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GCSE Survival Guide for Parents

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Welcome to Cowes Enterprise College GCSEs Survival Guide for Parents. GCSEs can be a very challenging time for parents, particularly if its your first child and you're both unsure of what to expect.


This guide has been put together by our team with the help of subject specialists, education experts and advice from mental health organisations to try to break down what parents need to support your child's education in the lead up to GCSEs.

We have tried to include everything from relaxation strategies to revision techniques in the hope that we can put your minds at ease and empower you to help. The biggest issue that students face in the current system is getting all of the content covered in time, both in class and then again in their revision time

The most significant change that will have taken place since parents sat their own exams, is that nearly all coursework has now been replaced with terminal exams at the end of year 11. Coursework used to be included in final grades, which took some of the pressure off the year 11 assessments, but now these end of year exams are tougher on students than ever before.

Looking after your child's wellbeing and breaking down any concerns they have about assessments is key to their success in their GCSEs and beyond. We hope the following pages can equip you with the knowledge and confidence you need to help your child not only survive but thrive during their GCSE years.

In the weeks and months ahead please keep in touch with us at school and we can work together to support your child through this period in their lives.



Danielle Godfrey, Assistant Principal

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How Can Parents Support Their Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Throughout GCSEs?

The GCSE years are some of the most difficult and frustrating that young people go through. Academic success can easily become the centre of attention during this period, even when there is so much else going on, but it is crucial that this pressure isn't allowed to overshadow your child's physical and emotional wellbeing.

It's time we broke down some of the myths surrounding GCSEs and that starts with thinking about the stress that is often associated with the assessments. It can be easy to forget that these exams are probably one of your child's first encounters with this kind of stress.

People who are already struggling with any other aspect of their life, be that with their family, friends, with illness or financial worries, find the struggle even harder. Understandably, this must be a very scary time for parents not knowing how best they can help.

Keeping a level head and reasonable expectations as a parent during this time is much more likely to have a better impact on your child than pushing as hard as you can for top grades. All parents want their children to succeed - it's all just about keeping a healthy balance.



What's Really Happening When We Are Stressed?

The best way to minimise stress and anxiety for students is to understand what it is and how we can combat it. Everyone has experienced some form of stress in their lives, but how often do we stop to analyse its symptoms and its effect on the body?

Understanding and being prepared for the physical and emotional signs of stress can stop students from getting overwhelmed in new situations. It really does all come down to a bit of biology...

Many students show physical signs of stress right before assessments as their fight or flight response kicks in with their adrenaline - their hands might shake; their heart might be beating faster. By understanding what is happening biologically, you are better equipped to take yourself through some logistical steps or techniques to regain control and be able to focus in the assessment.

This is an informative TED talk about ['How to stay calm when you know you'll be stressed' by Daniel Levitin](#)

Learning breathing exercises, meditating and practicing yoga can all help to calm these nerves and there are loads of YouTube videos students can watch and learn from.

[Yoga with Adrienne](#) is a very popular channel.

Neurological Development Of Young Adults



Teenagers are going through monumental changes in most aspects of their lives during the time when they're also expected to sit their GCSEs. With this in mind, knowing what is physically changing in your child's brain can be really illuminating for parents.

Important changes are taking place during the teenage years. Hormonal changes and changes in different parts of the brain are prompting complete transformations in their lives before academic, family or social pressures even get a look-in.

These changes are taking place in the limbic system, which is responsible for seeking pleasure and rewards, emotional responses and sleep, as well as in the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for decision making, organising, planning and controlling impulses. Knowing and recognising that these changes are going on makes you realise just how much neurological development is happening during these years and how unsettled teenage life really is.

There are two key changes linked to learning happening in the brain – 'pruning' as teenagers become interested in certain topics and discover their passions also myelin formation to connect ideas more quickly. Both of these changes can be positive to help young people in studying for exams.

Here is an interesting YouTube video about ['The Adolescent Brain' by Dr Dan Siegel](#)

Parental Expectations

Parental expectations can be a double-edged sword: you want to motivate them and help them succeed, but you may end up doing the opposite if you don't strike the right balance. Students are bombarded with information about assessments and revision throughout their time at school and it is easy to go along with this rhetoric without thinking about what is actually achievable and specifically relevant to your child.

