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The Parents' Guide to A Level Results Day

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The Parents' Guide to A Level Results Day: How to Be Exactly What They Need

Here's something most parents never find out. Ask students what scared them most about results day and a surprising number don't say the grades. They say telling you.

One student who missed her first choice by a single grade later admitted she was afraid to tell her parents straight away, because she didn't want them to feel disappointed in her. She went on to find a course she loved through Clearing and describes it as one of the best decisions she ever made. But in that first hour, the thing weighing on her wasn't the results slip. It was your face.

It makes sense when you think about it. For eighteen years, yours has been the opinion that counts. Long after they stopped showing you their spelling tests, your child has carried on measuring themselves against what they think you expect of them, even if they'd rather eat the results slip than admit it. They've also spent two years being told, by schools, by league tables, by every adult with a view, that this one morning decides everything. So when the envelope opens, they're not just reading grades. They're bracing for the reaction of the person they least want to let down. That's you and it's worth knowing before Thursday, because it changes what your job actually is.

And let's be honest about how strange this morning is for you too. You've spent nearly two decades being able to fix things. Grazed knees, forgotten PE kits, the 10pm dash to buy printer ink for coursework due at 9am. Results day is one of the first mornings of their life where there is genuinely nothing you can fix and no way to take the hit for them. The grades are already printed. That feeling of powerlessness is horrible and it is also completely normal. Every parent standing in a kitchen on Thursday morning is feeling some version of it.

But powerless is not the same as useless and this is the part worth holding onto. You control none of what's on the slip and all of what happens in the sixty seconds after it's opened. The morning itself is short, twenty minutes at most, but it's one of the mornings that gets filed away permanently and the thing that gets filed isn't the number of A grades. It's whether home felt safe when the news landed. That part is entirely yours and unlike an exam, you can prepare for it.

That's the job description on Thursday 13 August. Not fixer, not forecaster, not project manager. Your reaction is the weather your child steps out into and you get to choose it in advance.

This guide covers everything: what to do before the day, what to say (and what absolutely not to say), how to help without taking over, what happens if it goes brilliantly, what happens if it doesn't and the numbers worth saving to your phone tonight.

Before the day: do your homework quietly

The single most useful thing you can do happens before Thursday. Learn the process now, so that if things wobble at 8.05am, you're the calm one in the kitchen rather than the one frantically googling "what is Clearing" while your child cries into their cereal.

Here's the thirty-second version. Results are available from around 8am on Thursday 13 August, either collected from school or college or released online (check which, your child's school will have said). UCAS Hub updates the same morning. If your child met their firm offer, they're in, automatically. If they missed the firm but met their insurance offer, they're placed there, automatically. If they missed both, they enter Clearing, which is how universities fill their remaining places. It runs until 19 October and Clearing choices can be added in UCAS Hub from 1pm on results day itself.

Two more things worth knowing in advance. First, Clearing is not a mark of failure. More than 77,000 students found their university place through it last year, including at well-known universities and plenty of them will tell you the unplanned route turned out better than the planned one. Second, if your child does better than expected, they can trade up to a more competitive course by releasing themselves from their confirmed place. More on the golden rule for that later.

Practical prep for the night before: make sure your child knows their UCAS Personal ID, has their phone charged and knows what time and where they're collecting results. Then order a takeaway, watch something daft together and don't mention it again. The worst thing you can do the night before is hold a strategy summit.

The morning: let them lead

Some teenagers want you standing next to them when they open the envelope. Some want to go with friends and text you after. Some want to open it alone in their room with the door shut. All of these are fine and it's their call, not yours.

Ask once, in advance, how they'd like to do it. Then respect the answer, even if it stings a little to be kept at arm's length. Being wanted at a distance is still being wanted. They know you're there.

It's also worth preparing yourself for the theatre of the morning itself, because results day at a school gate is a lot. Somebody will be screaming with joy about their three A stars within ninety seconds of the doors opening. Somebody else will be crying into their mum's shoulder ten feet away.

There will be phones out, group hugs, teachers hovering and every emotion on the spectrum happening simultaneously in one car park. If you're driving your child there, the journey in is usually silent and the journey back rarely is. Let both happen. You don't need to fill the quiet on the way there with pep talks and you don't need to interrogate on the way back. Your presence is doing the work.

