

Learning not to sweat the test

Classes for middle and high school students teach study tips to help reduce anxiety

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Wendy Nelson's two daughters, Carley and Molly, get A's and B's in school, but they do not do as well when they take tests.



"When they get to taking tests, they do very poorly," Nelson said. "We just think they study the wrong things. I think they take the wrong kinds of notes." That's why the Nelson daughters are taking a series of classes called the Stressless

Tests Program®, designed to help them do just as well on tests as they do in the classroom.

The program consists of four classes, held in the evenings at local schools. Students learn stress-reduction techniques, as well as note-taking, studying and test-taking skills.

After two classes, Nelson believes she has seen improvement. Carley, 16, a junior at Mount Hebron High School, seemed more relaxed and confident when taking her midterms, Nelson said. And Molly, 13, an eighth-grader at Patapsco Middle School, has a better idea of how to study.



In the past, Nelson said, Molly "usually just didn't study because she didn't know what to study. So she basically gave up on it."

The four-session programs -- one for middle-schoolers and one for

high school students -- was created by Betty Caldwell, founder and director of the Stressless Tests Study Skills Program®, which she has set up as a nonprofit.

Caldwell, who has been in practice as a counselor in Howard County for about 12 years, says the business grew out of her work with families. Caldwell, who has a master's degree in education, said that her counseling practice -- which she calls holistic therapy -- led her to the realization that test-taking is a major cause of stress in teenagers.

She said she read research showing that there is a nationwide epidemic of test anxiety among high school students. "As I read it, I just felt very strongly that there could be a huge difference for kids," she said. "I came to the awareness that I really had something to offer."

About three years ago, she began offering classes in test-taking techniques. "I developed a course and put the word out and had a number of classes" she said. "Very quickly, I started hearing from middle school parents," saying they wanted a similar program for their children.

The program grew from there. "This is not something where I sat back and said, 'What business can I build?' " Caldwell said. "It was an evolution." These days, Caldwell is still a counselor, but her Stressless Tests® business is growing, she said. She offers the program at schools throughout the year.

The classes focus on self-awareness, so that students can understand their study styles and maximize potential. The program for middle-schoolers helps students get organized and master textbook information. They are also taught specific skills for taking notes and doing well on tests. And they are given tips for improving concentration and memory.

The program for high school students is similar, but it includes a focus on overcoming procrastination and perfectionism.

The courses are offered year-round and cost \$165 for the four weeks. Each class has about 15 students, Caldwell said. She has created a

digital video disc for teachers to use in the classroom, she said.

Caldwell also offers a course for parents of middle-schoolers so they can help their children study. That costs \$165.

Another course, called "Reducing Test Anxiety," is offered to high school students who know the material but panic during a test. That class costs \$175.

Nelson said her daughters are soaking up the information in the classes.

"It's 2 1/2 hours, and believe it or not they're not angry about having to go," she said. "There hasn't been a complaint. They don't say it's boring. It's something they do want to learn."

Information on the Stressless Tests Program: www.stresslesstests.org.

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