That isn't to say that you can't encourage them to aim for higher grades, but keeping a healthy perspective on what they as an individual are capable of ensures that they will strive to perform to the best of their ability, rather than an arbitrary standard.

Parents have a tricky balancing act to perform, as over involvement can lead to additional pressure for students and sometimes unrealistic expectations, and under involvement can lead to students switching off and not performing as well as they could. As a parent you would aim for that 'goldilocks' position where parents are encouraging, interested and supportive."

When parental expectations are not met and parents feel disappointed, developing children and teenagers will internalise a sense of themselves as being a disappointment, which will nurture low self-esteem and shame. When what is expected of them by the parent isn't within their ability, parental disappointment can be devastating.

Be child led and be honest about their unique interests, talents, and temperament. Place your child at the centre of your concerns.

To help guide you we have recently been through a period of review of student examination targets with teachers. We have taken into account student prior attainment right from when they joined us in Year 7 and balanced that with national peer expectations to ensure they can be competitive on a

national stage if they gain their target grade. Therefore, target grades can be a realistic starting point for any conversation.

Do

- Start the conversation. Ask them questions about how they're feeling. If they're not comfortable sharing, try opening up about any struggles you've faced in the past.
- Encourage them to exercise and get some fresh air each day, a change in surrounding can do wonders for shifting a negative mindset.
- Act early! If you think they are struggling, don't sweep it under the carpet. Even if you're not sure of the best way to help, it's always better to address any underlying issues or unhappiness as soon as it arises. Please contact teachers and/or your child's tutor for help.
- Educate yourself on mental health and the best ways to support your child if they are struggling. [Young Minds](#) has great resources for parents and carers.
- Work with your child to try and set up a sustainable routine around GCSE preparation, even if it's initially 15 minutes each day. The confidence-building power of daily routine is transformative and can prevent performance stress before it starts. We will have daily open sessions in the library to provide a supportive study atmosphere for those who get distracted at home.



Don't

- Stop them from seeing friends during revision time, it's good to break up the work with healthy social situations and everyone needs some downtime.
- Bottle up your concerns! Talk to your child if you're worried about their stress levels and see what you can do to help - it might be simpler than you think. Please speak to your child's teacher, tutor or pastoral team.
- Try to take everything on yourself – it's really important to remind yourself that you are not a professional and there may come a time when your child needs more than just your personal support. This is very hard, especially for parents, as our natural instinct is always to try and 'rescue' someone we care about from situations that are hurting them, but we can't do everything ourselves, nor are we qualified to
- Allow stress to become sickness. Intervene before your child has a chance to get overwhelmed – it's all too easy for everyday stress over GCSEs to tip into something more serious, so don't let a situation get worse than it needs to
- Let your child mistake a single test score for a final assessment of their potential. Instead encourage them to focus on how their work is developing, what they want to improve next, and on positive incremental changes over time. We find that mock exam results can have two reactions in students – some find it motivating, either as confidence building that they can do well or it will encourage them to work harder. Other students can find disappointing results demoralising and lead to a nihilistic attitude. Either way the mock exams are not the real ones.