A related rule for the house itself: no ambush breakfast. However this morning goes, your child does not want to walk downstairs at 7.30am to find grandparents on the sofa, a celebration cake defrosting on the side, or a phone already filming for the family group chat. Congratulations that were purchased in advance put pressure on results that haven't been read yet and if the news is mixed, that visible expectation makes a hard morning harder. Keep the kitchen normal. The celebration, if there is one, can be assembled at astonishing speed once you actually know what you're celebrating.

If they do want you with them, your job in the first ten minutes is beautifully simple: say less than you think you need to. Whatever is on that slip, they are processing it faster and harder than you are. Give them room.

If they've gone without you, the waiting is its own small ordeal and there are two rules for it. First, send one message and then stop. Something like "Thinking of you. Here whenever you're ready, no rush" does the job. A string of "Well??" and "Any news???" texts landing while they're still in the queue just transfers your anxiety into their pocket. Second, do not log into their UCAS Hub to check for yourself, even if you know the password from helping with the application last autumn. It's their account, their news and their moment to tell you and finding out that you peeked first is a trust dent that lasts well beyond August.

And when they finally walk back through the door or the phone rings, take your cue from their opening tempo. If they burst in shouting, celebrate at full volume. If they come in quietly and head for the kettle, sit down quietly with them. If the first thing they say is a joke, laugh. Matching their energy tells them the morning belongs to them; overriding it, in either direction, tells them it belongs to you. Set your face to warm and neutral before you know anything and let their face tell you which parent this morning needs.

The scripts: what to say and what to bite back

Nobody hands parents a script for this morning, so here's one. These small phrases matter more than any plan you've made.

If it went well, say: "I'm so proud of you. You earned every bit of that." Then celebrate properly. Make it a big deal in whatever way lands for your child, whether that's a party, a favourite meal, or just letting them run off with their mates. Pride, expressed out loud, is the whole assignment.

Strangely, good news has its own traps and parents fall into them within minutes. The first is pivoting straight to logistics: the grades are barely out of the envelope and someone is already saying "right, we need to sort your accommodation login and ring student finance."

There will be time for admin. Today, let the win breathe. The second is the accidental deflation of "see, I told you you'd be fine," which sounds warm but quietly dismisses months of genuine fear as fuss over nothing. They weren't fine for most of August and they know it. The third and the worst, is raising the bar mid-celebration: "imagine what you'd have got if you'd started revising in January." That single sentence can drain the colour out of the best morning of their year.

If a version of it is forming in your mouth, swallow it whole.

Then there's the result nobody scripts for, which happens to be the most common one: the mixed bag. Two grades they wanted and one that stings, or an offer met overall with a B where they'd banked on an A.

Two rules here. Lead with what went right, always, because opening with "so what happened in chemistry?" tells them the miss is the headline. And if they're the one who's gutted, a perfectionist devastated by an A that isn't an A star even though their place is confirmed, resist the urge to argue them out of it with "but that's a brilliant result!"

Being told your feelings are wrong doesn't fix them. Try "I can see you're disappointed and I get it, you set yourself a high bar" first and save the perspective for an hour later, when it can actually land: "for what it's worth, from where I'm standing, you've smashed it."

And sometimes there are no words coming back at all. Some teenagers open the envelope, go pale and simply stop talking, or dissolve before they've said a single grade out loud. Don't fill that silence with questions, because "what did you get, what does it say, is it bad?" is machine-gun fire at someone who's winded.

Sit down next to them. Put the kettle on. Let them come to it. And when the talking does need to happen, know that teenagers open up sideways, not head-on: the best conversations of the day will happen in the car, on a walk, or drying dishes next to each other, not across a table with eye contact and an agenda. If the kitchen has gone quiet, suggest driving somewhere for lunch. The steering wheel has coaxed more truth out of teenagers than any family meeting ever held.

If it went badly, say:

- "Okay. We're fine. Let's have a cup of tea and look at this together."
- "This says nothing about who you are. It's a handful of exam papers, not a verdict."
- "You have options today and none of them have to be decided in the next hour."
- "I'm proud of you. That hasn't changed and it isn't going to."

And whatever happens, do not say:

- "What happened?" (They don't know. It's an accusation dressed as a question.)
- "Well, I did say you should have revised more." (True or not, this helps nobody and they will remember it for twenty years.)
- "Your cousin got three A stars." (Never. Not today, not this month.)
- "Don't worry, it doesn't matter." (It matters enormously to them right now. Dismissing the feeling makes them feel unseen. "This is fixable" is different from "this doesn't matter.")
- Anything that begins with "When I was your age."

The difference between "this doesn't define you" and "why didn't you work harder" is the difference between a child who lets you help and a child who shuts the door.

