

# evaluating exams

The stress of exams can affect not only children, but also parents and teachers. Are exams worth it? And what can you do to help your child?

By GLYNIS HORNING



Ask most adults to share their worst nightmare, and who won't cite being back at school, trapped in a tricky exam? The stress of exams can be considerable, as a child's performance is measured against their expectations and those of parents and teachers, plus the performance of their peers. Many feel their self-worth and future success is at stake.

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (Sadag) reports a significant spike in pupils calling its helpline over exam periods, and with suicide now accounting for 9,5% of teenage deaths, the South African College of Applied Psychology notes "there is reason for concern", that the exam results period may aggravate symptoms for those already depressed.

In most South African schools, children start writing exams in Grade 4, and according to Sadag, the suicide rate for children aged 10 to 14 years old has more than doubled over the past 15 years. Clearly more than exams is at play where suicide is concerned, but do young children need the added stress in their lives? In short, are exams worth it?

## no

Exams are a waste of time say Yvonne Sullivan and Kim Day, flatly. Both are Grade 6 teachers at award-winning Durban government school Manor Gardens Primary, which has frequently taken first place and the overall Top School Achiever Award in the Horizon Maths Competition, and has won the national Kids' Lit Quiz twice, and placed first in the world.

"Exams are no longer valid in the 21st century," says Sullivan. "They reduce everything to their smallest part and capture only a minuscule part of the whole person – a meaningless score. They snuff out creativity as children's thinking is channelled into providing answers the teacher wants, rather than engaging children in open-ended debate that would generate innovative ideas. Valuable learning time is wasted revising for and writing exams, and teacher time is wasted marking and entering these meaningless symbols on to mark schedules."

Day adds: "With an exam-based system, learning is reduced to teaching for tests rather than learning for life. The joy of learning and the inherent curiosity of the child is suppressed. What is the point of memorising and regurgitating content when today one can access information so easily online? Learning must involve critical thinking skills and problem-solving. Time spent on exams would be better spent guiding children on how to access relevant information and evaluate sources. We must remove the shackles of testing from our education system."

## yes

And yet others still support exams. "Without them, what reason would there be for children to ensure they know and understand work?" says Dr Deon van Wyk, child psychologist and author of *Study Without Stress*. "They need to measure themselves and be measured on whether they can do the work – it's done in swimming and tennis, why not academics? Exams also allow teachers to see where a child falls short, and if they need to teach more or change how they teach or the pace of their teaching."

Exams introduce children to different study methods and the skill of actually writing an exam is "an essential skill later in life", says Diane Berry, head of Rustenberg Girls' Junior School in Cape Town. "It's not just about content – exams are set to include creative thinking, understanding, application, deduction, explanation, analysis, comparison, evaluation and comprehension. That said, exams are only part of the whole assessment programme, particularly in the intermediate phase, and must be kept in perspective."

As long as children are guided and nurtured through the first set of exams in Grade 4, they are fine, Berry says. "As exams become more complicated, children slowly become accustomed to different types of questions and how to answer them."

## maybe...

Many remain in the middle. "Exams are by no means ideal," says Joburg educational psychologist Marisa Di Terlizzi, director of student affairs at St Stithians College in Joburg. "Unfortunately, because of the way tertiary education is set up and the nature of society, there has to be some kind of 'yardstick', so that we can compare apples with apples." And while exams assess content, she says, they also assess skill, such as analysis: "These higher-order skills are important in terms of application of knowledge in tertiary education, and ultimately, the world of work."

"Could they be assessed in another way? Probably, but to do so might require more teachers and access to materials that only some schools have access to. So for now, though far from ideal, an exam based on common criteria is where we are."