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Essential Articles on Parenting and Education

# Does Tutoring Help or Harm Your Child's Education?

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In the past decade tutoring has become a common means parents use to educate their children. According to Eduventures, the educational research firm, \$4 billion was spent on tutoring in 2005—\$3.75 billion of it by parents.

Whether or not tutoring is popular, the motivation for directing students to tutoring has not always been wise, which is why the tendency to tutor has come in for rightly deserved criticism. Some children are being driven toward tutoring out of a mistaken belief that it is always valuable—that it is simply another way to enrich the educational experience of a child, as if it were a guaranteed means to ratchet up the quality of education for any child.

In my experience, tutoring for enrichment is often the purported reason for tutoring rather than the true motive. The widespread tendency to tutor children is instead, at least in part, the result of parents' anxiety about the future of their children. For decades, parents have questioned whether the education they provide their children prepares them for their futures. In recent years, as the economy has worsened and the middle class has shrunk, parents have repeatedly turned to tutoring to reassure themselves that they are doing all they can for the education of their children. This explanation does not characterize all the reasons for tutoring, but it explains a significant part of its current popularity.

In these circumstances, it is all the more important to understand when to tutor and when not to tutor, what good tutoring looks like, and how parents can increase the chances that the tutoring succeeds.

## The Responsibilities of Tutors

Before I address these topics, I think it is important to state that the issues surrounding tutoring cannot be resolved by addressing parents alone. Tutors bear a responsibility for ensuring that they are working in the best interests of students, which sometimes includes recommending to parents

that it is unwise to tutor a child. A tutor is entrusted with a role in the educational development of a child. And yet, unlike a teacher or a child therapist, there are few comprehensive, well-articulated ideas about the responsibilities of the tutor. One Columbia University professor of education referred to tutoring as “the Wild West” because of its lack of clear standards and wide range of practices.

In my opinion, standards for tutors should go far beyond a pledge not to exploit the anxieties of parents. They should make clear that tutors work to make students independent of tutors, and they should describe with considerable nuance how tutors relate to students, parents and teachers. They should require tutors to show awareness of the intellectual and psychological effects of tutoring on the development of a student.

## Right and Wrong Reasons to Tutor

Let’s begin with some recognizable types of students who are directed toward tutoring. A short but by no means exhaustive list includes:

- Students whose parents drive them to excel;
- Students with organizational difficulties; and
- Students who want to score well on standardized tests, especially the SAT or ACT.

While parents might easily locate their children within one of these groups, I don’t believe that is reason enough to tutor them.

## Students Driven to Excel

Consider the first group, students whose parents drive them to excel. I have had students brought to me because their parents insist they could do better in school, that they must receive only good or very good grades. In some cases, parents had a squad of tutors attending to their child’s every subject and organizational need.

On close inspection, I found these children to be good students who were working hard and had no desire to be tutored. They were students who, to my mind, shouldn’t be tutored because it would send them exactly the wrong message: that their ability and their stage of intellectual development aren’t good enough; they don’t have it in themselves to learn on their own.

The parents in these cases were not trying to enrich the educational experience of their child. Instead, the parents wanted tutoring because of an overwhelming desire for their child to be competitive for the best colleges and universities. The wish to be competitive is not in itself a problem, but when it trumps all other elements in the decision to tutor it undermines a vital part of educational development: the discovery of patience, individual interests, internal resources, and limitations.

The last of these discoveries is often the most difficult for parents and students to accept, because it can seem like defeat or failure—but only if success is defined as going to one of a few colleges or universities. And only if one does not recognize that limitations are also the fertile ground through which students find where their strengths and interests lie.

I know of one family who spent considerable resources on tutoring to ensure their child was admitted to an elite university. Once there, that student continued to need tutoring because the intellectual demands of the university were beyond his abilities at the time. At a more appropriate

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The motive to tutor children is in part the result of parents' anxiety about the future of their children.

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school, he would have been more satisfied and confident. Instead, he continued to doubt his ability to work on his own. In this case, excessive focus on competition undermined a student's development.

Parents aren't always wrong, however, when they use tutors to further their children's effort to excel. I've had students who were in constant conflict with their parents

over school, which led the students to work far below their ability. Tutoring—even though their parents pushed them into it—provided them with a place to discover intellectual passions and to succeed at school.