You are allowed to feel disappointed. You are not allowed to make your disappointment their problem this morning. If you need to have a private wobble in the garden, have it there. That shut door isn't just an emotional loss, by the way. It's a practical one. The next seventy-two hours may involve Clearing calls, quick decisions and honest conversations about what your child actually wants and all of that runs on them talking to you.

A teenager who feels judged at 8.15am goes quiet by 8.20 and then you're trying to help someone who is giving you one-word answers at exactly the moment the two of you most need to work as a team. Keeping your reaction kind isn't only the decent thing to do. It's the strategic thing to do, because your usefulness for the rest of the week depends entirely on the door staying open.

Be aware, too, that the message isn't only in your words. Teenagers are world-class readers of everything you don't say: the pause before you speak, the breath out through your nose, the "it's fine" delivered with a tight jaw, the too-bright voice that's trying slightly too hard.

You don't need to be an actor and you shouldn't pretend to feelings you don't have, because they'll spot that too. What works is honest warmth. Something like "I don't have a plan yet either, but we'll figure one out together" is true, calm and on their side all at once and it beats a brilliant speech delivered through gritted teeth every single time.

And declare a ban on the post-mortem. There may be a useful conversation one day about revision habits, the phone in the bedroom, or the subjects that were chosen under duress, but that conversation lives weeks from now, if it needs to happen at all and it lands far better if your child opens it themselves. Conducting the autopsy on results morning teaches them nothing they don't already know and costs you plenty. Even if they open it, standing in the kitchen saying "I messed up, I should have revised more," resist the urge to agree at length.

A simple "maybe, but that's a conversation for another day, today is about what happens next" honours the honesty without rubbing their nose in it and moves both of you towards the part of the day you can actually do something about.

The comparison trap (and the social media clause)

Every child's results exist in a swirl of other people's results: siblings, cousins, the neighbour's kid, the school group chat and a wall of "SO proud of my amazing daughter!!! 3 A*s!!!" posts on Facebook by 9am.

Your child cannot avoid all of that. What they can avoid is hearing it from you. Don't bring anyone else's grades into the conversation, today or in the weeks after. Their route is theirs. And one modern rule that didn't exist when we sat our exams: do not post your child's results on social media without asking them first. Good or bad. Their results are their news to share, in their way, at their pace.

Some kids who did brilliantly still don't want it broadcast, because they know friends who didn't.

Ask first. Always.

If it went wrong: be the ops room, not the pilot

So the grades are short and the firm offer is gone. Here's the part almost no parent knows until they're living it.

You cannot make the Clearing calls for them. Universities need to speak to the applicant directly. It's their application, their consent, their place and admissions teams are specifically listening for whether the student actually wants the course, not whether their mum does.

A parent on the phone is a red flag to the person on the other end.

That doesn't make you useless. It makes you the ops room. While your child is the voice on the phone, you can be the one who:

- Helps them search the UCAS Clearing vacancy lists and builds a shortlist of realistic courses
- Writes the key details on a pad in front of them: course codes, phone numbers, their UCAS Personal ID and Clearing number
- Helps them rehearse their two-minute answer to "so why do you want this course?" before they dial
- Keeps the room quiet, the phone charged and the tea coming
- Takes notes during calls so nothing gets lost in the adrenaline
- Reminds them, between calls, that a rejection from one Clearing line means nothing about the next one

Speed matters, because popular courses fill within days, but panic doesn't help. If your child was only a grade or so short, the first call should be to their original firm-choice university, because admissions teams sometimes accept near misses or offer an alternative.

It costs one phone call.

One warning about "changed course offers." Sometimes a university that can't confirm the original course will offer a different one instead and it appears in UCAS Hub looking like a lifeline.

It might be. But a relieved eighteen-year-old at 9am is capable of accepting three years studying something they have no interest in, just to make the horrible feeling stop. Your job is to slow that decision down by a few hours.

"Is this actually the subject you want, or is it just the fastest way out of today?" is one of the most valuable questions you'll ask all year.

And the golden rule if they did better than expected and want to trade up: they must have a verbal offer from the new university before releasing themselves from their confirmed place.

The moment they self-release, the original place is gone. Offer first, release second, every time.

Know the whole map, not just the uni corner

University this September is one route. It is not the only one and part of your value on Thursday is knowing the others exist so the day never feels like a cliff edge.