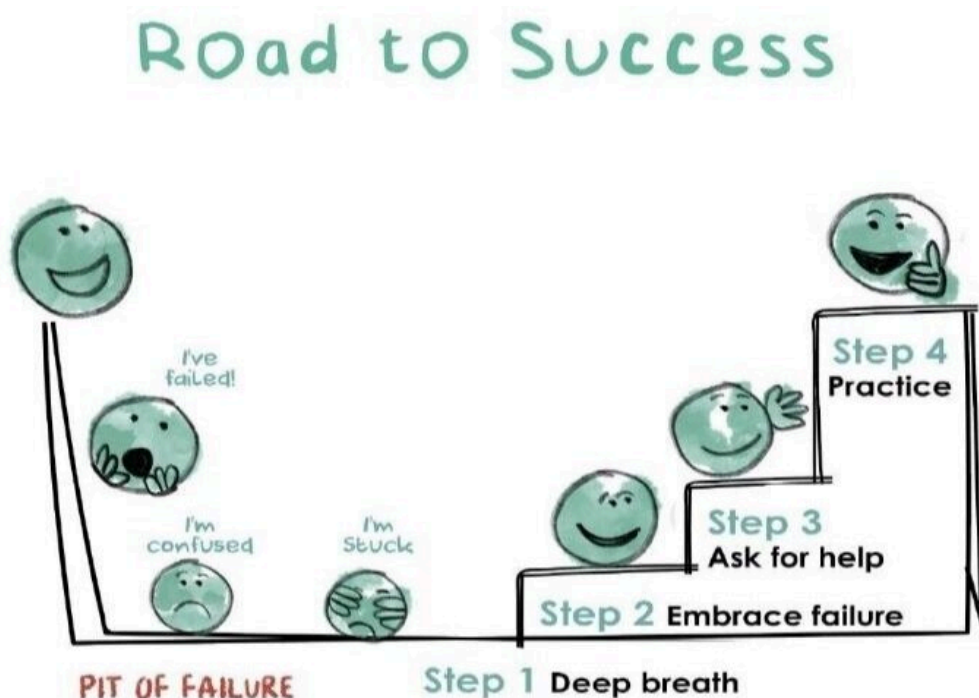
Building Resilience

GCSEs require students to have a level of mental resilience against the stresses and strains they are bombarded with. Learning to pick yourself back up again after a failure doesn't always come naturally - it's its own kind of art form and requires practice just like everything else, without it students are much more likely to burnout and get overwhelmed.

Sam Clark, teacher and author of 'What They Don't Teach You in School' "When I look back at my preparation for GCSEs, I remember being much happier to pretend that I knew the answer rather than admitting that I was struggling. I never had the courage to ask for help because I was worried about being a failure and the judgements that would follow. Encouraging children to identify their weaknesses and then ask for help is one of the golden rules for resilience. This skill will not only improve results but will be a key cog in resilience building for the future."

"One of the dangers is that children become so focused on their exams that they don't think about anything else. This leads to fatigue, stress and actions that lack resilience. Encouraging children to take time away from revision helps to get them out of the exam bubble and provides a balance that will inspire a more resilient approach to their learning. The emphasis on good food, exercise and sleep will further enhance this resilient mindset."

<https://www.tassomai.com/blog-content/2021/8/25/building-resilience-in-your-children-advice-for-parents>



Positive Mental Attitude

Mastering this kind of academic resilience will help students identify when they are getting overwhelmed, a skill which can easily be transferred into other aspects of their lives:

Getting stuck is a good thing! Some of the best learning you can do is learning from your mistakes. This process helps improve self-analysis and to build confidence over time through self-checking.

It's really important that parents reinforce the idea of keeping going and building resilience in their work, so that students learn to carry on even when they're finding something tricky. Working hard will always lead to progress.

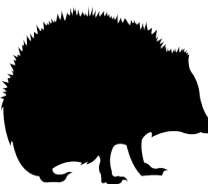
Is Your Child Suffering From Exam Stress?

Students preparing for exams often display very similar characteristics and it is good for parents to be aware of a few classic archetypes of exam-stressed children.



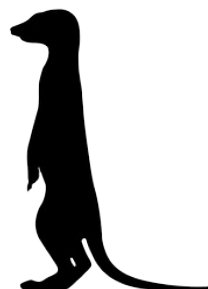
The Ostrich

The ostrich is that student who, at the mere mention of their exams - or their revision - buries their head in the sand. They could be quite obvious in this behaviour - "I don't want to talk about it" - or it might be subtler, finding an excuse to get out of the room and avoid the topic. Waste no time in confronting this behaviour and making a plan together, because the very act of avoidance means that the revision work will pile up and the stress will increase.



The Hedgehog

Similar to the ostrich in many respects, but rather than avoid the conversation, the hedgehog might become rather prickly. The reasons are quite similar, and the approach, likewise requires calm, careful conversation and a structured plan to work together to remove the fear of the exams.



The Meerkat

You might think you've been fortunate if your child is the Meerkat: super busy, extremely diligent, revising late and requesting extra practice papers from the teacher. But this behaviour may indicate a lack of confidence and a tendency to worry. Talk to your child to make sure they're keeping things in perspective and limit the revision schedule in order to allow time for rest and relaxation.



The Lion

A tendency of higher-achievers - the Lion is that child who seems to have it all under control, but spending an inordinate amount of time lying around. If they're behaving as though the exams present no problems - to the point perhaps of arrogance or laziness - then it's time for a conversation. Are they hiding any anxiety and feeling like they can't ask for help, or don't know how to?



