

TUTORS – THE WAY OF THE FUTURE?

By Justine Stewart

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While it's true that many kids will happily breeze through the school system, fitting neatly into teachers' expectations, enjoying their learning journey, and achieving results which correlate with their career ambitions, they're the lucky ones.

Others will experience the anxieties of struggling to keep up, become apathetic or aggressive due to mind-numbing boredom, or even experience a combination of these, depending on the subjects involved and whether or not they're what's now referred to as "twice exceptional", ie academically gifted but with a learning disability. And then there are the ones who'll be starting to stress out about getting the required OP for their chosen profession.

If you've been reading those report cards a lot more closely, asking more questions at parent-teacher interviews, and becoming increasingly aware of niggling hopes and fears about your child's progress—or lack thereof—you've probably considered extra-curricular tuition.

"Tutoring has changed since I went to school twenty years ago," says Chris Druett, who, like many tutors, is an ex-school teacher. He taught both within Australia and overseas, left teaching and began tutoring, and is now President of the Australian Tutoring Association (ATA), the industry's representative body.

"Back then, it was normally just the lower-achieving students who were receiving tutoring in order to catch up with their classmates... [Now] we're seeing not only those students continuing to get support, but also students who are preparing for particular exams or in a very competitive environment looking for additional support [in order to get the best result]."

The ATA says that recent independently-conducted research shows up to 80% of students preparing for their HSC (or Higher School Certificate, the NSW equivalent of Queensland's Year 12 OP Score) were receiving tutoring of some kind.

Druett says they're making the most of extra coaching, just as they would in other areas such as sport or music. Some parents say that as well as the actual content of the work, their children benefit from a tutor's encouragement and support, and increased use of goal-setting and independent learning skills.

REASONS YOU MIGHT CONSIDER TUTORING:

- Your child appears to have not mastered basic skills by the expected time frame (ie and the rest of the class have moved on to more advanced areas).
- You know or suspect that your child has social, emotional, and/or medical problems which may have caused problems at school (eg family problems).
- Your child has (or appears to have) learning or other disabilities which may slow down progress at school.
- Your child is lacking in confidence and/or unhappy at school and complains that they are struggling, bored, or both. Watch for comments like "I'm dumb" or "I'm really bad at [subject]" or "everyone else is better than me"; or "it's too easy", "why do I have to go to school?"
- Your child is getting into trouble too much at school. This can be both a cause and a result of learning problems, and a sign that the work is too challenging or not challenging enough.
- Your child is having trouble organising their study time or is avoiding homework to the point where it's a major problem.

- Your child is very motivated to achieve and wants to go beyond what school is offering, or has a particular interest in a subject (eg a foreign language) which is not available through the school.

“People are recognising that with one-on-one attention, you can achieve results that are beyond your imagination when you’re sitting in a classroom full of students,” Druett says.

In a way, Leo Blore, another former school teacher (and school principal) who now runs Extended Learning Centres (ELC), on the Sunshine Coast, agrees.

“I think parents choose tutoring because there’s a frustration with the system and with what’s going on, especially where their kid is smarter than what’s being taught in class,” he says.

Blore says that, unlike many other tuition centres, he doesn’t focus only on kids who are “behind the eight ball”, but is more interested in extending kids wherever they’re at, and helping them to “go places in the world”.

Poor school report cards, says Blore, can be the first indicator of emotional or academic issues. And he says that boredom is a huge problem for many students.

“Smart kids with Aspergers or ADHD have got what I call a ‘bumblebee brain’. It’s just buzzing all the time, and at school the neurons are not being stimulated enough. Some kids will turn that outward into behavioural issues; but it depends on the kid. Some will sink inwards [ie suffer from depression / anxiety].”

At this point, you’ll probably talk to your child’s teacher. However, some schools, and teachers, are reluctant to agree with parents that a child may need tutoring. This may be because they are genuinely concerned that:

- The tutor might not be as well-qualified as they are to teach
- The tutor’s methods may be different to the school’s and therefore confuse the child
- The child will be overloaded and end up hating any kind of schoolwork
- The child has problems which tutoring will not fix.

However, you should be aware that some schools/teachers will be inclined to think that “if we can’t help your child, no-one can”.

And, according to the ATA’s Chris Druett: “Some schools feel it’s a reflection that they’re not doing their job properly.” Indeed, one Year 7 teacher I spoke to, on the condition of anonymity, said he felt that some kids could benefit from a tutor, but he would never say so to a parent, in case it would be inviting legal action.

“It’s a shame because tutors and schools working together can be so effective, so we definitely encourage it,” continues Druett. At least, he says, the situation is improving.

Meanwhile, Leo Blore’s extensive experience within the school system has left him frustrated with what he sees as the failure of the curriculum to reflect changes in society.

“The core content of the maths curriculum is [basically] the same as it was in the 1930’s,” he says. “But kids today are smarter, they’re exposed to so much more, through technology, through travel, through their parents. They’re being dragged down by not being allowed to do anything above their so-called ‘year level’.”

“At ELC, we get kids working on interesting maths [books] and we actually find that their reading improves automatically through that. We have a huge array of resources, and we teach other skills, everything from electronics and robotics, to typing, to exploring different writing genres. We make it interesting, and extend the kids into different areas and say, ‘go for your life’.”

If you have purchased one of these products, are unhappy, and would like to dispute your contract, the NSW Consumer Credit Legal Centre website has some great advice (although not all of it may apply to consumers in Queensland): <http://www.cclcnsw.org.au>

Alternatively, there are many free or reasonably-priced websites (do a search for “maths kids fun” or similar), which may be helpful where parents are willing to be involved, students are fairly motivated to cover the work at home, and/or for families who may not be able to afford other options. For example, this free website follows the Australian curriculum for Years 7 – 12, and includes detailed online lessons and printout worksheets:
<http://www.mathsonline.com.au/>

NOTE: Kids need more than just “click and enter” software programs/websites to keep up with mathematics requirements – they must be able to use a pencil and paper to show diagrams, working out and reasoning. And if your maths isn’t great, take care, because unless they have someone to help them when they get stuck, the lack of support can blow their confidence and may actually worsen their results.

