



# JPA

Juvenile Protective Association



## Halloween Tricks and Treats

All the signs of fall are here: pumpkins, leaves turning brilliant colors, and, of course, the ghosts and goblins of Halloween.

Children look forward to trick or treating in costumes ranging from funny to scary. And, if you take a moment to look around, you'll notice that Halloween imagery is everywhere - on billboards, in TV movies, on displays at grocery and drug stores, and even in schools. There's no escaping what's coming. But at JPA, we know that all the imagery and costumes may make children feel anxious about Halloween, even when they are looking forward to it.

It's important to take a few minutes and ask the kids in your life how they feel about Halloween. You might be surprised to discover they are disguising their true feelings. Whatever they share with you, what's important is that you are there to listen.

During this season of trick or treat, we want to take a moment to say how extremely grateful we are to the Saul Zaentz Foundation. When we came knocking, the Foundation gave us a \$1 million grant to fund our Connect to Kindergarten (C2K) program, which you can read about in this month's interview below.

From all of us at JPA, have a happy and safe Halloween!

*Karen*



## Connecting with Kids

Saniki Wright taught kindergarten in Brooklyn, NY for two years before joining the brand new KIPP One school this fall. Aside from joining her new husband, Saniki was motivated to teach at the Chicago-based KIPP (“Knowledge Is Power Program”) school because she is committed to its mission of “growing students both academically and socially.” She radiates energy and empathy as she talks about her young charges; she’s the kind of teacher you’d remember long after kindergarten.

To build a strong social and emotional foundation for the school, KIPP One has partnered with JPA to help its teachers fulfill its mission, providing them with the kind of support that enables them to address academic and social issues affecting their students. “Many cry a lot,” says Saniki. She notes that they’re just getting used to being separated from their parents or other caregivers; sometimes behavioral issues arise as well. Luckily for Saniki and other teachers, JPA’s therapist Norma Swanson Irie is there to help as part of its Connect 2 Kindergarten (C2K) program.

JPA’s therapists help teachers understand and build relationships with their students, a crucial indicator of long-term success. A crucial element of that relationship is trust, which Saniki notes has to be built over time; it’s not automatic. But trust between a student and a teacher can make all the difference to a student’s overall performance in school as well as to a teacher’s own perspective as she works with her class and individual students.

One of Saniki’s kindergarteners came to her one day saying she had a “crush” on a boy in the class. Her first reaction was to imagine her young niece telling her the same thing. Saniki cautioned her student about having a “crush” on someone—it seemed too loaded a situation for such a small child. Later, however, Saniki discussed the situation with Norma as she processed the moment.

As they talked, Norma helped Saniki reflect on the possibilities of the interaction. She helped Saniki think about the student’s confession from a developmental perspective, including the possibility that the student used a word that meant one thing to adults and something else to her. Keeping the discussion in mind, Saniki was able to re-open the conversation with her student. They talked about the girl’s “best friend,” which is what she had meant all along.

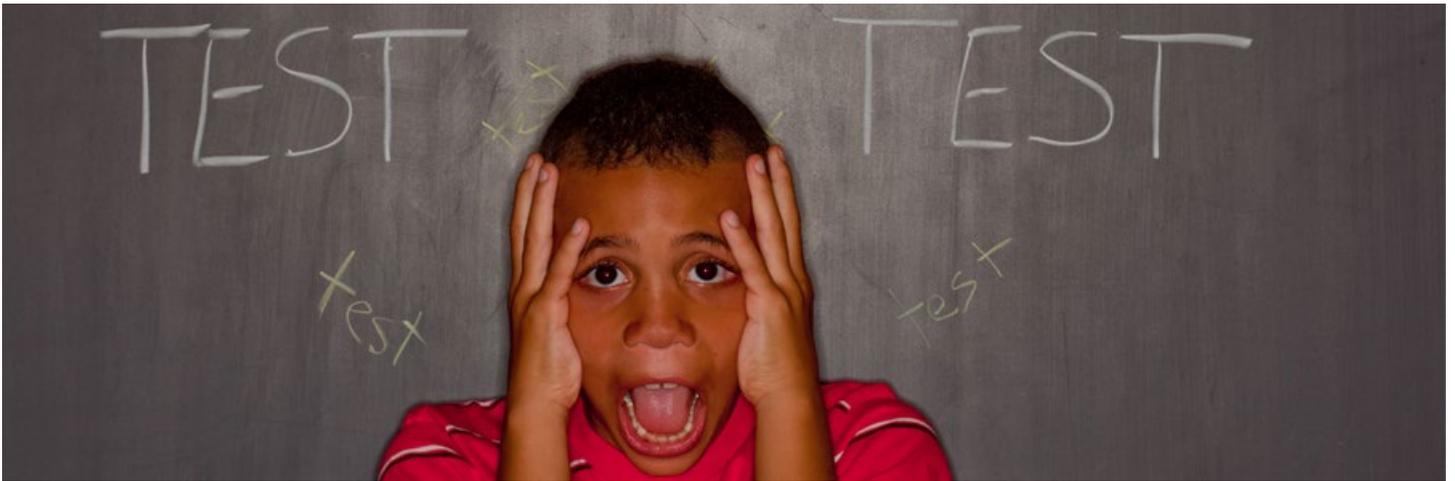
During that second conversation, Saniki realized she had made an assumption about the girl’s meaning without realizing it. Now, she was able to help her student open up, building the relationship they could both build on during the year. Saniki could “hear” what she hadn’t heard before. Seeing things from her student’s perspective worked for the student and Saniki, who gained perspective on how to help students open up to her and build trust in the long run.

