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Kicking the Tutoring Habit

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In the early 1930's, when my father was in elementary school in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, students were given a singing test at the beginning of the year. Each student was placed in one of three groups: sopranos, altos, and listeners. The duties of the listeners? Learn the words to every song, attend all performances, and mouth silently.

When I was in elementary school in the 1950's, the kindergarten curriculum had modest goals: Teach students to get along with their neighbors, line up quietly for recess, and learn the Pledge of Allegiance. For a special craft project we made handprint ashtrays out of clay for our parents.

The Tutoring Phenomenon

As today's middle schoolers frequently remind us, "Times have so changed." Try that singing test now and you might find parents picketing outside of school: "Perfect pitch is relative." "Solo parts discriminate." "This school damages self-esteem." And while the ashtrays might shock, the bigger complaint would be about a kindergarten curriculum lacking in both rigor and daily phonics homework, thereby placing children at a disadvantage for the verbal portion of the SAT.

Expectations of equal treatment of every student and of early, sustained, measurable, high-academic performance in every area drive both administrative decisions and parent behavior. We wish to view our students as filled with unlimited promise but, as was always true, some children can sing and others can't. Some are ready to read in kindergarten and some aren't. And some will never be good in specific subjects.

While we can provide encouragement and challenging learning opportunities, the possibility of students reaching their potential is up to them. But, more and more, parents are trying to fill in the blanks of talent—or predilection or drive—to insert whatever seems to be missing, to get kids up to speed (or even faster) by hiring private tutors to help. This well-intentioned impulse has a cost, one that is increasingly apparent in independent school communities.

The Habit of Tutoring for Enrichment

Tutoring for enrichment and learning enhancement (in contrast to needed, necessary, and school-supported tutoring) is seductive; it appears on its face to be a wholesome and positive activity. It's easy to justify. Parents can choose from the following menu: It's a good idea to get my child after-school tutoring because...

...she got a B minus in math. If she falls behind she'll never catch up; it's getting harder and harder to secure a spot in the best secondary schools and colleges these days.

...when we had her tested we discovered that she has a "learning difference"; clearly this means she will always need extra help.

...I'm quite sure most of the other students are getting tutored; without extra help, she won't be playing on a level field.

...she doesn't like to spend time by herself, but is too young to be outdoors without adult supervision; I don't want her to be in front of a computer or video or television or any other screen all afternoon.

The educational philosophy of "if some is good, more is better" is compelling. Parents imagine tutoring is the norm for even the ablest students, that if they don't give their children an advantage they will, in fact, be at a disadvantage. But more is not always best for our children—not for acquisition of skills or for pleasure in learning.

The Formula for Creating Lazy Learners

Yesterday, as I sat in session with the mother of a young child suffering from chronic constipation, I realized that it may be time to replace the old psychoanalytic view of the cause of this problem—the child is filled with repressed anger—with a new one: dependency-on-adults disorder. When loving, devoted, well-intentioned adults "over-function" by assisting children with tasks they are capable of doing themselves—for example, recognizing the physical sensations that trigger the brain that it's time to go to the toilet—children don't develop the habit of paying attention to cues.

The child's thought process might be: Why bother? Going to the bathroom is too much trouble. I'll just wait for someone else to take care of it.

Excuse the vividness of the metaphor here, but tutoring can cause learning constipation. If you know your own private grown-up will show up at your house at exactly 4:30, you don't need to ask questions in class, you don't have to listen too carefully to the homework directions, you don't have to build up the confidence to raise your hand and say, "Ms. Cross, I don't understand. Can you please explain that again?" You can wait and ask your tutor.

Other hidden costs of a steady diet of tutoring for enrichment include:

- Loss of intrinsic motivation (*I'm doing this work for them, not for myself.*).
- Loss of gratification and pride (the kind that comes from figuring out how to meet learning and creative challenges on one's own).
- Lowered self-confidence (*I must be pretty defective if my parents have to hire a specialist to come to our house.*).
- Loss of adult-free time, which translates for children into the lost opportunity to develop the habits of play and creativity, and the lost capacity to form their own relationship to the world around them.
- Loss of time to do chores and develop good family citizenship.
- Unwittingly teaching children that problems can be solved most efficiently by spending money.

Psychologists have different ways of describing the dampening of intrinsic motivation and stick-to-it-ive-ness: learned helplessness (*No matter what I do, it won't make much difference.*); cognitive dissonance (*If someone is paying me to work, my diligence is due to their investment, not my own desire.*); and shifting to an external locus of control (*Success is not due to my effort or ability but to external factors.*).

The Problem of the Heavily Staffed Child

A mother in one of my parenting classes described her role as a cross between a sherpa, a butler, a concierge, a talent agent, and the secret police. Many parents use web capture technology to trace their children's browsing and surfing history, to study their MySpace or Facebook sites, and to read transcripts of their instant messages. Some of the children have housekeep-

ers to pick up their clothes. Most travel to school in a carpool. When we add yet another adult—the tutor—to this retinue of handlers, we risk increasing the children’s sense of dependency and helplessness and decreasing their privacy and personal time.