## Students with Organizational Difficulties and Students Preparing for Tests

For each of these types of students, the decision to tutor should nonetheless be an individual one. Some students have disabling organizational styles, which prevent them from starting or completing assignments. Or they exhibit a divergent style of thinking, which may frustrate their ability to untangle their thoughts and thereby produce a good essay. They may respond well to tutoring. Still other students walk around with backpacks

that are exploding with papers and handouts, their rooms equally a mess—seemingly poster children for organizational help—and yet they are doing fine in school.

There are also students who are paralyzed with anxiety at the prospect of a test. They benefit from individualized testing strategies that a tutor might provide. But there are students who go for SAT test preparation even though they have already performed well on the test. They aren't satisfied; they want a near perfect score because they are convinced they cannot be happy anywhere but at a small, selective group of colleges or universities. Tutoring these students would encourage impatience with their development and promote a narrow idea of what success in their lives should be. It could divert them from a profound realization of their abilities and interests—all because their education did not follow a story of their lives that others tell them should be their story.

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## Intellectual Independence

In each case, the decision to tutor should be an individual determination, and it should be driven by a principled question: Does tutoring enable the development of intellectual independence in your child, or does it undermine it?

By intellectual independence, I mean the ability of students to learn on their own, using the resources of the school. Students who exhibit intellectual independence are still challenged in school. After all, education requires intellectual challenge. They may struggle in some subjects, and they may not be the best student in their classes. They have nonetheless learned how to solve problems on their own and how to find help within a school when they need it. These students understand how to learn with patience and how to be resourceful, which bodes well for their futures—far more so than which high school or college they attend. They have confidence in their abilities and aren't shaken by their limitations.

The importance of intellectual independence should lead parents to ask these questions before they decide to tutor:

- Is my child genuinely stuck or merely struggling for a time with a subject or skill? Have I given my child adequate time to solve this difficulty on her own?
- Has my child used the resources of the school, including teachers, learning centers, peer tutors, and resident learning specialists and counselors? Has my child learned to seek help when necessary?

## Tutoring Well: Teaching Students How They Learn

If your child is stuck, if your child has exhausted the school's resources, then tutoring may be a good option. Its goal should be intellectual independence. Tutors should certainly teach the relevant skills or subject matter, but they should do more than that. They should work to increase the ability of the child to meet the challenges of learning on his or her own. Tutors should work themselves out of a job, returning the student to the ordinary struggles of being in school.

To do this, tutors need to observe carefully how these students are trying to learn, including which habits enable—and which disable—them. That requires a capacity in the tutor to observe well and to instruct accordingly.

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This approach means that tutors should do more than help with an essay on *Song of Solomon* or *The Catcher in the Rye*. They should show students which writing habits frustrate their ability to write, and provide them with more constructive ones. If the students have a misguided sense of how to organize their time, tutors should show students as much in a constructive

manner. With an awareness of their habits, students' capacities to solve their own problems are often activated.

The examples I just cited are of nothing more than good instruction, but there are more complicated cases; there are complex reasons why students get stuck—in spite of the best efforts of schools and parents. They may be students who have gotten by on intelligence alone for all their school years, only to find the demands of the upper grades at a new school flummox them because they have no disciplined study habits. They may have been told they were brilliant so often that they cannot produce a first

draft of anything; because their essay is not immediately superb, they fail to turn in writing assignments.

Students such as these have somehow remained deaf to the counsel of their parents and the advice of their schools. Within tutoring, they may listen differently and learn about their habits. With knowledge of how they learn, students are better able to make changes and also to see those changes as something they have chosen to do. This boosts confidence and often renders the tutor less necessary.

