Child Mind Institute

Your Child Failed a Midterm. How Can You Support Them, and What Should They Do?

What you'll learn

- **First steps to take if you find out your child failed a midterm**
- **Problem-solving strategies based on whether they can still pass the class**
- **How to help your child recover if they need to drop the class**

Take a deep breath and assess

We know this isn't exactly the news you were hoping to hear. Before you react, just take a moment to slow down. Take some deep belly breaths! Then you'll be able to calmly assess the situation. Admonishing your child won't do anything to change their grade.

- Breathe in so that it fills up your lungs (your belly will expand), then breathe out slooooooowly. This will slow down your autonomic nervous system and help you relax.
- Assess the situation. What's the story? Did they study hard and still fail? Or did they slack off and stop going to class? If the latter, you may want to check in on their mental health.
- How receptive is your child to support right now?
- Is their attitude closer to "I don't want to talk about this, leave me alone" or "Help me, please, I don't know what to do"?
- If you see signs of both, which is the bigger one?

Validate

If they want you leave them alone, lean into VALIDATION and try to get them to open up. Say things like:

- "I know this is hard."
- "It's frustrating to try your best and have things not work out."
- "I can understand if you're worried about the future right now."
- Your goal is to get them to open up, but you're not going to force them to do so!
- Once they're willing to talk, you might be able to progress to problem solving.

Can they still pass the class?

Have them check the syllabus or ask the professor directly to find out how they're doing so far and what it will take to pass the class. Then make a plan.

- Will they need to get 95s or higher on everything they submit the rest of the way?
- If they CAN still pass the class, help them make the necessary plans and changes!
- Are they willing and able to get extra support?
- Their school may have a tutoring center — are they willing to work with a tutor the rest of the term?
- Can they attend their professor's or teaching assistant's office hours?
- Do they have other obligations that would prevent them from doing these things? Work? Childcare? Extracurricular activities?
- Encourage your child to schedule tutoring sessions and commit to going to office hours. Suggest they ask about possible extra credit opportunities.
- Help them set deadlines, like "I will email my professor by Tuesday."
- Ask permission to follow up with them for accountability. If they say yes, do so.

If they CAN'T still pass the class

While failing a midterm isn't always a make-or-break scenario, failing is a possibility. If they've run the numbers and checked with the professor, then you can suggest that they consider dropping it, or switching it to pass/fail.

- Most colleges or universities will still give students the opportunity to drop a class or switch to pass/fail for several weeks after midterms.
- Your child may wind up with a "W" or "incomplete" on their transcript, but this is not always calculated into their GPA.
- Not every class can be switched to pass/fail. If they have questions, they should contact their academic advisor or advisor's office!
- Double check: Are there credit or grade requirements for them to maintain financial aid or scholarships?
- Dropping one class usually will not impact this, but failing the class might!
- Your child can contact their school's financial aid office, or check their financial aid paperwork!
- Many schools require a GPA above 2.0, or require that the student not be on "academic probation" for a certain length of time.

But if they drop the class, won't they be behind on their credits?

- Maybe... but that's okay!
- Did they come in with credits from high school or AP classes?
- If not, they can always overload in a future semester, or take summer classes.
- This may be cheaper than their typical classes anyway!
- Encourage them to consider taking summer courses towards their requirements at a local community college or online.
- Your child should check with their academic advising office to ensure the school will accept the credits!
- Also, fewer than 50% of students graduate from college in four years. You may want to consider a different timeline with your child, if possible.
- At this point, the most important thing is to support your child through their loss, regardless of what feelings this might stir up for you.
- Support without judgment will go a long way in helping them to build the resilience they will need to move forward.

Linehan, M. M. (2015). *DBT skills training manual* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2012). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change.* Guilford Press.