

UNDERSTANDING EXAMS

A SIMPLE GUIDE TO EXAMS, GRADES AND WHAT YOUR CHILD IS EXPECTED TO KNOW

Helping you feel confident in supporting your child through their exams.



WHAT ARE EXAMS REALLY TESTING?



Exams are not just about memory — they assess:



Knowledge – What your child knows



Understanding – Can they explain it?



Application – Can they use it in new situations?



Exam Technique – Can they answer the question properly under time pressure?



Many students lose marks not because they don't know the content — but because they don't apply it correctly.

TYPES OF EXAMS YOUR CHILD MAY SIT



Written Exams

Most common – structured questions, essays, calculations.



Practical Assessments

Especially in Science – experiments and analysis.



Speaking Exams

Languages – communication and confidence.



Coursework / Controlled Assessment

Completed over time, contributes to final grade.

UNDERSTANDING GRADES (GCSEs & BEYOND)

GCSE GRADING SYSTEM (9–1)

Grade	Meaning
9	Exceptional performance
7–8	Strong (A equivalent)
5–6	Secure pass
4	Standard pass
1–3	Below pass

★ Grade 4 = pass

★ Grade 5+ = strong pass (often required for college)



COMMON MISUNDERSTANDINGS

- ✗ "If they revise a lot, they'll do well"
It's about how they revise, not just how long.
- ✗ "They know the content, so they'll be fine"
They must practise exam questions and timing.
- ✗ "Mocks don't matter"
Mocks highlight gaps and weak areas early.



WHAT STUDENTS ARE EXPECTED TO DO

- ✓ Learn and understand key content
- ✓ Practise applying knowledge to exam questions
- ✓ Manage time effectively in exams
- ✓ Show clear working and structured answers
- ✓ Review mistakes and improve



KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

- **Exams test more than memory:**
They assess knowledge, understanding, application and exam technique.
- **Practice makes progress:**
Exam questions and timed practice build confidence and improve results.
- **Mock exams are valuable:**
They help identify gaps and areas that need more focus.
- **Confidence counts:**
Good preparation + a calm mindset lead to better performance.



HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT YOUR CHILD

- Encourage structure and routine
- Focus on effort, not just results
- Help them stay organised
- Keep communication open
- Avoid adding pressure



Your support and encouragement make a huge difference to their success.



WHAT HAPPENS IN AN EXAM?

Students are expected to:

- ✓ Read questions carefully
- ✓ Understand command words (e.g. describe, explain, evaluate)
- ✓ Manage time across all questions
- ✓ Stay calm under pressure



Exam technique is just as important as knowledge.



COMMAND WORDS EXPLAINED

These tell students how to answer:

- Describe** → Say what you see / what happens
- Explain** → Give reasons why
- Analyse** → Break it down and explore
- Evaluate** → Give a judgement with evidence



Many students drop marks by misunderstanding these.



WHY STUDENTS LOSE MARKS

- ✗ Not answering the question properly
- ✗ Poor time management
- ✗ Lack of exam practice
- ✗ Panic or low confidence
- ✗ Weak understanding of key topics



WHAT "GOOD REVISION" LOOKS LIKE

- ✓ Past papers under timed conditions
- ✓ Active recall (testing themselves)
- ✓ Breaking topics into smaller sections
- ✓ Revisiting weak areas regularly



Revision should be challenging – that's how learning happens.



HOW TO UNDERSTAND YOUR CHILD'S RESULTS



Score vs Grade
A small mark difference can change a grade.



Topic Breakdown
Which topics are strong or weak?



Progress Over Time
Are they improving across papers?



Exam Technique Issues
Did they lose marks due to:
• timing • misreading questions
• lack of structure

QUESTIONS PARENTS SHOULD ASK

Instead of:

- ✗ "Why did you get that grade?"

Ask instead:

- ✓ Which topics felt difficult?
- ✓ What would you do differently next time?
- ✓ Do you feel it was knowledge or exam technique?



A lower grade doesn't always mean lack of knowledge – it may be exam technique.



WHAT GOOD PROGRESS ACTUALLY LOOKS LIKE

PROGRESS IS NOT ALWAYS A STRAIGHT LINE



Progress can be slow at first



Confidence often improves before grades



Mistakes are part of learning

SIGNS YOUR CHILD IS ON THE RIGHT TRACK

- ✓ They can explain topics more clearly
- ✓ They are attempting harder questions
- ✓ They are making fewer repeated mistakes
- ✓ They are becoming more independent

WHEN TO BE CONCERNED



- ✗ No improvement over time
- ✗ Avoiding revision completely
- ✗ High anxiety or low confidence
- ✗ Repeating the same mistakes



This is where intervention or support is needed.



HOW MUCH REVISION IS ENOUGH?



Short, focused sessions (20–40 minutes)



Regular breaks



Consistency over long hours



2–3 focused hours beats 6 hours of unfocused revision.



WHEN TO BE CONCERNED

- ✗ No improvement over time
- ✗ Avoiding revision completely
- ✗ High anxiety or low confidence
- ✗ Repeating the same mistakes
- ✗ Poor attendance or lack of engagement
- ✗ Drastic change in behaviour



Early support can prevent small issues from becoming bigger problems.



KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR PARENTS

- ✓ Exams test skills, not just memory
- ✓ Practice and technique are essential
- ✓ Confidence plays a huge role
- ✓ Support matters more than pressure
- ✓ Every child can improve with the right approach and support



Your child doesn't need a perfect parent – they need a supportive one.
You've got this!