The Bower Bird

A classic behaviour, not unlike the Meerkat. The Bower Bird (who spends large parts of its life decorating its nest) lends its name nicely to the type of student who keep themselves terribly busy focusing on superficial tasks like colouring in notes or organising files and revision plans. If you are the parent of a Bower Bird, then talk to them, constructively, about their aims for each revision session, and check in with them regularly to see how much they have achieved.

These students sometimes get involved in the 'performance' of learning but not actually learning.

Mental Health Resources

[SHOUT85258](#) is a text message based organisation that gives young people an accessible way of asking for help. Think of it as the texting version of the Samaritans. Even if your child isn't currently struggling, suggesting they save the number to their contacts will let them know that you're thinking of them, without smothering them.

[Samaritans](#) is a registered charity aimed at providing emotional support to anyone in emotional distress, struggling to cope, or at risk of suicide throughout Great Britain and Ireland, predominantly through their telephone helpline, which is available 24/7 for those who need it.

[Papyrus UK](#) is a mental health charity specialising in supporting young people and they have great advice for parents and carers, both on their website. If you are unsure where to start, head to their website.

[Young Minds](#) is the UK's leading charity fighting for children and young people's mental health. As an organisation, they are fighting for a world where no young person feels alone with their mental health. They have a parents helpline and large bank of resources for parents who are unsure of how to best support their child's mental health.

[Switchboard](#) is a hotline, instant message and email service run by volunteers who all identify as LGBT+. They offer a safe space for anyone to discuss sexuality, gender identity, sexual health and emotional well-being.

Science Of Learning

Over the past five years at Cowes Enterprise College we have been consulting a wide range of research in order to guide our students in the best, research informed, approach to revision and study skills.

We have been heavily influenced by the work of the Learning Scientists.

<https://www.learningscientists.org/> who advocate six strategies for effective learning.



Content by Yana Weinstein [University of Massachusetts Lowell] & Megan Smith [Rhode Island College] | Illustrations by Oliver Caviglioli [teachinghow2s.com/cogsci] Funding provided by the APS Fund for Teaching and Public Understanding of Psychological Science

We have developed four Youtube videos which assist students in their learning and all are useful for revision approaches.

[How to follow the flashcard method of revision](#)

[How to take notes](#)

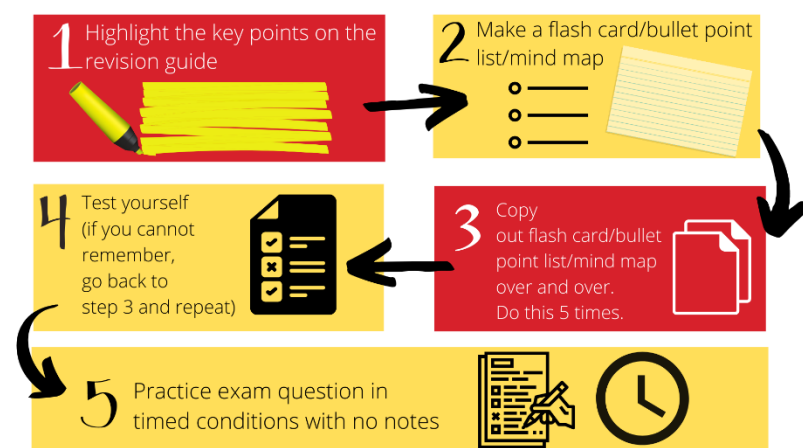
[How to create an effective mind map](#)

[Metacognition – how do I learn?](#)

The Flashcard Method

Study skills

How do I make and use flash cards to revise?

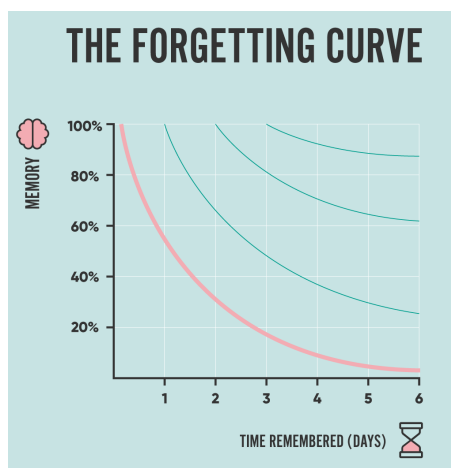


How do I take effective notes?

