

Parents guide to coping with the 11+

Many parents of children taking the 11+ find the process stressful. Unlike most parts of the UK, Kent opted to retain grammar schools employing the 11+ as the main selection criteria. Unfortunately in some areas the alternatives are less appealing and the 11+ stress tends to be higher. This guide will help you and your child survive the 11+ process with less distress.

Parental stress is increased by the silence about the 11+ in many areas, especially where there is fierce competition for places, like Kent:

- It is not 'politically correct' to support a system based on 11+ tests
- Parents (and teachers) will often not discuss the 11+ openly
- Outside Kent the entrance tests are concealed by schools to prevent preparation and the tests are quite different to those set by Kent
- Good tutors are coveted and rarely shared
- Competition in Kent is fierce and is compounded by talented and well couched out-of-county children competing for the same places
- Information about appeals is hard to find.

Manage your own stress levels

You may not agree with selective education and feel that it is at best uncertain and at worst a "lottery".

Kent County Council operates a selective education scheme and to progress your child to a Grammar school they must take the 11+ tests and you have to plan for the best and worst outcomes with as much calm as you can.

Put the 11+ in context of good health, financial security and a roof over your heads and maintain perspective at all times - The 11+ is relatively low on the crisis scale.

Manage your child's stress

Children taking the 11+ experience stress during the process. Even if you are calm your child may not be and your child's motives for the 11+ may be different to yours.

The most important step to manage your child's stress is to reassure them of their future, regardless of the outcome of the 11+. It may be difficult to convince them that the alternative to a grammar school will be a good alternative for them, but convince them you must! Every school has strong points, and you must research them all thoroughly. Demonstrate you are in control of the situation and that you have their future securely mapped out.

Every child undertaking the 11+ needs to know that they are not a 'failure' if they are unsuccessful and that you are proud of them for all their hard work. A successful grammar selection is a bonus and not a validation of your relationship.

With the possibility of months of extra work for their child, parents often promise an expensive gift at the end of the process. This personal decision must consider the conditions set for the child to receive the gift. How will you both feel with non-selection if the gift is conditional on passing the 11+? It is the view of many parents that presents should reward *effort* and not achievement.

General Advice

'Practice, Practice and Practice' is a common axiom but that is not very helpful.

General Tips

Here are some revision tips for parents and children:

- Do not overload your child! Allow plenty of breaks, even if they're only 5 or 10 minutes long. This increases concentration and helps them to take it all in.
- Bear in mind that typically a child's attention span ranges between 30 minutes to 50 minutes. The build up needs to increase the attention span gradually.
- For each subject, create a fridge list of topics you need to cover.
- Revise in different places in the house, or even in a library makes taking the exam in a new place easier.
- Active revision is a great way to learn. Use plenty of past 11+ papers in as near exam conditions as possible.
- In the run up to the 11+ do the practice papers at the same time of day as the actual exam so your child mentally adjusts to peak performance at that time.
- Rewards! As each 11+ topic is finished or if a better mark than expected is achieved, why not have a mini-treat for your child and yourselves? Another way of doing it is to set a target and the reward if it's met.
- When doing practice 11+ papers, mirror the style that will be in the next test, it could be either the standard or multiple choice format. Kent now uses only multiple choice style exam papers.
- Doing 11+ papers under exam conditions shows if the student needs to work on their speed – as every mark counts.
- Mark test papers thoroughly to catch the silly mistakes made under timed conditions.
- Focus on the subjects your child is weaker in. Your child must pass all the papers and a top mark in one paper is of no value if another paper does not meet the pass mark.
- Focus your energy on studying rather than the result.
- Remember - Brain is muscle and needs recovery time after intensive use. It helps them during resting time if the talk is not about exams otherwise it is not a rest.
- Plenty of exercise and nutritious food is a must to keep brains in good working order – avoid sugary rewards!
- Make sure your child is sleeping properly so they are fresh and happy for gruelling days up to and during the 11+ tests. If they have trouble sleeping, a mug of hot chocolate helps, a long hot bath, or even an extra 15 minutes of television helps get their mind to relax.
- Make sure both parent and child have a good night's sleep before the 11+ exam as you have to keep each other calm!

