

‘Tiger parents’ and the tutor

The start of the academic year has again brought a boom to tuition with many tuition centres desperately recruiting staff to meet the growing demand. However, whilst tuition is growing there is a need to address issues that affect students and student performance. One such issue is that of high-pressure parenting.

The publication of Amy Chua’s book *‘Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother’* has caused widespread debate about the approach and role of parents in the education of their children. In her book Chua, a university professor, recalls the strictness with which she raised her daughters. She says that when one came home with 96% on an exam she asked about the missing 4%. She would force her daughters to practise music or be left outside in the cold and placed relentless pressure on her children to succeed academically. She argues that her daughters are better for her strictness.

A few years ago a father approached me to tutor his son. He said to me early in the conversation and within his son’s hearing, ‘And you can beat him if he does not listen to you’. I said that I would not beat him. The father reassured me that it really was okay and in fact he would encourage it. I repeated that I would not beat his son. The father shrugged and said that I was ‘too soft’ and that I did not understand how to properly tutor.

The tuition industry within Australia and overseas continues to grow at a rapid rate. Parents who value education fuel this growth. Many parents will say that a tutor can teach or mentor their children in a way that they themselves cannot. The relationship between some children and their parents is complex enough without the added overlay of stress around education. A crucial aspect of tuition is building a student’s self-esteem, encouraging them and instilling within them a sense of self-belief. Sometimes when parental pressure is extremely high then otherwise capable students find themselves underperforming. Petrified of failure they avoid trying. Indeed the self-talk becomes quite negative.

A concern about “Tiger parents” from a tutor’s perspective is how to manage parental expectations if they are unreasonable, whilst respecting the parent’s right to have a philosophy of learning. At what point should a tutor refuse to tutor a student on account of unreasonable parental pressure? Of course, tutors can find this tough to answer because tuition has the additional aspect of providing a commercial incentive to tutors who take on students. Under such circumstances tutors have an obligation to address issues of stress and how it can undermine student performance. They may have to refuse to tutor if a parent’s expectations are unreasonable. In this way they place educational interests above commercial interests. A failure to do so could compound the effects of stress on a student. Students who grow up with too much pressure can find they are constantly driven to prove themselves, always behaving from a feeling of unworthiness.

Mainstream educators and tutors should collaborate with parent groups to discuss the issues arising from different approaches to parenting and education so that the interests of all students can best be fostered.

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