



How to Thrive at GCSE

Some Suggestions for Parents



November 2017

A couple of years ago, inspired not only by the excellent I/GCSE results achieved by Year 11 students last year but also by the way they conducted themselves through the study leave and examination period, I decided to ask them and their parents for their advice. As they had come through the process so well, I wanted to draw on their experience and expertise. I received many replies, full of helpful ideas. Many are focused more on Year 11 and the examination period, but others give advice on managing the two years successfully. I have tried to group the advice into topics to make it easier to use, and I hope you find it helpful. This advice is not definitive, and what works well for someone may be less successful for another, but I hope that you can use these suggestions as a starting point to find strategies that help you to support your daughter.

At the beginning of the school year we ask students in Middle School to think back on what they learned about managing school life over the last year, and then pass that advice to the year below. Your daughters will have been involved in that process recently, as well as last year, and I have included some of the advice given at the beginning of the booklet. You and your daughter may find this helpful too!

And finally I have included some extra advice from me at the end.

Those of you who attended the 'How to Thrive in Year 10 and Beyond' evening will also have heard some Lower Sixth students offer their guidance, and your daughters heard the same in an assembly.

I am really grateful to the girls and parents who took the time to share their suggestions and help other parts of our school community. I hope you find this useful, and would love to hear **your** suggestions of what works well, so please do let me know your suggestions and strategies you use to support your daughter.

Helen Nash
Head of Middle School

Advice to Students from Students in the Year Above

How to Thrive in Year 10: Top Tips from Year 11

Work

- Keep work organised and neat.
- Write down all of your homework - and do it all.
- Use your study periods to study: Get as much work done in them as you can and prioritise the work that needs to be done.
- Don't leave things to the last minute.
- You do actually do a lot of work in Year 10, and in Year 9 **science**.
- Get the **science** revision guides: LIFE SAVERS.
- Revise for tests and make good notes for them - and keep them. They're really useful for revising at the end of the year. Writing good notes for the end of year exams is helpful for Year 11 when you come to revise.
- Learn grammar for **languages** as you go - don't leave it to the end of the year.
- If you do **art**, photograph each page of your black sketchbook as you go along, so that if something happens to it, you still have copies of the pages. Also, always put in the maximum effort from the beginning of Year 10 even if you're spending more time on it than other subjects (but not to the point when it's ridiculously outbalancing others) because ultimately everything in your sketchbook is coursework and that's what your grade is almost completely made up of. I thought what I did in Year 10 wouldn't have much (or in fact any) role in my final grade, when actually my work from that year made up nearly half of it.
- If you do **geography**, take lots of notes on the trip.
- Try not to stress about exams.
- Speak to teachers if stressed.

Having a life

- Be busy, don't be lazy!
- Find a balance between activities and work - give yourself focuses other than work.
- It is definitely possible to keep activities going, so still join clubs and try new activities. Drama and sport are really good in Year 10 so make the most of it - you just need to balance time.
- Plan the Charity Dinner well. It's something to look forward to.

Look after yourself – and your friends

- Go to bed early and get lots of sleep – it really helps.
- Eat lots and healthily (and chocolate if you're depressed).
- Think about how others are feeling e.g. don't talk about how much/little revision you have done etc.
- Friendship groups will change - don't stress about it. Make new friends.
- Don't forget that your form is your support network.

How to Thrive in Year 11: Top tips from previous Year 11 students

ALWAYS take time to make notes before every end of unit science test. AND make your GCSE notes in the lead up to mocks (so Christmas holidays), then refine, add to and revise them during Easter before the real thing. If you start making your first proper notes at Easter, they'll probably be more rushed and less in depth. See writing notes as preparation for revision, not revision – have notes compiled before study leave. Making notes early made a huge difference for me- particularly in sciences and history where there is a lot of content to cover.

Mocks will be hard – understand that. Mocks are really important, because after them the real exams don't feel that scary anymore at all- once you've done one set in the sports hall it feels like you've done them all!