- Always start on a fresh page
- Make sure your writing is legible
- Use wide margins
- Use symbols and diagrams
- Prioritise new information
- Colour coding helps you to link colour with your memory
- You could also use a highlighter pen to highlight key words, dates, and definitions
- You shouldn't mistake highlighting your notes for revision

We spend time in lessons creating flashcards with students to help start them off with their revision. Above is the five step method we use to make sure flashcards are used to their full potential. We must be careful that students follow all five steps and don't stop at step 2.

Creation of flashcards can be very satisfying for students – whether that be because they enjoy creating a thick stack of cards or make them aesthetically pleasing with lots of colours and diagrams. However if the student doesn't then review and test themselves leading up to tackling exam questions the job is not done! As a result the information won't be retained in the long term memory.



The forgetting curve is a mathematical formula by Hermann Ebbinghaus that originated in 1885. The curve demonstrated the rate at which information is forgotten over time if we don't attempt to retain it.

Learners will rapidly lose their memory of learned knowledge in a matter of days or weeks unless the information is consciously reviewed. Some studies suggest that humans forget approximately 50% of new information within an hour of learning it. That increases to an average of 70% within 24 hours.

We talk to students often about the forgetting curve. If material is not reviewed often, starting soon after it is first learnt, it very quickly is forgotten. The purpose of revision, especially little and often, is to combat this downward curve. The flashcards provide short, bitesize reminders of information that is easily transportable and reviewed. They fit in the blazer pocket!

Where to Start with GCSE Revision? Practical Revision Tips: Help Your Child to Get the Most Out of Their Revision

The starting point for students will be the revision booklet and the mock exam timetable that was shared with you and your child last half term.

This helps students make a start with revision. Often students most struggle with where and how to start. We encourage students to turn to the subjects in the revision booklet they most need to work on. This could be subjects that they wish to continue next year and so need to achieve a certain grade or their weakest subject according to the last report or assessment.

Students will naturally want to start revising their strongest subjects as they will find this revision easier and almost enjoyable! Encourage students to ensure they spend time at the start of each revision session tackling the content they find tricky first whilst their brain is freshest.

1. Encourage them to take a "little and often" approach to studying. Studies have shown that students learn a lot more when they work for concentrated, short bursts every day, rather than cramming on one day for hours at a time.
2. Read up on different learning strategies. Implementing proven techniques such as "[interleaving](#)" can help your child to optimise their time spent revising. Interleaving focuses on improving knowledge retention, through switching between topics and returning to them at later dates. By revisiting topics more often, students will become more regularly exposed



to concepts and will be able to build upon their knowledge of them more easily.

3. Help your child to research online resources. As online learning has become more common, various websites have offered up online learning tools to help students make the most of their time at a computer or on their phone. Be sure to download past papers, mark schemes and subject specifications from exam board websites so that everything stays relevant to assessments. Find the exam boards we use [here](#).



4. Introduce your child to different revision techniques. The “[Pomodoro](#)” technique was developed in the late 1980s, and is shown to be an extremely effective way to work. It helps to break up stretches of work into manageable chunks, by studying to a 25 minute timer with a 5 minute break in between each round. This can help your child to focus to do more worthwhile revision.



5. Encourage your child to keep healthy revision habits. Different students react to revision stress in different ways, so it’s important to keep an eye on how your child is feeling. If your child is overworking themselves, it may be time to step in and get them to take an hour or two off - this time to rest can be just as important as the revision itself.



Help! My Child Just Won't Revise!

Parents regularly ask teachers “How can I make my child revise?” around GCSE exam periods.

Instead of threatening students with punishments, such as taking away their access to technology, or banning social activities, you really want to drive a focus on intrinsic motivation to revise - where a child is motivated to revise for its own sake and their own personal rewards.

Take your teenager somewhere new to revise

Sitting in a bedroom, surrounded by the same four walls, reading from the same four textbooks certainly isn't our idea of a great day or an effective learning technique. The good news is that revision doesn't have to be boring, and bad days do not have to correlate with GCSE revision.

Of course, revision locations are limited when you don't have the freedom to drive. This is where you can step in.

Why not offer to take your child to a cafe with Wifi, hot drinks and enough room to study? A change of setting can be great for the brain, and often motivate us to explore new ways to achieve our goals. By letting your child choose where to go will be empowering, and help them to feel like they're completely in control of their success.

