

HOW NOT TO BE BOGGED DOWN BY PRELIM EXAM RESULTS

Some pupils may feel that they have worked hard, and yet did not get the results they aimed for during the prelim exams.

Ms Shirley Sim, a senior school counsellor at Maris Stella High School (Primary), says parents can share stories of how they overcame disappointments in school and at work to encourage the child.

“Explicit assurances of unconditional parental support, regardless of results, is empowering. This is especially so for pupils with learning challenges or who struggle academically,” she says.

For children who did not put in enough effort, parents may have to step in to establish suitable routines.

“Sometimes, what appears to be lazy or unmotivated behaviour may be a reflection of pupils lacking skills like the ability to organise, plan, and manage time, or to start and complete assignments,” she says.

No matter the results, the way parents speak to children shapes the inner voice that children use to speak to themselves, says Ms Sim.

“Will it be one that focuses on strengths? Or will it be an inner critic that focuses on weaknesses and stunts learning?” she asks.

Having a kind inner voice goes a long way to build resilience, even for academically weaker pupils who may think that there is no point trying, she says.

Prof Liem says parents can also remind their child that schools may set the prelim exams in a way that allows the pupils to know their areas of weakness so as to better prepare themselves for the PSLE.

“With this sensible goal in mind, pupils would not be too disheartened when their prelim results fell short of their expectations,” he says.

TIP

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PRACTICAL TIPS TO MOTIVATE A CHILD

Parents should ask their children why they feel that they have not done well in the prelim exams, says Prof Liem.

The factors they use to explain their performance will determine their subsequent motivation, he says, citing the Attribution Theory. The theory suggests that some of these factors are controllable while others are not.

For example, does a child feel that he or she did not do well because of factors such as effort, study strategies, time management and distractions – which are changeable?

Or does the child attribute the poor scores to innate ability, task difficulty or luck, which are not within his or her control?

Parents can help a child shift his or her perspective to the more controllable factors, to help him or her realise that the performance is

within the child’s control, says Prof Liem.

“If a pupil believes that he or she performed poorly because he or she is ‘stupid’ or ‘unlucky’, adults could try to ask ‘are you sure you are not good at maths?’, ‘tell me

how you studied for the maths prelims’ or ‘how many hours did you study?’” he suggests.

Knowing that achievement factors are within the child’s control will motivate him or her to study, says Prof Liem.

Another way is to work with the child to do time blocking: organise his or her time after school or during the September holidays based on three sets of activities – studying, resting and playing.

When a child has blocked off, for example, two hours for revision, he or she should focus without distractions.

Assure the child that he or she can spend the next hour, for instance, playing a video game, listening to music or exercising.

“During the blocked-off hours, it is important that the child knows what he or she is to study and the goal to achieve. Only with this clarity would the child’s studying period be fruitful and the learning

process effective,” he says.

The increase in self-belief when a child achieves his or her goals will give the young one the momentum in his or her studies, Prof Liem says.

Another way to motivate a child is to be specific in praising him or her.

Ms Emilyn See, a senior curriculum and teaching specialist at enrichment centre The Eton Academy, points out her students’ progress, not necessarily in their marks, and tells them she is proud of them.

“It could be growth in their confidence in reading, or how they remembered a concept I taught, or how they used a good writing technique for composition,” she says.

Another effective way to maintain motivation is to set achievable goals. For example, breaking down a task into small, specific goals will help pupils feel more in control as they work towards reaching each step.

Says Mr Or: “Try to aim for the next achievement level (AL) grade rather than a grade that is too far away. Setting achievable goals will give pupils a sense of accomplishment as they check off the steps.”

Also, encourage pupils to reward themselves with a small snack, for example, when they finish each task, rather than only when they complete their last paper, as having something to look forward to will keep them going, says Mr Or.

One last tip to spur children has little to do with actual studying.

It is simply having good parent-child relationships, says senior school counsellor Ms Sim.

Parents must be intentional in connecting with their children and not focused on only getting more homework done.

One way is to continue to schedule mutually enjoyable activities such as outdoor activities, meals or a card game, Ms Sim suggests.

Parents can use casual conversations and experiences to get to know their pre-teens better.

“Students feel happy and supported when they see that parents listen to and care about their fears and challenges,” she says.

CALMING STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH EXAM STRESS

Ms Sim says the issues that pupils face in the lead up to PSLE include anxiety, self-doubts and feeling upset with parents.

Latent stress over revision and performance, or a perceived lack of it, can strain the parent-child relationship, she notes.

Parents can help to mitigate the

stress by reminding themselves and their child that no single exam is meant to define future success.

“The grades that our children achieve at PSLE are also not a reflection of our parenting abilities and strengths,” says Ms Sim.

Ms Teo Xiwen, head of mother tongue languages at Ahmad Ibrahim Primary School, agrees. “When parents understand that their

child’s learning is a lifelong one, they are more inclined to see what their child has achieved at this point of time and celebrate it.”

There are simple ways to calm an anxious child.

One is the five-senses grounding exercise – getting the child to name five things he or she can see, touch, hear, smell and taste. This mindfulness exercise will help the child be more present and aware of his or her surroundings, and reduce feelings of anxiety or stress.

Another strategy is the 4-7-8 breathing exercise, a technique discovered by American doctor Andrew Weil who found that practising this way of breathing regularly can significantly reduce anxiety.

Get the child to inhale in four counts, hold the breath for seven counts and exhale for eight counts.

Do three or four cycles each time, several times a day.

To reap the benefit of these techniques, it is best to practise them regularly before the exams, say Ms Sim and Prof Liem.

Madam Efizah Samat, head of department for science at West View Primary School, says another way to reduce stress is to encourage pupils to talk to trusted teachers or peers.

When she chats with her pupils, she reminds them of the phrase “excellence is not about being the best, but doing my best”.

As the final countdown to PSLE begins, educators have a common message for parents: Recognise the effort your child has put in, celebrate it and tell the child you love him or her no matter what.

As Ms Nur Sofhia Buang, head of department for mathematics at Jurong Primary School, puts it: “In the grand scheme of things, the PSLE is just one milestone in a pupil’s lifelong learning adventure. The AL score isn’t everything and doesn’t determine our pupils’ success and value.”

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• This is the last of a three-part series on PSLE revision. The first part was on how to guide your child to get the most out of PSLE revision and the second was on oral exam preparation.



Ms Shirley Sim, a senior school counsellor at Maris Stella High School (Primary), with pupils. For parents whose children are taking the Primary School Leaving Examination, she says their show of unconditional support for their child can be empowering. ST PHOTO: HESTER TAN

Mindful about stress over performance