“In consultation I help teachers to look at behaviors through a developmental lens. So a crush in a 5 year old does not have the same “romantic’ connotation as it does for the adult, and we can approach it from that place of innocence,” said Norma with a smile.

Saniki’s work with Norma has been extremely helpful, she says. “I have in the back of my head what Norma has said.” At the end of each meeting with Norma, Saniki writes down on an index card one takeaway to work on the following week. She says “It gives me energy to go back to the classroom.”

Norma’s support isn’t limited to individual teachers, either. As part of the C2K program, she teaches a social-emotional lesson with the full classroom, averaging once a month, on a topic that teachers select based on what they’re experiencing in class. She also visits classes to observe the dynamic. Because there is no evaluation involved, interactions with teachers can be open, honest, and constructive. They can bounce ideas off her, knowing Norma is as concerned about them as she is about the students.

For KIPP One and other schools that partner with JPA, the C2K program provides an essential resource for building relationships. JPA’s whole person approach strengthens everyone involved, providing a lasting foundation for students’ positive social, emotional, and academic growth.



## Real Stories, Real Kids

This month we tackle the issue of test anxiety with a true story about a brave child who shared her worries, and who turned her questions into answers: “An Answer for Every Question”

**Presenting Issue:** Students in Chicago Public Schools are now taking a respite from an intense standardized testing regime that challenges them academically, mentally and emotionally.

Unfortunately, this rigorous testing can take a toll, especially when many schools cheer students on to be part of a “winning” school.

**Background:** Students flood the halls of their middle school. It’s what appears to be a regular Thursday morning – the bell rings for students to grab their books and head to class; a student gets a drink of water; there are posters on the walls stating “You Can Do It!” Yet one little girl hides in the bathroom crying.

“I just can’t. It’s too much pressure. Testing, it’s just too much,” Jessica, a third grader, screams to her friend Tomika on the other side of the bathroom stall door. Jessica’s hands are hiding her reddening eyes as tears roll down her cheeks behind the locked stall, making it difficult for another student, Ashley, to see her, let alone hug her.

“I feel scared too,” Ashley says, “This test is a really big deal. I know that I’ve been too worried to even think about it, let alone take it!”

This situation is all too common – students feel overwhelmed but lack a supportive forum in which to share their worries and receive necessary support from a trained and caring adult. With budgetary cuts common across public schools in Illinois, few mental health professionals can be found in Chicago Public Schools, despite schools’ continually asking for them. Ashley’s words ring true, and ring loudly: “I wish I had someone to talk to about it.”

Schools rightly focus on preparing students for standardized tests, but how are student’s anxieties about sitting for tests being addressed? JPA’s Test-Taking Anxiety program provides an answer to this striking question.

**Intervention:** This program enables a trained JPA therapist to engage with a classroom and really hear what ‘s on students’ minds, what their worries are; it also enables the therapist to get a feel for the classroom’s unique socio-emotional needs. Then, in conjunction with their teacher, JPA’s therapists tailor a curriculum that incorporates what they hear from students with teaching them how to cope with their anxieties.

As part of JPA’s Test Anxiety Program, JPA’s therapists worked with third graders at Jessica’s school, directly addressing Jessica’s fears. For instance, students shared that they didn’t know that it was “alright to have difficulties testing” and that they thought they were “bad for being worried about the test.” JPA therapists normalize this experience, teaching students that it’s typical to have an array of feelings about testing. After the course was completed, Debra, her therapist, remembers how Jessica ran up to her, grinning. “Jessica introduced me to the friends around her as her ‘anxiety teacher’ and said that she ‘loved me.’” Jessica shared how great it was to be able to anonymously write down her specific fears about testing on a piece of paper, alongside her class, and to give it to Debra for a response. She wrote down that “I’m bad for thinking I would fail.”

