

Standardized Test Secrets

Confident. Prepared. Relaxed. Well rested. These are the traits of successful test takers. How can you ensure that your middle grader does his best on standardized tests? Try these ideas to help before, during, and after tests.

Editor's Note: We chose to use a boy in this report, but the examples apply to both boys and girls.



Before:

Understand the purpose. Your child may wonder why he has to take standardized tests. Let him know that the tests measure how students in his school are doing compared with other schools and districts. The tests also show areas he needs to work on and how his skills change over time. Plus, they help teachers and administrators do their jobs better.

Support the teacher's efforts. Chances are your child's teacher will give him many activities to prepare for the test. She may also share information about ways to practice at home. Remind your middle grader that these exercises will help him do his best. Be on the lookout for testing schedules and other information from the school that you'll need to keep him on track.

Reassure your child. Standardized tests are very different from classroom tests. For example, about half of the questions are expected to be too difficult for the average student. The tests are also put together so that many test takers won't finish within the time limit. Let your middle grader know that even if he misses many questions, he can still score well.

Use practice sheets. Most standardized tests require separate answer sheets with small circles to be filled in with pencil. Filling in the circles quickly and efficiently is tough for many children. Your middle grader should use firm, up-and-down pencil strokes. It's important for him to completely erase answers he changes and to avoid stray marks. You can make a homemade practice sheet with rows of small circles. Or the teacher might have samples to share.



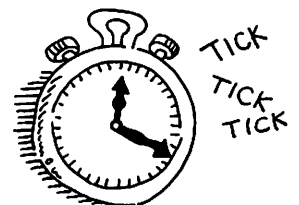
Get in shape. Two essential ingredients for successful test taking are a good night's rest and a healthy breakfast. If your middle grader is worried about the test, taking a warm bath and spending time reading can help take his mind off it. A well-balanced breakfast will give him energy on test day. The menu might include cereal with milk, or eggs and toast, plus fruit or juice. Be careful he doesn't eat more food than normal—being too full can make him sluggish.

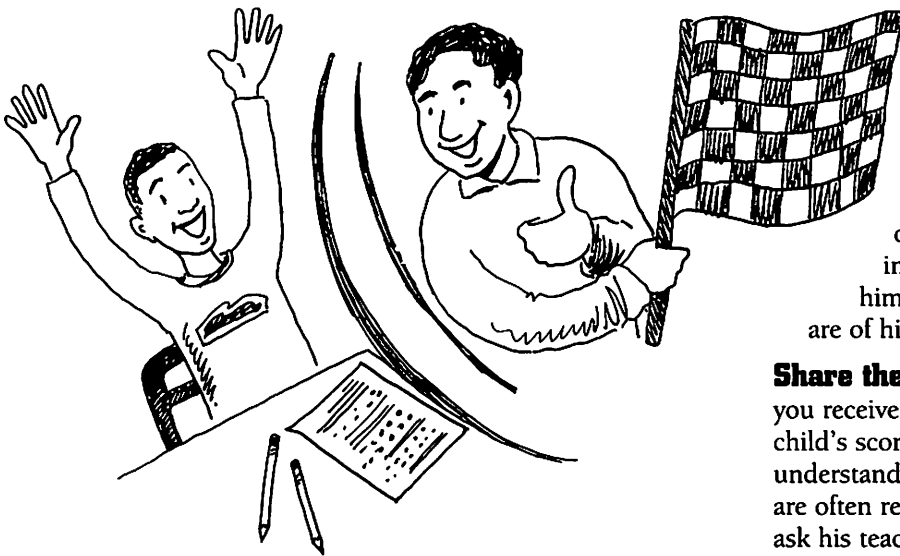
During:

Take extra supplies. Your school may provide all the supplies your child needs for the test. Just in case, it's a good idea for him to take several pencils with medium-sharp points (a very sharp pencil can break easily). A good eraser and a few sheets of blank scrap paper are also useful. For added energy, snacks of raisins, grapes, or granola bars are great for breaks.

Follow directions. Encourage your middle grader to read all directions slowly and carefully. If he's allowed to write in the test booklet, have him circle or underline important words. If he is confused about what to do, tell him to ask the teacher or test administrator right away.

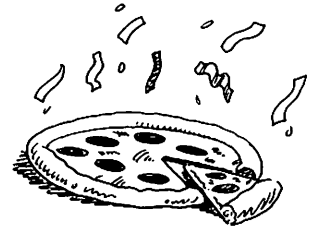
Use time wisely. Most standardized tests are divided into timed sections. At the beginning of each section, your child should scan all the questions. That will give him some idea of how much time to spend on each one. A simple method is to divide both the amount of time and number of questions in half. For instance, say he has 30 minutes and 20 questions. In the first 15 minutes, he should answer at least 10 questions.





After:

Celebrate. Finishing a standardized test is an accomplishment. Give your child plenty of time to relax and wind down. Taking the test requires a lot of mental energy! Consider treating him to a special meal or a video rental. It's important to tell him how proud you are of his hard work.

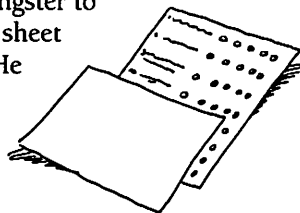


Share the results. When you receive a copy of your child's scores, make sure you understand what they mean. Scores are often reported in percentiles and can be confusing, so ask his teachers for help. Talk with your middle grader about the areas he did well in and any he needs to work on. He will probably be very curious and may ask lots of questions. Remind him that standardized tests are a tool to help students learn.

Read every answer. It's often tempting for test takers to read multiple-choice questions and mark their answers immediately. The best approach on standardized tests is to read the question and all the answers. Then, go back and select the best one. Your child may need to practice this two-step approach until he feels comfortable.

Make good guesses. On most standardized tests, it's better to guess at an answer than to leave it blank. Coach your middle grader to cross off answers he's sure are wrong. That way, he can improve his chances of choosing the right answer. Remind him not to spend too much time on particularly hard questions. If he's completely unsure, he should make his best guess and move on.

Stay in order. One mistake many students make is getting the questions and answers out of order. Encourage your youngster to keep his place on the answer sheet with a piece of blank paper. He can slide the paper down to reveal one row of circles at a time. Every few questions, he should make sure he is on the correct row.



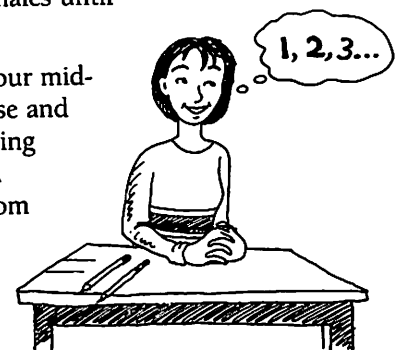
Check answers. If your middle grader reaches the end of a section with time left, he should go back and check his answers. Some test takers circle difficult questions as they work so they can easily find them later.

Tackling test anxiety

Taking standardized tests can be frightening and stressful. What should your middle grader do if he freezes up on test day? Here are several tips he can try to help him relax and concentrate.

Steady breathing. Encourage your child to close his eyes and take slow, deep breaths. Have him pay attention to the way his chest rises and falls. Suggest that he count each time he inhales and exhales until he reaches 10.

Relaxed muscles. Your middle grader can also tense and relax his muscles. Starting with his face, have him squeeze his muscles from his head to his toes, holding the muscles tense for five seconds and then releasing them.



Positive thinking. Ask your child to close his eyes and imagine himself confidently answering the questions. If he pictures himself doing well on the test, he's apt to feel more at ease.

Middle Years