Tutoring is analogous to hand-feeding a maturing bird: it will be well fed, but dangerously dependent. With over-handled kids, the trouble usually comes when they get to college and suddenly have to forage for food (knowledge) on their own. They’ll be better prepared if they’ve developed the necessary skills (delay of frustration, tolerance of boredom, persistence, patience, control over feelings of anxiety, and ability to set priorities) before they go out into the world.

Unnecessary tutoring also leads to a loss of learning about the natural consequences of insufficient test preparation or hastily done assignments. This is similar to the problem of grade inflation. In both cases—the heavily

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tutored child and the child who attends a school where most grades are A’s and B’s—the student doesn’t have the opportunity to find out where he stands. As a result, he loses the automatic feedback mechanism of grades in relation to effort.

And then there’s the question of ethics and tutoring. Students from wealthier families can afford more tutoring than other students. If we pull back the curtain on this shadow economy, we see an increase in inequality. If school were the Olympics, the tutored participants might be eliminated for cheating.

Also, “stealth tutoring” can warp a child’s sense of what is ethical. What message do we send to children when we hire a tutor and tell the children to keep it a secret from the school? If your school’s honor code requires a student to write: “I have not given or received any unauthorized assistance with this assignment,” where does the tutor fit in? Is she an extension of the child’s “I” because she is hired by the parents?

In short, tutoring for enrichment causes practical, moral and psychological problems. It can lead kids to feel like handicapped royalty instead of vigorous and engaged learners who are in the habit of advocating for themselves.

I don’t mean to suggest that children should never get support in school or at home. Certainly those with substantial learning difficulty in

a particular subject (but not every subject) will benefit from appropriate help. And, at some point, all children need others to turn to for tips, to get them on the right track, or to simply listen as they work out problems for themselves. And I don't mean to be critical of all tutors. I know that there are many worthy tutors who have the courage to coach rather than to cater. But if we can break the reflex to enlist the help of a professional outsider at the first whiff of difficulty, many benefits await.

How can we, in schools, raise parental consciousness about the dangers of unneeded tutoring in a fashion that builds the parent-school partnership? The first step is to view parents' behavior with empathy.

The Fear Factor

A school divided the fourth graders into math groups based on their skill. Indignant parents immediately called the head of the lower school: "My child is not in the top group!" "My child is, surprising as I find this to be, in the low group!" "Had you simply let us know before you gave the placement test, we would have had him tutored!"

It's easy to mock this reaction, to see it as a lack of faith in the school, in its able teachers and wise administrators, and a lack of sophistication about what kids need in order to reach their potential in math, but it's more useful to look at this reaction from the parents' perspective.

Parental jitteriness about their children's school achievement is fueled by a pervasive sense of unease about the future, a sense of scarce resources: *We are aging. The planet is melting. The competition is daunting. What if my child is downwardly mobile?* When parents are overly fearful they reduce their thinking to simple but false dichotomies: *There are only two positions for my child, ahead or behind. There are so many things I can't do anything about, but there is one thing I can fix: my child's grade in Biology.*

The first step is to raise parents' awareness of these displaced and condensed fears. The next is to increase familiarity with alternatives to professional tutoring.

At School: It Takes a Village

Super radical old-fashioned idea: Encourage parents to persuade their child to see the teacher or turn to a friend for help. Asking a busy teacher for extra help is not as easy as relying on the tutor your mom hired, the one who comes to your house right after your milk and cookies (or red peppers, pita

chips, and hummus), but it is a great habit to develop, one of huge advantage when the students are in college—perhaps even of more value than the higher grade on the quiz or paper yielded by the tutoring.

A friend can also help. In a wonderful November 1988 *New York Times* article on peer tutoring, the education writer Edward B. Fiske explains that much of the best learning comes from teaching yourself or teaching others. He points to the work of Diane Hedin, of the University of Minnesota, whose survey of the literature on peer tutoring found compelling evidence of its effectiveness for both tutor and tutee. The study showed “dramatic changes in self-confidence and self-image as well as higher motivation to learn and achieve.”

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The biggest gains come to student tutors who are having academic difficulty themselves. Fiske points to a Harvard Graduate School of Education survey that found that “(Some) students have stopped studying because they do not want to read ‘baby’ books or work on elementary math problems, but they can learn little from materials written at their grade level. Tutoring gives them an excuse to review the basics. It also forces them to think about how they learn and to break tasks into manageable bites.”

Consider having your fifth graders, especially the ones who are struggling, tutor the third graders . . . or the fourth graders tutor the first graders. Be prepared with an explanation if parents say, “I’m not paying to have my child work!” or “That’s not what I’m spending my thousands of tuition dollars for.”

Yes, the school day is already crammed with activities and we don’t want students missing time on the play yard or relaxed lunchtime socializing, but consider seeking a pocket of time, perhaps for just for a few students, to slot in peer tutoring. Be creative. At the Park Tudor School in Indiana, students receive community service hours for helping others with academic work.

