other side of the story.

I've left it too late to revise

- One of the biggest mistakes that students make is not allowing enough time for revision. This usually results, when they do realise what is involved, in de-motivation and the attitude that there is no point in doing anything as the task is too big. The key point to remember is that it is never too late until you enter the exam room - with revision, a little knowledge is better than none, and could make the difference between a pass and a fail.
- Put in place a damage-limitation plan. Help your child to make use of the time they have got, however little, by helping them to prioritise and structure revision tasks into manageable chunks. Focus on the subjects in which they are likely to get passes, ignoring those in which there is no hope, and rather than reading hurriedly through the whole syllabus, identify and agree on a few key areas and encourage them to revise these as thoroughly as possible.
- Keep up motivation and self-esteem by reminding them of how they have coped with difficult situations in the past and that the exam period will soon be over and by talking about the strengths and qualities that they have which will contribute to the best outcome in the circumstances.

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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 child 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 and other unexplained aches and pains
 - Irritability and frequent angry episodes
- If your child 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 child 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, unless they ask for it - what stressed people most need are somebody to listen and empathise with the feelings they express.)
- Each of the following have had some success in helping students regain a sense of perspective, but the important thing is to use the strategies that you know have worked in the past:
 - Reminding them what percentage of the final result the piece of work represents and talking about possible ways around the problem.
 - Asking them 'what's the worst that can happen?' or saying 'OK, well the starting point is that nobody died'.
 - Reminding them of when they have overcome difficulties in the past.
 - Getting them to focus on what they have achieved, despite this 'blip'.
 - Pointing out that little is achieved without hard-work and mistakes being made - it's part of life and learning and adults frequently make mistakes too.

Many of the ideas in this paper are developed further in the book "GCSEs What can a parent do? 101 tips to ensure success" by Julie Casey.

Education Scotland have a very good interactive section on study skills on their website, see the link below:

<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/studyskills/>