If a grade looks genuinely wrong, your child's school can request a review of marking from the exam board and there's a priority service where a university place depends on the outcome, so raise it on the day. Reviews can move grades down as well as up, so it's a conversation with a teacher first, not a reflex.

Beyond that: resits (at school, at college, or online from home) with the massive advantage of knowing exactly what's coming; degree apprenticeships, which deliver a full degree plus a salary with the employer paying the fees; Access to Higher Education Diplomas, a coursework-based route into university without A Levels that around 20,000 people use every year; vocational qualifications that lead straight into accountancy, IT, trades and fitness careers; or a year of real work, which builds money, references and clarity, with the grades still valid whenever they want to use them.

If your child already holds a job or apprenticeship offer that was conditional on grades, get in touch with the employer on the day either way. Met the grades? Confirm. Missed them? Tell them anyway, because employers respect honesty and quite often flex for a candidate they liked.

One thing worth admitting to yourself: the map has changed since you last looked at it. For most of us, leaving school came down to university or "getting a job," and an apprenticeship meant a trade and not much else. That world has gone.

Degree apprenticeships now exist at law firms, banks, engineering giants, the NHS and major tech companies, some of them harder to get into than well-known university courses and employers have spent a decade getting steadily less interested in where somebody studied and steadily more interested in what they can do.

If your instincts about these routes were formed in the nineties, they're due an update and Thursday is a bad day to be handing out directions from an old map.

It's also worth being honest about a quieter pressure: the one that comes from other adults. Somewhere in the back of many parents' minds on results day is the question of what they'll say to the relatives, the colleagues, the school-gate circle, if the answer isn't "she's off to university."

Your child will sense in about four seconds whether you regard the other routes as real options or as things to be explained away and if they pick the apprenticeship while reading embarrassment on your face, you've handed them a burden they'll carry into it.

The financial reality deserves a fair hearing too. An apprentice at twenty-three with three years of experience, a qualification and no student debt is not behind their graduate friends. They're just on a different line of the same map and plenty of employers now rate that line highly. You don't have to prefer it. You do have to talk about it as an equal, out loud, where your child can hear you.

And if you and your child want different routes, tread carefully, because this is the disagreement that can sour the whole autumn. You may have pictured a graduation photo for eighteen years; they may have quietly decided they want to earn, build and study on the job. Or the reverse: you see a solid apprenticeship, they're set on reapplying to university next year. Your role here is stress-tester, not veto-holder.

Ask the good questions, the "what does a day actually look like," the "where does this put you at twenty-five," the "have you spoken to anyone who's done it," and then let them choose. A young person who picks their own route owns the outcome and works for it.

One who was steered onto yours has someone to blame the moment it gets hard and the person they'll blame is standing in your kitchen.

You don't need to become an expert in all of these overnight. You just need to know the doors exist, so that when your child says "that's it then, it's over," you can honestly say "it really isn't, there are about six routes from here, want to look at them together tomorrow?"

The important numbers to save

Put these in your phone ready for Thursday:

- **Exam Results Helpline (National Careers Service): 0800 100 900.** Free, open from results day and explicitly for parents and carers as well as students. Qualified careers advisers who can talk through Clearing, apprenticeships, resits and everything else. If you make one call all day, make it this one.
- **UCAS: 0371 468 0 468** for application and Hub questions (they don't give careers advice, that's the helpline above).
- **Student Finance England: 0300 100 0607.** Essential if your child changes course or university through Clearing, because their finance application needs updating to match.
- **National Apprenticeship Service: 0800 015 0400.**
- **YoungMinds Parents' Helpline: 0808 802 5544** if you're worried about how your child is coping emotionally and **Childline (0800 1111)**,
- **The Mix (0808 808 4994)** and **Samaritans (116 123)** for them, any hour, any reason.

Look after yourself too

A quiet word about you. You have probably been carrying low-level results anxiety since June and Thursday morning you'll be performing calm while your stomach does gymnastics. That's love and it's also exhausting.

So: eat breakfast before the envelope. Line up your own support, a partner, a friend, a sibling you can message honestly while presenting serenity at home. If the results are hard, give yourself permission to be sad about it later, away from your child. Your feelings are real and valid. They just can't be the loudest thing in the room on the day.

And try not to project your own script onto theirs. Many of us carry a picture of how this was supposed to go, sometimes shaped by our own exam experiences decades ago.

Your child's path does not have to match the one in your head to be a good one. The parents who handle results day best are usually the ones who decided in advance that their pride was unconditional.

Watch out for the guilt audit, too, because it starts running the moment a result disappoints.