Do extracurricular activities! It really helps you stay calm and have some fun away from academic subjects. Additionally, they help you develop as a person so you come out of Year 11 with more than just an envelope with some letters in it! Being busy increased my motivation for work as I knew that when I was free, it was time to knuckle down and focus.

I recommend taking some time off at the beginning of the Easter holiday to pace yourself for the upcoming few months. I had 9 days of no revision at the beginning of the holidays which with hindsight was perhaps a little too long but 5 days of relaxing/sport/socialising really helps.

It was really easy to get swallowed into everyone else's stress, about whether you did too little revision compared to everyone else, or you just don't know as much as other people. Group studying can be useful, but it does need to be productive for it to work (it can still be fun though!). To avoid picking up on the stressful atmosphere, try to be confident in what you know and how much you had done, as you are the only one that can verify that you know what you need to.

Look out for one another. This is really important as friends' support really helps get you through. Stuff will go wrong - that's life. But don't panic!

During Study Leave

Have a 'revision zone'

- I think it is really important to find out what type of environment you can best work in. Whether that is at home, or at school, it should be found early on, so that you can best utilise your time to study. I personally preferred to work at school in the library, as I associated it with a work-only atmosphere. I could also go and find my teachers with questions. Even though study leave is offered, you shouldn't have to feel obliged to leave school, as long as you are using the time wisely, the studying can take place anywhere.
- I worked in Oxford Library and it was great – there were lots of people revising there from different schools and colleges and we created a friendly and supportive community!

Facebook groups can be helpful but beware spending too much time on social media!

Explore different ways of revising. For example, I learnt most subjects by writing notes and learning them, but I learnt history by teaching my mum all about Nazi Germany, and Latin/Greek set text by listening to a recording I made.

Ideas for revision timetables

- I prefer revising by time slots and not by tasks as it helps keep me focused/motivated and ensures I take enough breaks!
- During my revision period, I made a revision timetable so I knew how much of each subject I was doing, this really helped me to stay organised.
- Revision timetable with 'chunks' e.g. organic chemistry not just chemistry means you get started sooner rather than choosing what to revise!
- Don't try and revise all day, but do morning and afternoon and then have the evening off/morning and evening with afternoon off etc. because otherwise it is so easy to run out of steam and just stop.
- I never worked all day, and I tried to go for a run/walk every day, even just for 10 minutes, to clear my head and keep the blood flowing! I'd often see my friends or do something fun in the evening having worked in the day. This really helped as it meant I had something to look forward to, if not I would have no motivation to work. This might not work for everyone but I had a moderate lie-in till 10 then worked until 3 when I took an hour and a half off to watch television/relax. This gave me a good balance and I then worked with breaks for dinner till 8/9 depending.

Revise without parental incentives: this point is clearly individual as some may require more incentives to revise, however by not being "bribed" by my parents for a certain grade I knew that I was working hard for myself. Therefore my results were entirely my own - I wasn't revising for my parents - I did it all for me! There are also cases when you can't control the outcome, so it may be impossible to meet your parent's target. By not putting a figure on my "target" results, it meant that my aim was simply to do my best and my parents made it very clear that they would be proud of me no matter what, which helped decrease some pressure.

Finally, trust the school and the teachers...they really know what they're doing and will help each individual achieve their potential.

Advice to Parents from students and Parents who have been through GCSEs

Through the I/GCSE course

Y11 students say:

Do not compare your daughter to others - she needs to work to the best of her ability to achieve the best she can.

Don't make you daughter feel that GCSEs are the only things that will ever matter in her life.

Parents say:

We encouraged our daughter to read *Blame My Brain: the Amazing Teenage Brain Revealed* so she understood what her brain needed in order to function well. This included ideas on sleep hygiene, nutrition and exercise which I know the school highlighted to the girls. What the book does though is to go into more detail about 'why' it is so important. Through my work and studies, I am doing quite a bit of neuroscience and learning about how we can work 'with' our brain and helping it to code new information in a way that makes it easier to retrieve. Rather than 'telling' her what she should do, I suggested that she read some articles and books for herself and then we talked about them. After reading the book, she would go to bed earlier and have a warm drink of milk (something she has not had for years and years) - it seemed to help her to get to sleep.