FINDING A TUTOR

You can find a tutor by asking around, checking the Yellow Pages or through online search sites such as www.findatutor.com.au or www.tutorfinder.com.au. The Australian Tutoring Association (ATA) website, www.ata.edu.au, will show you who is a member of their organisation, which is important as it means they have agreed to follow the ATA’s Code of Conduct. All three of these sites also include great general advice and tips for parents about how to choose a tutor. For example, the ATA website gives an excellent checklist of the questions you should ask a potential tutor, covering issues such as qualifications, child protection clearance, costs, refunds and contracts, methods and materials, progress reports, dispute resolution procedures and more.

PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

Good tutoring does not use a “one-size-fits-all” approach, and the tutoring program should be individually tailored to your child’s abilities. Shop around before you make a decision.

Whatever form of tutoring you decide upon, children will usually attend for around one hour per week, and they may also have some specific ‘homework’ to do before the next session. Make sure your kids are also getting plenty of outdoor exercise and free time to play, even if you have to cut back on something else for a while. And don’t put yourself under too much financial pressure, because in the long run that’s not going to help your child. You might find that your local community centre or library even has a free homework help service.

RICHARD’S* STORY:

“We realised that our child needed one-on-one instruction that couldn’t be provided by the school. We found a tutor through a recommendation by another parent. Essentially our tutor uses the same methods as the school teacher, although she also presents other, more traditional teaching methods, and our child seems to respond well to this. I would say it’s been beneficial, as Jonathon* is now more able to keep up with his classmates. The only downside is that the school won’t allow the tutor to come into the classroom, which is what we originally wanted, but they have allowed Jonathon to come home earlier on ‘tute days’.”

DEBORAH’S STORY:

“School just wasn’t giving my kids enough mental stimulation. They were starting to ‘play up’ because they were extremely bored. My fifteen-year-old had been mis-diagnosed with ADHD when he was younger but I had refused to put him on medication. Later both kids were diagnosed as being high-end Aspergers. The school ran IQ tests and although they’re not

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

The ATA's Chris Druett says the "premium" form of tutoring is a fully qualified one-on-one tutor who comes to your home. "Depending on the subject and year level, that can cost anywhere from \$30 - \$100 per hour. Online tuition (where you are interacting in real time with an online tutor) might cost around \$40 per hour, again depending on subject and level. At the other end of the scale you might go to a 'homework help centre' which might be with ten other students, and that might cost around \$20 per hour."

"We have a blanket fee of \$49.50 per 75 minute session," says ELC's Leo Blore. "Some kids can cover fifteen or twenty maths concepts in one session; some are flat out doing that much in a term at school."

But as part of his holistic, "big picture" approach, Blore says he ends up spending a lot of time outside paid sessions working with parents, and that his students end up becoming "like family".

"If I can see that something's worrying a kid, I'll say 'what's up' and we'll talk about it. This might be a simple thing that we can speak about and resolve in ten minutes, which will free up their brain to take in information."

GETTING OFF ON THE RIGHT FOOT:

Before you start searching for a tutor, you might want to consult your GP, and if necessary get a referral to a paediatrician (ideally one with experience in dealing with kids with learning problems) to establish what medical or other conditions might be contributing to the problem. For example, you wouldn't want to discover too late that a \$200 pair of glasses would have saved you thousands in tuition fees!

You should also:

- Discuss with your child the reasons why you feel tutoring would be beneficial, and involve them in the process of choosing a tutor
- Be realistic about your expectations, both in terms of results and time-frames. Tutoring is not a magic wand, and there may be other issues such as parenting techniques or family dynamics which need to be addressed.
- Stay involved with your child's learning, and maintain regular communication with both your child's tutor and school teacher.
- Review regularly, and reward successes rather than focussing on negatives.
- Consider changing tutors or looking for other causes if things don't seem to improve.

"TUTORING" COMPUTER SOFTWARE = APPROACH WITH CAUTION

Over the last few years, consumer affairs organisations have issued warnings about companies selling computer software "tutoring" programs.

(http://www.ocba.sa.gov.au/assets/medicomms/mrelease_tutorprogram.pdf)

Some of these companies use emotional blackmail and high-pressure in-home sales pitches disguised as "free assessments" to push parents into buying on the spot. Families have signed up to repayment plans totalling almost \$10,000 (including thousands of dollars in interest). Some of them discover within a few weeks that the product doesn't appeal to their children and the promised "phone support" is unsatisfactory.

genius level, they're close, but both of them were starting to think that there was something wrong with them. Their teachers said they were lazy, not concentrating, not listening.

I heard about Extended Learning Centres through word of mouth, but I was very wary because I'd tried one of the home tutorial computer systems, and had been badly burned by that financially.

The change in both kids was miraculous. Their behavioural issues just disappeared. Their minds were being fed! Their teachers noticed a huge difference, and it also helped their self-confidence enormously. Leo [Blore] has really gone out on a limb for us, including coming along to meetings with the school, which really helped.

It took about six months to really be confident that tutoring was the right thing. I was spending a \$1000 a term, and it was a real struggle, because I wasn't working at the time, but the way it benefited the kids and the changes in them, it was obviously the right thing to do.

Now, after three years, the kids still get out of the car and run up when we arrive, and when it's time to go they never want to leave."

** These are real stories but names have been changed.*

