

Don't say 'just do your best'

What your child actually needs to hear before the PSLE



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It is just days before the PSLE, and you want nothing more than to be your child's biggest cheerleader. You offer what feels like the ultimate comforting phrase: "Just do your best."

Yet, to your Primary 6 child sitting in the pressure cooker of final revision, those well-meaning words can easily translate into: "Your best had better bring home an A1."

With the written PSLE papers commencing on Sept 24, this scene could well be playing out in homes across Singapore.

Watching your 12-year-old face her first big academic milestone naturally brings a wave of worry and a desire to calm her nerves. Yet, during this period, even the best-meaning words can sometimes feel like extra weight on her shoulders.

To bridge this gap, here are tips on how to encourage your child without adding extra pressure in the lead-up to the exams. They are just as relevant for parents supporting children through year-end assessments at other levels.

WHEN PANIC STRIKES IN THE FINAL STRETCH

As the countdown ticks away, your child's confidence can suddenly give way to panic: "I'm going to fail" or "My mind has gone blank". When these moments hit, focus on physical and emotional grounding rather than debating the facts.

Ong Xuan Wan, head of department for science at Dazhong Primary School and a recipient of the President's Award for Teachers 2026, has three children aged six to 11. She notes that every parent-child relationship is unique, and every child responds differently.

When her eldest child gets anxious, Ong says she acknowledges his feelings first to separate his identity from temporary panic. She starts gently: "I know it feels overwhelming now..."

When sudden panic strikes him, she uses grounding words such as: "You've been working on this, it's in you. Trust the preparation you have put in."

Ong also teaches her children simple physical actions, such as taking slow, deep breaths, to calm themselves down.

She adds: "I use a blend of these methods depending on what they need – sometimes it's a quick physical grounding reset, other times, it's just quiet reassurance."

Experts at the National Institute of Education (NIE) agree that a parent's calm presence is key to de-escalating panic.

John Wang, co-founder of NIE's Motivation in Educational Research Laboratory, advises that you keep your voice slow and calm, use short sentences and avoid arguing with your child's fear.

He suggests saying "I can hear that you're really frightened right now. Let's pause together", or "Put both feet on the floor. Take one slow breath with me".



Ong Xuan Wan, recipient of the President's Award for Teachers 2026, with Primary 6 pupils at Dazhong Primary School, where she is head of department for science. She has three children aged six to 11, and teaches them simple habits such as packing their stationery early and prioritising a full night's sleep to calm pre-exam jitters. PHOTO: MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

He also recommends asking your child to look around and name one thing she can see, hear or feel, or reminding her: "Your mind feels blank because you're panicking; that feeling does not prove that you know nothing."

Adding to this perspective, Gregory Arief D. Liem, assistant centre director at NIE's Science of Learning in Education Centre, says that you do not need to eliminate your child's worry entirely before helping her feel capable. Anxiety, after all, is a normal response to an important event.

Instead, he suggests keeping encouragement specific and truthful: "Remember those questions you used to get stuck on? You can now solve them well. That is something you have learnt, even if you don't feel confident right now."

Grounding confidence in real progress is far better than offering empty promises like "You'll do well", which he cautions that no

one can guarantee.

Above all, your child should never feel that your love hinges on achieving a particular score, says Liem.

He highlights the fundamental message every 12-year-old needs to hear: "Whatever the result, we will work out the next step together. Mummy and daddy will always love and care for you, no matter how you do in the PSLE."

FOCUS ON WHAT CAN STILL BE DONE

While some children battle pre-exam jitters, others face a different struggle. With the PSLE just days away, one of the hardest challenges facing parents is supporting a child who fell short on preparation and did not put in enough effort. Saying "You've done your best" feels dishonest, yet last-minute lectures only trigger panic and the child shutting down.

RIGHT FIT FOR THE SITUATION

I use a blend of these methods depending on what they need – sometimes it's a quick physical grounding reset, other times, it's just quiet reassurance.



ONG XUAN WAN, head of department for science at Dazhong Primary School and mother of three. When panic strikes her children, she acknowledges their feelings and uses grounding words. She also teaches them simple physical actions to calm themselves down.

Rather than pretending that preparation was sufficient, Wang suggests being transparent while keeping your child focused on what she can still control. "I'm not going to tell you that you've done your best when you know you haven't. But blaming you now won't help. There is still time to make a sensible difference. Let's choose two high-priority tasks, do them carefully, and then make sure you sleep."

If her child feels under-prepared for an exam, Ong focuses on trading fault-finding for low-hanging fruit. Instead of pushing complex, high-stress paper sets at this late stage, she will help him target bite-size, high-yield wins like revisiting core concepts and reviewing past corrections.

Set up a simple routine – such as 30 minutes of study followed by a short break – to maintain discipline without creating fatigue right before the exam.

CLOSING THE PARENT-CHILD PERCEPTION GAP

Under the weight of exam stress, well-meaning words can easily be misunderstood. What a parent intends as an encouraging push can be perceived by a 12-year-old as conditional love or an impossible standard.