Communication

If your daughter is worrying but doesn't want you to call School because she does not want you to fuss - call School!

If they have any concerns, encourage them to talk to you and/or her form teacher. It was because of all the support our daughter received from the school that she achieved such great results considering she was sick the first 4 months of Year 11.

Encourage your daughter to speak to her teacher if she is struggling or worried. The other suggestion I would have is to take up any offers to get extra help from teachers when you start to feel you are struggling. In Year 11 this was incredibly valuable. She would turn up to 'clinic' with a clear idea of what she needed to go over with the teachers and I know that several of them are now so proud of what she eventually achieved!

My advice to other parents is to regularly communicate with their daughter. Sit in her room and find out how things are going. Give them an opportunity to let off steam in a safe place.

When our daughter would be totally stressed and freaked out about her work load I would sit her down and prioritise her work with her. We focused her time and energy on what was being graded first and foremost. Then we looked at the date something needed to be turned in. Teachers understand!

Revision and Mocks

Let them make mistakes in Year 10 and don't worry if something goes wrong. If they try a particular revision technique that doesn't work, use it as a learning experience and help them find a better technique.

The most important thing she had to learn was to find a system of revision and learning that suited her. The system that she developed over the years was properly tested in the mock GCSE exams and was found to work. It was this topic that I asked her to work on over two or three years until she was satisfied that it worked for her and it seems to have been satisfactory.

Do please, when the time comes, encourage your children to use the mocks wisely and prepare properly for them so that they can be used as an effective tool to pinpoint any gaps that need addressing well ahead of the actual GCSE's.

Solid revision at mocks gives you a safety net if things go pear shaped later on. One of my children was very ill just before and during public exams, but had worked hard for Mocks, limiting the damage and some of the stress.

Plan Ahead

Organisation is the key. Try to get your daughter to make sure they have all the notes, specifications etc early on in the process - mocks are a really good time to make sure they have everything.

If I was to give any advice it would be that she started writing her 'revision notes' at the beginning of Year 10 – as each section/topic came to an end she would take the time to write down notes that she could use at the end of Year 11 as a start point for revision. This seemed tedious to her at times, and took some self-discipline on her part, but it both made sure she understood what had just been covered in class and also meant she didn't have to start from scratch prior to starting her serious revision for her mocks and her real exams.

I would also say that I think it would be useful for all students particularly in the run up to the last few months of Year 11 to make sure that they have all their coursework well planned and completed well ahead of time particularly in the arts courses so that there is no extra time pressure put on students during these crucial last few months (or term) and the students can then simply focus on the exam preparations themselves.

Extracurricular

She was also involved in extracurricular activities which is bound to be a stress reliever and a nice change from all the academic load - but how many extra demands each student can handle/balance varies per child.

We encouraged her to continue with her extracurricular interests even though it was a challenge to fit everything in at times. Our daughter had an incredibly busy Year 11 with *Les Mis*, a ballet show, riding and gymnastics regionals but I think it forced her to take a break from thinking about or studying for exams. She wasn't sure whether it was a good idea to be involved with *Les Mis* but I suggested that it would be better to drop a grade than not take part. As an ex graduate recruiter, I know that top firms can find it difficult to choose between all the A* candidates but those who have an interesting story to tell, will always stand out from the crowd - *Les Mis* is certainly a wonderful experience to talk about.

Limit too much family travel during school breaks that conflict directly with key exam preparation timings. Shorter trips or day trips out can offer the same benefit but can also allow enough time for student to feel good about their study opportunities.

Study Leave and the GCSE exam period

Year 11 students say:

Make sure your daughter has the right environment to study in
Don't keep asking if you think the revision is going in!!!