The chances are, they'll also see adults working with their laptops too - sending a hugely important message that hard work is something that we choose to do, to achieve success throughout our lives.

Explore solutions to overcome revision problems based on your own experiences

Possibly one of the worst things you can do to a revision-reluctant teenager is make them feel guilty for not studying. This will only cause resentment, even when you offer practical solutions to help.

Maintain an open and honest relationship before the intense study period so they don't feel overwhelmed when the time comes to step up revision for upcoming exams.

Think back to how you felt when you were revising whilst you were at school, and how you can relate to their situation. Discuss ways that you used to overcome hurdles in your motivation and reassure them that you'll be there for them every step of the way.

If your children can see a specific example where you were able to overcome similar difficulties and get to where you are today, then they'll be more motivated to be proactive in their learning throughout the year.

Consider that your child might not be "lazy" after all

You might be wondering how to motivate a lazy teenager - but what you might not be considering is the real reason why your child is being "lazy" - or if it is even laziness you're dealing with in the first place.

Anxiety is often a common reason for children to refuse to be productive. However, if you can resolve anxiety issues and reduce the stress they are under, you can gradually help them to build up the time spent on studying for their GCSEs out of school.

Young people are often 'catastrophising'; they believe they will fail spectacularly. Help them look at the true evidence regarding their hard work, so they can challenge irrational thinking.

Help your children 'problem solve' and form a plan so that even if their results are not what they hope for, there are options and a future. Remind them that they will feel satisfied if they know they have tried their best, and to achieve this they need a healthy balance of revision and relaxation."

Treat your children like you'd like to be treated after a difficult day

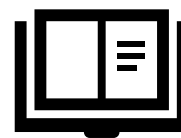
Although bribery isn't a good idea there is nothing wrong with treating your child after a hard day at school.

Exams can be some of the most stressful days of our lives. Just as you'd appreciate someone running you a hot bath when you've had a tough day, a slice of cake after a hard day at school is definitely well-deserved.

This kind of support is integral to allow your child to reset so they aren't afraid or anxious to make a start on revision.

If you need more help to motivate your child please contact the pastoral team where we can conduct a 'round robin' of the child's teachers to get a picture of how they are presenting in class in terms of their motivation to work and any ideas we have which may be effective.

Revising for GCSEs: Using Past Papers Effectively



Most teachers will agree that doing as many GCSE past papers as possible and going over each subject's specification before the exam will be beneficial.

Feedback Loops

Past papers can be a great way to identify your child's weaknesses, especially in the first few that they do. When your child first starts doing them, it's a good idea to have them complete each question and then check it against the mark scheme straight away. Checking the answers immediately shortens the 'feedback loop' - feedback is crucial to learning and its value is far greater if applied instantly, so check their answers against the mark scheme right away, not 2 hours or 2 days later!

Past papers do come with a health warning. By placing all the emphasis on past papers students are revising what is least likely to come up again this year! Try and use past papers and apply it to topics that are challenging by re-wording questions to fit topics that did not come up in previous years.

Becoming familiar with the command words, such as "explain" and "describe", that are used in past papers helps to limit the chance of them misunderstanding the question. This can also help to make students feel at ease when it comes to taking the exam, as they will understand instantly what is being asked of them. Frustratingly the exam command words can have slightly different demands depending upon the subject. This is where it is important to consult the subject specific guidance on 'how to' answer the exam paper guide.

Insight or Examiner Reports

Pay close attention to the Examiners' Comments - these can be found for every past paper online, often in an "Insight Report". These will tell you where most students lost their marks, so you can see where your child may have made a similar misunderstanding to other students. It is also important to remember that if your child isn't sure about how well one of their answers would have done in an exam, or if they want advice on how to improve it, their teachers are always there to help.

For More Information

Please refer to the [school website](#) exam preparation section for more information. Specifically, information around our examination policies, links to revision sites as well as the exam support YouTube videos we have created.

We also have a [directory of staff contact details](#) should you wish to contact us to discuss anything related to your child during this stressful time.

We hope all of the guidance and advice offered in this booklet has highlighted the subtle ways that you can help to support and guide your child through this exam year. A good set of GCSE grades will certainly provide your child with a passport to the next step in education. It may also provide your child with a profound sense of self-worth and accomplishment. Above all else, we hope you can help your child not only to develop a clear vision and focus but also to remain open and relaxed throughout this exam year.