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## What to Look for in a Tutor

If tutoring is the proper choice, then it's worth considering how parents can improve the likelihood that it will work well for their child. To begin with, there are important characteristics that parents should look for in their child's relationship with the tutor:

- The tutor builds trust with your child. Tutors should build an open relationship with students, so the students increasingly reveal, directly and indirectly, what the experience of learning is like for them. Tutoring won't work if students are uncomfortable disclosing how they are struggling. It may be that they don't have confidence in the tutor, or it may be a sign that they don't want to be tutored.
- To the student, the tutor is neither a parent nor a teacher. Tutors should pursue a unique relationship with their students, one that is free of the parents' need to discipline and the teacher's need to grade. Since home life and school life have not been able to solve the problem, it is essential to create a different kind of environment and relationship within which students can explore their academic difficulties.
- The tutor provides specific habits and skills that enable the student to become independent. Those habits may teach the student to handle a workload, read with greater understanding, write essays, wrestle with geometry, manage time, or even adjust to the pedagogical style of a teacher or school. Whatever is needed, there should be clear signs that the tutor's work increases the student's capacity to learn and develops the student's independence. To that end, the tutor should pursue in-

formation from parents, teachers, and any other professionals whose insights into the child increase the chance of success.

## The Right Expectations

Parents also have an active role to play in enabling the success of tutoring. That role can be divided into the expectations they bring to tutoring and the contributions they provide.

If parents encourage the right expectations for tutoring, it improves the odds it will succeed. Two expectations are especially important. First, tutoring does not focus on swiftly improving the grades of a student. Improved grades may be an effect, but it is not a goal. Whether it comes from the parents or the student, an expectation that tutoring is about grades can doom tutoring even before it begins. It can lead students to concentrate on immediate performance to the exclusion of underlying learning issues and distract them from the important changes in habits and development of skills necessary for their academic success. Parents should instead encourage their child to measure success by the child's increasing ability to work independently.

Second, tutoring will use whatever length of time is necessary to help the student—but no more. If parents demand that tutoring be completed in a certain number of weeks it is equivalent to their expecting that their child will change in a prescribed period of time. This does not mean tutoring should go on indefinitely. Parents should make clear to the tutor that they expect the tutor to work toward making their child independent of tutoring.

## The Effect of Parent Contribution

The information and feedback that parents provide the tutor are just as important as the expectations that they bring. In tutoring, as in many helping professions, the coin of the realm is information. A physician is only as brilliant at diagnosis as the information she has about her patient. The ability of a tutor to succeed with a child depends on the information that parents provide about the child's school habits—vital so if the child is embarrassed, reluctant or unable to articulate them. The more comprehensive

parents are in providing tutors with information, the more swiftly they will be effective. Parents should communicate anything they know about their child's study habits and work product, as well as professional advice from counselors and teachers. They should note to the tutor when family events, extracurricular activities or health issues affect the student because it influences the kinds of demands a tutor should place on the student in any given session.

It is equally important to tell tutors if students believe in them or show dissatisfaction. It is rare for students to be able to voice their complaints directly, and rarer that a tutor will get it right with a student all the time. Feedback provides the input for tutors to adjust to the needs of the student whenever they can.

There are also distinct ways in which the active contributions of parents can undermine the success of tutoring. The most common problem is over-involvement in the work a student is doing with a tutor. I have had parents who simply must help out their child at the first signs of struggle. They cannot distance themselves. While the student tries to follow instructions that ultimately will improve the student's ability to write an essay, the parents cannot tolerate the sight of a misshaped paragraph or a confused argument. So they jump in and fix everything they can. As a result, rather than learn from tutoring, the child learns to expect his parent will intervene when the going gets tough. In effect, the child maintains a dependence on the parent.

It is equally problematic when the parents draw the tutor into an effort to discipline the student. I have had parents who have waited until I was present to berate their child for schoolwork or for a lack of effort. Or they have urged me to act as a proxy for them, interrogating their child about his or her failure to do schoolwork. In effect, this action implicates the tutor as a parent-like figure, threatening the neutral space tutoring relies on to make a difference with the student.

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These behaviors are not the norm, however. In my experience, parents are eager to see tutoring succeed, quick to change their habits to help that along, and wise about what will most support their child. If tutoring is appropriate and both parents and tutor cleave to the principle of intellectual

independence, it can provide a powerful means for changing a student's relation to learning.

Used wisely, tutoring can help students develop the capacity to solve problems on their own. It can help them to discover a path to their intellectual and creative interests. It can teach independence to students and help them to achieve a more focused and energized relationship to their education. For that to happen, tutoring should never undermine the development of students' capacity to solve problems on their own; instead it should teach that independence and restore the student to his or her school.

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