Make sure she is taking proper breaks and maybe arrange things to do to take her away from work; maybe have a big incentive like festival tickets or a small one that isn't so expensive but is still an incentive

My parents switched the Wi-Fi off during the day while I was revising, sounds very cruel I know but it really did work as I wasn't tempted to check my phone for two minutes which would inevitably turn into two hours!! However, my parents were very kind as they let me off doing jobs that I

usually do around the house so I could actually relax while I wasn't revising. They also made sure there were plenty of yummy (yet healthy!) snacks in the fridge that I could easily grab without wasting time procrastinating by spending half an hour making a snack!

Parents say:

Revision Timetables

Time spent producing a really good revision timetable, perhaps weighting exams according to difficulty, fact-learning load, and balancing subjects, etc, really helps everyone feel in control. We helped with making a revision timetable, dissecting each subject into topics then subtopics so that each subtopic was sizeable enough to get through in one go. Each was ticked off at the end of the revision slot or was credited with an* if needed more attention. This seemed to really help our daughter plan how much she needed to get through as the sheer volume of work seemed daunting but much less so at the end of the planning process. I would say this was the absolute key to helping her mentally because she could clearly see what she had got through and which topics needed top up revision.

A great piece of advice someone else gave me was to have her work to a schedule of set work times and break times. Sometimes I had to force her to take breaks but when she stuck to her schedule she would get through a lot of work.

Try to treat studying like a job and work solidly from 8am - 5pm. Then use the rest of the day as free time to do fun things to reduce some of the stress. Most importantly, Sleep! Sleep! Sleep!

During the revision period it is quite helpful to divide the day into 3 hour sessions, morning 9-12, afternoon 1-4 and evening 6-9 and suggest the your daughter only works for 2 out of those 3 sessions. The other block she should meet up with friends or relax - this avoids endless unproductive hours of revision and gives them an end point.

Our daughter found it much more useful to work for 50 mins and have a break rather than the short periods suggested by school, otherwise you can end up with so many breaks nothing gets done – it's important your daughter works out which schedule works for her.

Revision Support

All I can say is that we put our daughter under no pressure at all to study but made sure she had the time and facilities to do so! She kept a careful written record of the hours spent on each subject which helped to prevent her indulging in the subjects she favoured! We also made sure she took time out each day to relax, either a trip out, or seeing friends, a film etc. and we allowed her to time manage this herself so that she had control of the own study time.

I tried to be reasonably cheerful and relaxed and not ask too many questions. I was at home as much as possible during my daughter's study leave, it was actually rather a nice time for me, I got to see her by herself which was lovely! If parents are working going in to school to revise might be better as it is a lonely business and our daughter went in a few times when she needed to see her friends.

Let her determine the best place for her to study. It may be at home, it may be the local library, it may be school.

Be there to help them IF needed/asked. Our daughter made a list of history dates and I sat with her for hour upon hour going through the information and making her think about how the different activities were connected. I also helped her with RPE quotes trying to help develop silly techniques to help her remember them.

There was a lot of discussion between my wife and I as to how to support our daughter through this process. I think we got it wrong at the beginning by almost trying to help too much. She absolutely did not want to be pampered. Constantly asking her how's it going, does she want anything, isn't it time to do a bit more etc etc did not help her. After a couple of weeks of her revising you got to know how hard she was working, and when she was working we found the best policy was to leave her alone and just support her when she needed it, you just know when this is,

it's a natural parental instinct. Intermittently interrupting her asking was she hungry, did she want a drink was just a distraction to her and just added to the stress, so we stopped doing it. When she had a break from revision then that's the time to jump up and ask her what she wants, food drink etc. We found that there is absolutely no point in asking her what she was revising and trying to get involved in her work, as she reacted as if we were testing her which was not the intention. It is a very stressful time and an innocent comment from us suddenly can be taken the wrong way. This is when you just have to step back.

Phones and laptops out of the room unless for past papers!

We provided lots of healthy smoothies instead of quick fix carbs.

We encouraged our daughter to do 10/15 min bursts of favourite exercise clips on you tube a couple of times a day to stay energised!

Some other useful guidance

Help your daughter to write emails to outside sports clubs and other non- GCSE commitments when she feels she has to miss a session or indeed season. It can be a relief to them not to have to word it themselves. Stay with them until they have pressed SEND.

