



A Guide to Testing FOR PARENTS



Log On. Let's Talk.
www.ets.org/letstalk

Listening. Learning. Leading.



A Guide to Testing

FOR PARENTS



*Listening.
Learning.
Leading.*

Introduction

As parents, you are faced with questions every day. Your children turn to you for answers. But when it comes to answering questions about testing — like how to understand the tests and how to help your children prepare for them — where do you turn? Where do you get the facts and information to help your kids?

This ETS guide is for you, the concerned parent who wants to know about standardized tests and testing, and to understand how scores are used and why tests matter. You will learn about different types of tests, how to help your children prepare for the tests, and why tests are important for helping your children's educational experiences be the best that they can. We've also included a glossary of commonly used terms to help you.

TESTS ARE PART OF LIFE

Being “put to the test” is part of life. We are tested on our skills and abilities in many ways, from grade-school spelling bees to driver’s license exams, college entrance exams, and even professional certifications.

Tests are valuable tools that help ensure we are adequately prepared for various aspects of life. Since we — and our children — will encounter them often, it is important to understand them and to realize that different tests serve different purposes.

Most school-age children are familiar with achievement tests, those exams that determine what students know and don’t know about a specific subject. These can be classroom tests, prepared by a teacher specifically for that class, to find out if students are learning the material being taught. Another example of an achievement test is an Advanced Placement® (AP®) test, which measures what students have learned in a course given in high school for which college credit may be obtained.

STANDARDIZED TESTS

In order to ensure that large populations of students are tested equitably and fairly, it is often necessary to standardize tests. A standardized exam is simply one that tests similar information under the same testing conditions. For example, all test takers (with the exception of those with certain disabilities) must be given the same amount of time to complete their exams and must have a quiet, controlled testing environment.

The way students’ test scores are analyzed depends on the type of test. A norm-referenced test compares a student’s score with a norm group, or particular group of students — for example, a representative cross section of all eighth-graders in the country who have taken the same test.

A criterion-referenced test measures a student’s performance against specific standards — for example, the academic content standards set by a given state. Once a test’s purpose is defined according to the knowledge and skills that will be tested, one of these types of tests is chosen.

Tests are
valuable tools.

What You Should Know about Different Tests and How They Are Scored

There are many kinds of tests. It's important to understand the differences and to recognize the strengths and weaknesses among them.

This section will introduce you to different types of tests and will provide guidance about what kinds of tests are appropriate for use in different situations. (NOTE: It is possible for a test to fit into more than one of the below categories.)

ACHIEVEMENT TESTS – Millions of achievement tests are given in the United States every year, ranging from classroom quizzes and final exams, to tests of driving skills and many college admissions examinations.

OBJECTIVE SCORING – When test answers are scored without the possibility of personal bias or subjectivity, the process is known as objective scoring. This occurs when student responses are matched to an answer key, typically via machines.

The major advantages of machine-scored tests are reliability and efficiency. Scoring machines are oblivious to the race, gender, ethnicity, native language, and appearance of the test takers. This helps make the tests fairer than if scored by subjective means.

Students usually can answer the questions on these tests relatively quickly, which allows them to answer more questions about a wider variety of content than tests that require handwritten responses and that are, in turn, scored by hand.

STANDARDS-BASED TESTS –

Assessments that test knowledge against a specific, known set of standards are referred to as standards-based tests. Student performance on these types of tests is measured against clearly stated standards.

SUBJECTIVE SCORING – Often, human judgment is required to accurately score test answers. The following three types of tests often require subjective scoring: constructed-response, essay, and performance.



A Guide to Testing

FOR PARENTS

CONSTRUCTED-RESPONSE TESTS –

With these tests, students must provide their own answers to test questions rather than select from among several answers provided for them. Constructed-response test questions typically take the form of “short answer” or “fill-in-the-blank.” Many constructed-response tests require grading assistance from highly trained scorers. Essay tests and performance tests are two types of constructed-response tests.

ESSAY TESTS – On

essay tests, students write sentences or paragraphs in response to questions.

Essay tests are necessary and useful for directly measuring writing skills. But for use in testing subject knowledge, they may conceal what a student actually knows about a subject, producing misleading results. For example, two students with equal knowledge about the U.S. Revolution are not likely to receive equal scores if one student writes well and the other writes poorly.

PERFORMANCE TESTS – With perform-

ance tests, students perform tasks rather than answer discrete questions. Examples include driving a car, speaking a foreign language,

painting a picture, or teaching a class. How well people can perform these tasks cannot be determined solely by answering questions.

How Good Tests Can Help Children

We all want our children to receive good educations. But how do we make sure children are learning the skills and gaining the knowledge they need to succeed in college, on the job, and in life?

Many states set standards for what students must learn and then measure students' progress, holding students and teachers responsible for the results. In fact, the federal No Child Left Behind Act requires every state to produce annual report cards that provide information on their student achieve-

ment levels. (For more information on No Child Left Behind, visit <http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/>)



A Guide to Testing

FOR PARENTS

TESTS PROVIDE ANSWERS

Educational assessments, designed to make sure that school curricula are being taught and that standards are being met, are essential for measuring progress and for providing feedback to students, teachers and parents.

Tests provide answers, not all the answers, but they help teachers make better instructional choices for their students.

Combined with students' grades and with what teachers can report from reviewing students' classwork, educational assessments can help parents understand how well students are learning, both individually and compared to their peers. Good tests identify strengths as well as weaknesses.



