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Stress Busters for SAT Tests and Sports Games

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With fall sports and the October 1 SAT test date right around the corner, teens are already getting sweaty palms.

Luckily, you can help them calm down. "Performing under a little bit of pressure gets us ready for the real situation," says University of Chicago psychologist Sian Beilock, author of *Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To* and of a new performance-failure study in the current issue of the journal *Emotion*. "Really it's practice *under pressure* that makes you perfect and ready. The military does this. The FBI does it."

So what can you do?

Simulate the big event. Whether it's a sports competition or the SAT, mimic the conditions. "We're not born as good or bad test takers," says Beilock. As *The New Yorker* reported in "[Getting Bin Laden](#)," the elite Navy SEALs (Sea, Air, and Land Teams) rehearsed in a simulated compound in Nevada but also had already been part of so many evening raids that they were like "mowing the lawn." So why not sign your kids up for timed practice SAT tests? Or, as one college coach did, make young basketball players feel free-throw pressure by getting them to shoot at an unexpected time – and with their fellow players forced to run if they miss, says Beilock.

Videotape sessions. "One reason athletes often crumble is all eyes are on them," says Beilock. If they know others might see them on film, they will get used to the idea of

performing in front of strangers.

Invite friends and family to practices. If they're going to be at the game, they should stop by earlier, too. That way your young athlete will get used to them.

Remind kids about why they should succeed. "Point to specific examples," says Beilock. "Remember that exam you aced? Remember all the hours you spent studying?" The SAT is testing basic knowledge. It's not asking a college applicant to suddenly sing like Alicia Keys.

Don't say, "relax." "What's better than saying 'calm down' is giving them the tools to calm down themselves," says Beilock. Sign them up for the timed practice tests. Encourage them to practice while others are watching.

Urge kids to write down their feelings. So-called journaling may help. And writing down concerns about a test 10 minutes before taking it, says Beilock. It "downloads the worries."

Avoid loading on extra pressure. "Students write, 'I'm worried my parents are going to kill me if I do badly on the SAT,'" says Beilock. Yikes. As one young athlete told me, "Your parents are the last people should be giving you stress." Reduce kids' anxiety by reminding them they can retake the test. They can also apply to prestigious schools, including Smith College, Wake Forest, American University, Bowdoin College, and Virginia Wesleyan, that don't require standardized tests. In fact, about 830 of the country's 2,430 accredited four-year colleges do not use the SAT or ACT to admit most of their applicants.

Don't dwell on nerves. Instead of wasting their time and energy on thinking about how nervous they are, kids should focus on catching the ball – and how they're going to do it.

Encourage kids to feel confident. Remember Muhammad Ali saying, "I am the greatest"? He believed it, and so did his competitors.

For more stories about college, read:

[Should You 'Help' Your Child with College Applications?](#)

[Surprising New Reasons Why Your Kids Should Go to College](#)

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