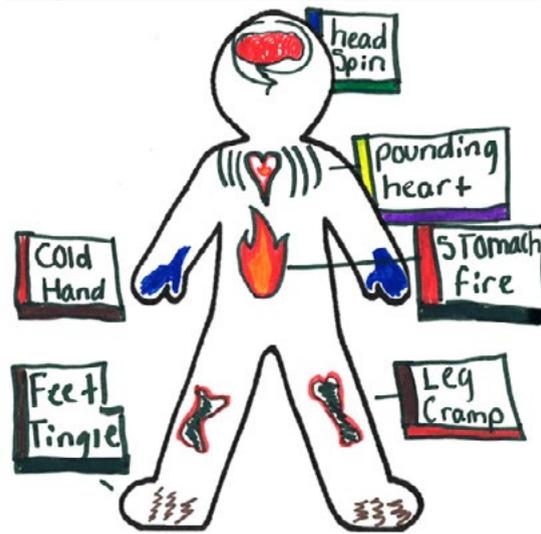
**Outcome:** Jessica said she had been taking the NWEA MAP test that past week and “had started to feel nervous.” However, instead of shutting her booklet and putting her head down, she shared something important.

“I remembered what we had talked about in the Test Taking Anxiety program and it worked! I remembered to take deep breaths and that what I was going through was normal. I scored 8 points higher!”

Debra praised Jessica’s determination to work hard, identify her needs in a difficult situation, and use the inner strength she’s built up. Jessica gave Debra a hug and ran off saying, “I did it, yo!”

This example highlights the unlimited inner strength and resolve that can be tapped into when children’s feelings are listened to by adults – and when adults have the social-emotional tools to support their students

*(Note: All names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the individuals involved.)*



## Take-Home Tips: Dealing With Students' Test Anxiety

JPA receives tons of questions from teachers and parents about test taking. This month we have many tips to choose from but they all involve a simple idea: inviting an organized and candid discussion your students around test-taking fears and anxieties helps to calm their nerves leading up to big exams.

- What:** Let your child verbalize about being anxious. Just talking about fears can be an important stress outlet. Let your child know it's OK to be anxious.

**Why:** Allowing your child to fully feel their emotions without telling them to "feel differently" communicates that you accept them as they are. This is a powerful message.
- What:** If there are specific reasons for anxiety, treat them as serious. Adults often forget how nervous they were before a test, worried about breaking a pencil point or experiencing the need go to the bathroom.

**Why:** This lets your child know his or her feelings not only matter, but are taken seriously. This will allow them to feel assured that as they face life's stresses, you will be beside them every step of the way.
- What:** Be reassuring. You can work out possible scenarios and options beforehand: "What could you do if you have to go to the bathroom during the test?"

**Why:** This gives children practice with building distress tolerance in a safe space (at home), as well as creates a space to discuss coping strategies for entering stressful situations.
- What:** For school-based tests, help your child study by offering to ask questions that deals with the topic. Use his or her notes or textbook as a resource.

**Why:** This communicates interest in the specific details of their school-work, as well as provides an opportunity for parents to share in important mental preparation for facing stressful situations.
- What:** Use study time for parent-child bonding. Instead of penalties for wrong answers, work together for good answers. If your child gives a wrong answer, don't simply provide the right one; offer a hint and encourage him or her to think carefully. A small reward for both of you (ice cream often works) after a study period can reinforce the good work that you've done.

**Why:** Positively reinforcing growth and efforts shows a child that you accept them and are willing to meet them and support them where they are at, not that you expect perfection.

6. **What:** Offer to be the student. Let your child teach you the subject at hand. This not only helps with an understanding of the topic but also builds confidence and trust. (This can be a good strategy if your child claims there's no need to study!)  
**Why:** This allows the child to feel like they are the expert, and allows the parent to re-experience what it feels like to be a student. This can often teach both parties a lot about what the other's experience is like, reinforcing empathy.
7. **What:** If your child's school publishes a test schedule (many schools now have online calendars parents can see), try to schedule some study time with your child well in advance of the date.  
**Why:** Tackling small pieces of a larger challenge over time can feel more manageable for children, that way they don't feel like they must feel at "100%" overnight.
8. **What:** It always helps to be familiar with the format of standardized tests. Where possible, consult online resources like NWEA.org.  
**Why:** When parents "do their homework" they can provide their child a working knowledge of the format of the test. This allows them to talk with their child about what to expect.
9. **What:** Work with your child filling in test "bubbles." Remind students to be careful and to think about each possible answer.  
**Why:** Simply saying that it is all right to "take your time" may come in handy when other students have completed testing and your child begins to feel pressure to finish quickly. They will remember this affirming and supportive voice in their head and it will help them self-soothe.
10. **What:** Remind your child that test results do not mean anything about the person taking the test. Tests are ways to discover how to improve in the future.  
**Why:** This reminds them that there is a whole lot that makes them special, intelligent and unique. One test does not define this for them.
11. **What:** The night before a major test, instead of cramming, do something special with your child. A favorite meal, a movie, a game, or anything else that relaxes and focuses on your relationship can have a very positive effect.  
**Why:** This is a clear reminder that your relationship is special and important no matter the outcome of test results, and this is the most important thing a child needs to know.