VALID, RELIABLE AND FAIR

In order for tests to be considered good — or even useful — they must be valid, reliable and fair.

For example, a standardized test is valid if it is closely linked to a set of standards through the content and skills it is measuring. The questions must clearly measure what students are required to learn.

A test also must be “reliable,” producing consistent scores among different testing conditions or versions used.

Finally, so that tests are fair for all test takers, test makers must examine a test's results to ensure that the test is working the same way for all test takers. For example, the language and wording of test questions must be free of cultural, racial, ethnic, gender, and other forms of bias that may inappropriately affect students' performance.

TESTING ...

ONE PART OF THE SOLUTION

Tests are certainly an important part of children's educational experience. But by themselves, tests can no more improve learning than thermometers can cure patients. Thermometers help detect if a patient has a fever, but a treatment plan must be developed for relief to be had. Likewise, tests provide useful information, but there must be supports in place — such as quality teachers, good curricula, and excellent standards — to transform score results into learning events.

Tests provide
useful information

Good Tests Can ...

- ... identify individual or classroom strengths and weaknesses in subject areas, allowing teachers to tailor their lesson plans to focus more on areas of study where students need the most work.
- ... allow schools, school districts, and states to identify areas of need and to target extra help to schools in need.
- ... help parents better understand where their children are succeeding and where they need extra help.
- ... help determine whether schools and school districts are meeting the standards set by their state.



Questions to Ask Your Children's Teachers and Schools

- What tests are being used? Why?
- Did my child have the opportunity to learn the subject matter before the test was given?
- What kind of preparation can we be doing at home?
- What can I do if my child does not score well on the test?
- How is the school performing as a whole? Have scores declined? Have they improved?
- When can I see my child's test results?

How You Can Help Your Children Prepare

- Encourage your children and praise their accomplishments. If they feel confident about themselves, they will want to do well.

- Keep books, magazines and newspapers in your home, and visit your public library regularly. Reading is one of the best ways to learn new words and ideas — and this will prove helpful on tests.

- Provide a quiet, comfortable place and time for studying at home.

- Make sure your children do not miss many school days. The more children are involved in their classes, the more likely they are to do well on tests.



- Meet with your children's teachers regularly to discuss your children's progress. Ask teachers to suggest activities for you and your children to do at home to help improve their schoolwork and prepare for tests.
- Make sure your children know what will be covered on their tests and that they are aware of the exact date and time of their exams.
- Know when test results will be available, and establish a time when you and your children will review and discuss the outcomes together.

Understanding Test Score Language

Once children complete a test, the next step is to receive and understand test results. The score reports for various tests can look different and contain different language, but here are some commonly used terms:

- A **raw score** refers to the number of questions answered correctly on a test — for example, 20 out of 25 correct.
- A **scaled score** table is used to convert raw scores to scaled scores, in order to ensure that results from different parts of the test can be interpreted into one score. Scaled scores are useful for reporting changes over time. Results for individual students are often reported in terms of scaled scores, while mean or average scaled scores are used for groups of students. For example, the scaled score for the verbal or math section of the SAT® is between 200 and 800.
- A **percentile rank** is the percent of test takers in the “norming” sample who had scores less than or equal to a student's score. A student with a reading comprehension score in the 60th percentile is one who scored as well or better than 60 percent of the students in the sample group.

Taking Next Steps

Now that you have reviewed your children's test results, it is time to take action:

- If your child did well on the exam, celebrate!
- If the exam showed that your child needs improvement in some areas, meet with his or her teacher and develop a plan of action.
- Find out if and when the exam will be given again and discuss with your child's teacher the possibility of your child retaking the test.
- Find out about additional academic services the school or district can offer to assist your child in his or her learning.
- Consider outside tutorial programs that can help your child. Community centers and other organizations often offer after-school help.



Conclusion

Our mission at ETS is to help advance quality and equity in education. We do that by providing fair and valid assessments, research, and other services so that students can develop the knowledge and skills they need for the future.

Tests provide part of the important information that allows teachers, principals, and parents like you to evaluate how well students are learning, and how to take the appropriate next steps to best affect students' future educational experiences.

Having adequate and accurate information on testing can help prevent the testing experience from being a scary or confusing prospect. We hope this information will help you understand more about tests and will help you prepare your children for them, as well as help you understand the important role tests play in ensuring that all children receive the quality education they deserve.

Our goal is to listen to parents, teachers and students, and to learn from you about how we can better serve the education community. To take part in the conversation about testing, go to www.ets.org/testing. Log On. Let's Talk.

Glossary of Common Testing Terms

achievement test: a test measuring knowledge of material that students were taught; it is usually linked to a specific subject or course

criterion: a specific standard

computer-adaptive testing: computerized testing that tailors the difficulty of the test to the individual test taker

grade-equivalent score: a student's standing in relation to others in terms of grade and month in the school year

multiple-choice question: a question in which a student selects an answer from a list

norming group: a particular group of students to which an individual student's score is compared

performance assessment: an observation of the process of creating an answer or product that demonstrates a student's knowledge and/or skills

portfolio: a collection of a student's work over a period of time

reliability: the consistency of test scores across different administrations or alternate forms of a test

stanine score: score from a nine-point scale that is used in standardized tests

validity: the extent to which test scores reflect what they were meant to measure

Log On. Let's Talk.

www.ets.org/letstalk