Here is a breakdown of common phrases, how children interpret them, and better ways to reframe these words.

What parents say: "Just do your best!" (Intended as gentle reassurance)

What the child may hear: "Anything below the score you expect means I didn't try."

What parents can say instead: "Let's focus on the preparation and effort you can still control. We'll support you, whatever the result."

CONTINUED on C2

Choosing the right words immediately after a paper



To spur revision, experts advise acknowledging areas the child still has difficulty with and helping him identify areas to practise. PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK

FROM C1

What parents say: “You should know this by now.” (Intended to spur review)

What the child may hear: “I’m stupid and I’ve disappointed you.”

What parents can say instead: “This part is still difficult. Let’s identify what you understand and what would be most useful to practise.”

What parents say: “You’re so smart. This should be easy!” (Intended to build confidence)

What the child may hear: “If I struggle with a question, it means I’m not actually smart.”

What parents can say instead:

“Some questions may be difficult. You can work through effective strategies and do them step by step.”

What parents say: “Your friends are revising more than you.” (Intended to motivate)

What the child may hear: “I’m falling behind and being measured against everyone else.”

What parents can say instead: “Let’s focus on your individual growth so you aim for your own peak, not someone else’s.”

What parents say: “We’ve spent so much on tuition.” (Intended to encourage seriousness)

What the child may hear: “I owe my parents a good score to repay their investment.”

What parents can say instead: “We arranged support to help you learn. Tell us what has helped and what you still need.”

ON THE EVE OF AN EXAM

By now, the focus must shift entirely from active revision to rest, self-care and emotional calm.

To help take the pressure off during this final stretch, Wang recommends comforting phrases such as “You have prepared steadily, and today is for looking after yourself, not proving your worth”. Or, “It’s understandable to feel nervous. We don’t need to get rid of the feeling; we can make space for it and still feel ready”.

Liem suggests focusing your praise on effort and effective learn-

ing habits.

For example, you can say: “I noticed how you took time to understand your mistakes this week. That was useful work.” But make sure you do not tack on: “So you should do well tomorrow.” Praise is most effective, he adds, when it acknowledges learning without piling on another expectation to meet.

Beyond choosing the right words, routines play an equally important role in calming pre-exam jitters. Ong teaches her children simple habits like packing stationery early and prioritising a full night’s sleep.

To keep anxiety at bay during the paper itself, she will go over exam strategies with them, such as circling difficult questions to revisit later.

POST-EXAM: WHAT NOT TO SAY AFTER THE PAPER

The moment children step out of the examination hall, their nervous system is still coming off a high-stress event.

How you navigate these post-exam moments can either soothe your child’s lingering anxiety or spark unnecessary distress.

AVOID ‘HOW DID YOU DO?’ AND ‘WAS IT HARD?’

While these questions spring from natural curiosity, Wang and Liem point out that asking them immediately after an exam feels like an evaluation.

Your child may hear “Did you meet my expectations?” or “Did you make mistakes?”, forcing her to replay a performance she can no longer change.

Instead, give her room to decompress with a simple check-in: “You’re back. How are you feeling?”

If your child initiates a discussion about the paper, focus on her experience rather than predicting her grade. Ask: “Which part felt most manageable?” or “Which section took the most effort?”

SKIP BRUSH-OFFS LIKE ‘DON’T WORRY, IT’S OVER’

Telling your anxious child to stop thinking about a paper seems practical enough, but it ignores how she is feeling.

Wang and Liem note that this can signal to your child that she should be able to switch off her emotions on command, leaving her feeling unheard.

Wang advises validating your child’s feelings rather than trying to fix them on the spot. Skip dismissive lines such as “There’s nothing you can do about it now” or “Just focus on the next subject.”

Instead, try a more empathet-

ic response: “I know the paper is over, but I can see you’re still feeling worried. You don’t have to stop feeling anxious right away. Tell me what’s on your mind, and we can figure out together what will help you feel calmer for the next step.”

Liem suggests offering simple options for a change of pace – taking a walk, sharing a snack or just resting – while staying fully present to listen.

If your child expresses anxiety like “I’ve ruined everything”, taking her distress seriously does not mean agreeing with her statement.

You can acknowledge her frustration while keeping the exam in perspective, reassuring her: “You don’t have to carry this worry alone.”

RESIST EMPTY REASSURANCES

When your child comes home deflated, crying, “Everyone said science was easy except me” or “My classmate finished 30 minutes early”, resist the urge to offer empty predictions like “I’m sure you did better than them”.

Wang advises acknowledging your child’s disappointment. “That sounds really discouraging. It’s hard to hear others say a paper was easy when it didn’t feel that way to you.” Then, gently separate comparison from reality: “Finishing early doesn’t mean someone wrote a better answer. People work at different speeds.”

Ong practises this same approach at home, validating her children’s feelings first when they start measuring themselves against their peers.

“I encourage them to aim for their personal best instead of comparing themselves with friends,” she says. “What matters is keeping their confidence intact for the remaining papers.”

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