Should we have paid for a tutor. Should I have taken the phone away in Year 13. Was it the house move, the divorce, the months of disruption, the fact I was working every evening that spring.

Nearly every parent runs this tape and it's worth saying plainly: a set of grades has a hundred parents.

The subjects chosen at sixteen, the teacher who left at Christmas, the topics that came up on the paper, how they slept the night before and yes, somewhere in the mix, home. You were one influence among many, not the author of the outcome.

The reason to switch the tape off isn't just kindness to yourself. It's that guilt leaks. A parent quietly blaming themselves says strange, over-compensating things in the kitchen and your child needs your attention on their next step, not your penance for the last one.

One more for families running across two households: agree the script in advance. Results day goes sideways fast when one parent is celebrating down the phone while the other is asking what went wrong, or when a child has to perform the news twice to two different audiences with two different agendas.

A single message between the adults the night before, something as simple as "whatever the results say tomorrow, we both lead with pride and we save any other conversations for later," puts everyone on the same team. That includes step-parents and grandparents who'll be in the room or on the phone.

Your child should hear one consistent message from every adult who loves them and it takes one text to arrange.

The days after: when to talk and when to leave it

Results day has a long tail. If Thursday went well, the following weeks are about admin: accommodation, student finance, reading everything the university sends. Nudge gently, but let them own it. They're about to run their own life; the admin is the training ground.

If Thursday went badly, resist the urge to hold a family planning meeting on Friday morning. Clearing runs until 19 October. Resit enrolment isn't a same-week decision. Apprenticeship applications run year-round. Once the genuinely time-sensitive moves are made (the Clearing calls, any priority review), the rest can breathe.

Check in without interrogating. "How are you feeling about it today?" once, then follow their lead. Some teenagers want to talk it through nightly; some need three days of silence and video games before they can face it.

Both are processing. If the low mood deepens rather than lifts after a week or two, or they stop doing the things they normally love, that's the moment for a gentler, more serious conversation and possibly one of the support lines above.

Be ready for the second wave, because it catches families out. Results day is loud and over quickly, but the weeks that follow are full of quieter landmines: the group chat filling with freshers' week countdowns, friends posting halls room tours and then the big one, that stretch in mid-September when their mates physically leave and the house goes quiet.

If your child's plan changed on results day, that fortnight is often harder than the day itself, because it's when the difference stops being abstract and starts being an empty Saturday. You can't remove it, but you can see it coming.

Plan something for that week, a trip, a project, a visit to a friend who's also staying and name it gently in advance: "September might feel a bit strange when everyone heads off, so let's make sure you've got good stuff in the diary."

Being understood in advance takes half the sting out.

If there's now a gap in the plan, a resit year, working before reapplying, hunting for the right apprenticeship, the real enemy isn't the setback. It's drift. A teenager with no fixed points in the week can sink into a nocturnal fog remarkably fast and every week of fog makes the next move feel heavier.

The answer isn't a boot camp, it's a rhythm: a part-time job, driving lessons, a standing gym session, a set block each week for applications or revision, one thing that gets them out of the house with other humans.

Your role is scaffolding, not scheduling. Help them sketch the shape, then let them run it, because small wins stacked weekly rebuild confidence far faster than any pep talk you can deliver from the doorway of their room.

And celebrate the pivots, not just the plan A's. The evening they accept a Clearing place, sign apprenticeship paperwork, enrol for resits or land their first proper job deserves the same dinner out that three A stars would have earned and arguably a warmer one, because deciding to go again after a knock takes more nerve than sailing through.

What you celebrate teaches your child what the family actually values and "we celebrate courage and good decisions here, not just grades" is one of the better lessons to come out of a bruising August.

Say the long view out loud too, because it's true: by Christmas, most of this will have settled into a new normal, the route will feel like theirs rather than the backup and Thursday will already be shrinking in the rear-view mirror.

What they'll remember

Twenty years from now, your child will struggle to remember their exact grades. Ask any adult in their forties, most have to think about it.

What they will remember, with total clarity, is how you looked at them across the kitchen that morning. Whether home felt like the safest place in the world or the scariest room in it. Whether the person they most feared disappointing turned out to be the person who said "we're fine, let's have a cup of tea" and meant it.

Grades measure a couple of years of exams. Thursday measures nothing about your child at all, but it will quietly measure something about us as parents. It's a test you can absolutely ace and unlike theirs, you get to see the questions in advance.

You've just read them. Good luck on Thursday. You'll both be fine.



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