Not rewarding (or expecting) the achievement of a specific grade - which is not totally within the control of the student - but instead, to communicate that I was happy if she felt that she had tried her best i.e. *influence* her grades . Even though our daughter achieved amazing grades, we have not rewarded her as I want her to take ownership of this herself rather than thinking that she did any of this for her parents. Of course she knows that we were delighted and proud of *her* achievement but they were *her* grades.

We encouraged our daughter not to work so hard and to come on days out etc. I believe that most of the girls apply more than enough pressure to themselves so don't think that parents need to add to it. From talking to friends who have sons, this tip may not be that helpful to the parents of boys! I also encouraged her to take regular exercise breaks (which helps the brain to strengthen new neural connections) and to still help around the house. She was happy that we didn't add any pressure for her to work harder indeed quite the reverse.

Overall, we tried to keep a sense of perspective. Yes, the exams were important but you still needed to live your life too and in a few years' time, who would ever ask you how many A*'s you received! We didn't ever have a 'melt-down' during the exams nor did it ever feel horribly tense so hopefully that approach made a difference.

The final tip is to trust the school and subject teachers - the true experts

And afterwards...

After the exams we didn't discuss them very much, better to move on. I also reminded my daughter that she had worked very hard and should do well but if there was a problem at GCSE level it is all fixable. Definitely don't go on about how much more difficult they were when we did them!

Some Year 11s can be 'challenging' when the GCSEs are over and adrenaline levels slump and they are either really tired and grumpy or want to party non-stop, or both. Don't take it personally - it's just a reaction to working so hard.

And finally...

Some advice for Parents from school

The most important advice has already been given by parents and students who have just gone through the experience – and done so brilliantly! I would just like to reiterate/reinforce a couple of points:

- **The importance of encouraging your daughter to get a good work/life balance through these two years (and beyond!).** Encourage her to do sport, drama, music – whatever she

enjoys. It is so important for your daughter NOT to work all the time but to plan in time to do something she loves and have some balance in her life. Help her to keep a sense of perspective!

- **The negative effects of comparison.** In a school full of bright, ambitious students, they do a lot of comparing their results with one another, and this is not helpful. We want them to chart their own progress, not compare themselves to one another! Please don't ask your daughter how her friends did, or whether her mark was low for the group. If any teacher has a concern, he or she will raise it and reports and Parents' Meetings will keep you informed of your daughter's progress on a regular basis. If you have any concerns, please let us know.

If any of you are interested in having an insight into the mysteries of the teenage brain, I can recommend a [TED talk](#) by Professor Sarah-Jayne Blakemore:

And for parents in Year 11

The Michaelmas term feels really intense, building up to the mocks. Students need to pace themselves and work steadily. This is a busy – and long – term. They should remember their useful guidance to Year 10 and build up revision notes for tests as they go along.

Encourage your daughter to talk to subject teachers, who will offer the support needed, individually or through the many lunchtime support clinics on offer. They need to take control of their own learning: see where they need help and go to teachers. I would encourage you to support your daughter in this proactive and independent approach to their studies. I have it on good authority that once the exams start in May, it does get better. Year 11s have said that they actually enjoy the exam period; they feel prepared and ready. When they go on study leave they can revise at home or in school, in supervised study rooms, and are given a special room as their base.

Healthy Habits:

Eat properly: I'm a great believer in chocolate – but not all the time. We all need to eat well and drink enough to stay fit and healthy.

Get enough sleep: teenagers should be having around 9 hours sleep; sleep disruption leads to problems with appetite and cognitive functions. I know how busy our students are and appreciate how difficult it is to get an early night, but sleep needs to be prioritised. Here are some tips for how to improve sleep, from Professor Russell Foster. His [TED talk](#) on sleep is available here:

- No caffeine after lunch
- Keep the bedroom dark and not too warm
- Avoid bright lights 30 minutes (some experts say 60 minutes) before sleep, including TV/computers/mobiles etc. Encourage your daughter to turn off mobile phone before bed and, as I have advised previously, preferably charge it in another room overnight.

Get some exercise.