At Home: We Are Family

In most families, there are often untapped resources and knowledge to draw

on. Consider sibling tutors. They don't have to travel to get to the house. Parents can barter with them for their services. If everyone can stay cool and not get touchy about the perceived delicate condition of the tutee's self-esteem, it doesn't matter who's older or younger. What does matter is who understands the order of operations or Spanish verb tenses well enough to explain, or who is patient, or can make it fun. If bartering doesn't appeal, parents can always pay.

Even though I'm a psychologist who is always trying to get over-involved parents out of the room, to get them to mind their business and let their child learn to solve his or her own problems, you might suggest that parents try pitching in by saying to them, "I know you're busy ... and the math is hard and weird ... and it's been a really long time since you tackled meiosis versus mitosis ... and your child says he doesn't want your help but ... if you can stay calm, you can try your hand at offering your child some coaching and support—and save so much money you can all go on a little vacation to celebrate."

Grab those new parents before they drink the Kool-Aid, get acculturated into the hypercompetitive cult, and lose their sense and perspective. Catch them early. Raise consciousness. Adam Rohdie, head of Greenwich Country Day in Connecticut, suggests conducting "how to help with homework" workshops for new parents. A teacher or resource specialist can put a problem on the board along with the wrong answer and ask the parents: "If your child comes to you asking for help with this problem, what would you do?" Effective strategies for supporting autonomous learning can be modeled and taught.

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tolerance of boredom,
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skills.

Parents can also provide homework support, not through direct help, but by simply providing companionship. We have such an odd, heroic, individualistic culture. "Tiny infant," we seem to say, "find a way to fall asleep in your big, dark room, all by yourself, instead of in the long hut, in a hammock with your mommy and aunties and the whole tribe. And when you come home from school, do that work in your room all by yourself, no collaboration, no peeking out the door! No company!"

Many independent school students live far apart from each other, isolated like princesses in towers. The evening hours can get long and lonely. When the children were smaller, the parents read them a story before bed. Now that the children are bigger with bigger homework responsibility, par-

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ents might sit beside them and read their own books, just to make a cozier scene. This isn't coddling, it's human contact. We are social animals.

You can also encourage parents to help protect their children from all the alluring but anti-productive electronic distractions. Like crows attracted to shiny objects, children get sucked into the machines: YouTube or texting or Guitar Hero. When we require them to cut down on multi-tasking, efficiency increases.

The No-Tutor Solution

Another option is to let students pay the price for poor choices. Consider saying to parents, "Don't hire a tutor; let your children get a low grade. Give them an opportunity to learn about cause and effect. Make privileges contingent on bringing the grade up. Help them take ownership of their learning."

We should also fight expectations of perfection. No matter how high the tuition at your school, every child can't have the most popular teacher. You can't teach to every learning style, can't provide for every aspect of the students' academic, moral and character education, can't guarantee that every day or every week or even every year will be a great one for every student. And this is not a bad thing, because it's just like real life.

Just as your school isn't perfect, students will still fall somewhere in the middle of the normal curve, at least in some subjects. But the parental quest for their achievement has become so engrained in children's value systems; when one mother said, "Well, you can't be good at everything," in response to her fifth grader's "C" in science, her son just stared at her, speechless.

When we act as though our kids no longer have strengths, only weaknesses that can and must be remediated, we communicate unrealistic expectations of perfection. Tell parents to respond to some lower-than-hoped-for grades without panic. Encourage them to demonstrate that they value

many varied attributes of their children, including non-academic traits like manners and kindness.

Tell parents not to put a stumbling block before the blind by sending their child to the most academically competitive school they can wedge the child into. When over-placed kids need near-daily tutoring, we are stealing their childhoods.

Pat Bassett, NAIS president, writes that good schools are countercultural. In a culture that values easy solutions and showy results over ethics and substance, tutoring for enhancement is a natural but highly costly choice. Opening up a dialogue with parents on this subject is an important countercultural exercise. So here's a final suggestion: Start a chapter of TA (Tutoring Anonymous) that will allow parents to band together with others to resist overwhelming urges.

Hiring a tutor is an effort to make schoolwork and homework less onerous, less risky, less troublesome. And, while we don't want to relegate any students to the sad calling of being "listeners" or to hold back the willing and eager kindergarten reader, we do want to be realistic and respectful and to give the children a chance to find their own rhythm, in their own time, using their own strengths.

Wendy Mogel is a clinical psychologist and the author of the The Blessing of a Skinned Knee. She lectures nationally about managing parental anxiety and entitlement in independent schools. A special thanks to David Dunbar, Coordinator of Teaching and Learning Initiatives for The Masters School (New York) and CITYterm; to Adam Rohdie, Head of Greenwich Country Day in Greenwich (Connecticut); Douglas Jennings, Head of Park Tudor School in Indianapolis (Indiana); and Lois Levy, Head of the Lower School at the Center for Early Education (California).

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