- On exam days, have a good breakfast for energy, leave early so you arrive in plenty of time. This helps both of you to stay calm and composed and avoid conversations about things that are stressful.
- Talk constructively about the task ahead, preparing yourselves to face the challenge rather than avoiding it; that just increases the fear of the exam failure.
- If panic creeps in, stop thinking those self-defeating thoughts. Talk about that whatever happens you are proud of the efforts. All they need to do is to work calmly through the paper and do the best they can.

On Test Day

Before the test

- Keep your child off “high carbohydrates” such as pasta for the last few days before the tests. Foods, such as pasta, are good for physical energy, but can have the opposite effect on mental energy.
- Provide healthy food for your child – lots of fresh fruit, vegetables and oily fish, and make sure they drink plenty of water. Dehydration shrinks the brain.
- Ensure your child has a sensible bedtime, and consider opting out of out-of-school activities that will leave your child tired and grumpy the next day.
- If your child thrives on routine and responds badly to change, make sure everything continues as normal at home, from meal times to bath times.
- Make sure that your child has an analogue watch, or if they have a digital watch make sure they turn off any alarms on it before they go in to the test.
- Make sure that your child can calculate the finish time for the tests, based on any start time.
- Check whether pencils and erasers are provided for the test. Pencils must be HB hardness because most test papers are read electronically, and only a HB pencil will make a clear enough mark for it to be read. Pencils with a rubber on top can be useful so the child doesn't have to put their pencil down completely if they need to rub something out.

On the day of the test

- Leave plenty of time for the journey to school or to the test venue. If you are travelling a long distance, check the traffic reports before you set out.
- Make sure your child has a good breakfast. On the way to school give them a banana or other healthy snack to eat. This will keep their blood sugar up and aid concentration.
- Make sure that your child has their watch on – your child might not be able to see the clock in the exam room from where they are sitting. Schools vary in how they tell the children how many minutes are left. Some will announce “half-time”, some will announce five minutes, two minutes or one minute left. Invigilators can and do forget to make any announcements about time at all, so your child must take responsibility for timing the test as well.
- Make sure that your child has anything they usually rely upon, such as glasses or an inhaler. Give them a handkerchief in case of tears or sniffles.
- Prepare your child for the fact that some children may cry. Help them to understand that they must distance themselves from the emotions of other

children, even their friends. If necessary they can put up their hand to draw the invigilator's attention to the fact that the other child is upset, but they must then continue with their own test.

- Tell your child that they must not be distracted by anything that happens in the exam room. Things do go wrong during the test – fire alarms and car alarms go off by mistake, children are taken ill, invigilators come and go, etc. Unless and until they are told to stop working they must continue as if nothing is happening around them.
- If your child is taken ill during the test, ensure that the invigilator has made a note of it. Try to get written confirmation after the test from the school or admission authority that they have a record of what happened.

After the test

- Check with your child to see if anything significant went wrong, either for them personally or more generally in the exam room. The information could be crucial at an appeal.
- If there was disruption in the exam room, verify your child's report with other parents and call the school to discuss it. In most areas the invigilator is required to submit a report that shows any problems that occurred, and the report is then filed with the Admissions authority.
- Reassure your child that, however the test went, you are still proud of them and that you know they will do well at whichever school they attend. Take them out for a small celebration if you can!
- If you promised your child a gift, now might be the right time to give it to them to reinforce that the gift is for effort and not selection.

What if my child is ill on the day of the test?

- The advice in every area is the same – **do not allow your child to take the test if they are unwell**. If you would not normally have sent your child in to school with the same symptoms, do not take the risk of doing so on such an important day.
- Appeal panels do not have much sympathy for arguments such as: “He wanted to take the test with all his friends, so even though he wasn't 100 percent we let him go in to school”, or “She seemed almost better so we thought it was best to get it over and done with”.
- In some areas the advice given is to obtain a letter from your GP to state that your child was unwell and therefore not able to take the test.
- Make sure that you know beforehand who you have to notify in the event that your child is unable to take the test due to illness, and take that information with you if the test venue is not local to your home. Every area has reserve dates or other arrangements for children who miss a test to take it on another date.
- Make sure that you liaise closely with the school or Admission Authority over the arrangements for the new test. When will it take place? Where will your child sit the test? In areas where the tests are taken in primary schools it is not unknown for children to have the test sprung upon them quite unexpectedly, or to have to take the test in the Head Teacher's office, the school office or the dining room while lunch is being prepared.

