

What You Should Know—and Questions You Should Ask—Before You Hire a Tutor or Tutoring Company

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The roots of private tutoring go all the way back to classical times, when emperors employed renowned philosophers and rhetoricians to privately educate their children: think Quintillian and Cicero. Traditionally private tutoring was a service provided only to society's most elite, ensuring that only the affluent received the best education. Today, in modern America, many middle-class families are also enjoying the benefits of some form of private tutoring and federal efforts are being made to make private tutoring also available to the economically challenged (through the private tutoring provision established under President Bush's No Child Left Behind educational reform act).

There is overwhelming research to support the benefits of one-on-one tutoring in improving students' grades, study skills, and confidence levels (Bloom, 1984; Slavin et al., 1991; Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989; Wasik & Slavin, 1990; McArthur, Stasz, & Zmuidzinas, 1990; Hock, Schumaker, & Deshler, 1995; Lepper et al., 1997; Merrill et al., 1995; Simmons, Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes & Hodge, 1995; Vadasy, Jenkins, Antil, Wayne, & O'Connor, 1997), and there are many situations in which private tutoring can be both beneficial and necessary.

Private tutoring can do much more than merely benefit the student who is experiencing difficulty with a particular subject—after all, none of us grasp *every single concept* in every single subject the first time it is presented to us. Private tutoring can also help the following students in the following ways:

- Private tutoring can help students with learning disabilities to master subjects and study skills (Vadasy, Jenkins, & Pool, 2000);
- Private tutoring can help students who have performed poorly on yearly standardized tests (Robelen, 2002);
- Private tutoring can help academically and intellectually advanced students remain challenged—and, therefore, interested in their education—and, because it is customized, one-to-one instruction, private tutoring can go at the accelerated pace necessary for such students (as reported by Dr. Charlton in "The Story of My Life" in Charlton, Marolf, & Stanley, 2002);
- Private tutoring can help ensure that elementary school students have a firm grasp on academic basics when school systems may be introducing more complex ideas before the basics have been mastered as a result of mandatory end-of-year standardized testing (MacDonald, 2003);
- Private tutoring can help students prepare for and maximize scores on standardized college admissions tests, such as the SAT, GRE, LSAT, MCAT, TOFEL, and others (Matson 2003);
- And, yes, private tutoring can also help students who are having difficulty with a particular subject—for as we all know, few of us are equally good at every subject: some of us are math people, some of us are language arts people, some of us are more interested in science or history—and, therefore, some of need additional help at some point in our educational lives in subjects we find particularly challenging).

Parents interested in providing private tutoring for their children for remedial purposes should know the answers to these four very important questions prior to hiring a private tutor or private tutoring agency: (1) What makes a successful tutor?, (2) What should be your tutor's goal in educating your child?, (3) How long will your child need to be tutored?, and (4) Will you be paying for individualized one-on-one instruction or will you be paying for a pre-established curriculum presented to your child in a group setting?

Because these first three questions are interrelated, their answer is likewise interrelated. A good tutor is a tutor who uses strategic tutoring to help a child not only improve his or her grades on assignments, quizzes, and tests but who also teaches him or her how to master the skills necessary to learn the subject on his or her own.

Thus, the goal of private tutoring for remedial purposes should be to teach the student *how to learn* the subject for which he or she is being tutored so that he or she ultimately no longer needs the assistance of the tutor. Although the time required for each student to master these skills varies, results from strategic tutoring can be expected within eight to ten weeks of individualized one-on-one tutoring sessions occurring at least one hour per week during that time frame.

To answer the fourth question: Before you hire a tutor or tutoring company, you should also inquire whether your child will be tutored one-on-one with an individualized curriculum specifically designed for him or her (based on his or her particular needs and learning style) by an educated, trained tutor—or whether your child will be tutored in a small group setting with a pre-established curriculum. Just as tutors' level of education and training varies, the tutoring style employed by tutors and tutoring agencies varies as well. The vast limitations, even ineffectiveness, of novice (untrained) tutors is revealed over and over again in research studies (Fuchs et al., 1994; Hock et al., 1995; Kohler & Greenwood, 1990; Graesser et al., 1997; Jenkins & Jenkins, 1985; McArthur et al., 1990).

While much research supports the benefits of private tutoring, the research that dispels the benefits of tutoring seems to be geared more toward the type of tutoring than the practice of tutoring as a whole (Hock et al., 2001). In fact in studies that question the measurable benefits of tutoring, many of the tutors are neither educated nor trained in the subject matter they are tutoring and the type of tutoring administered is either not identified by the study or it is simple assignment-based tutoring (defined below). The *kind of tutor you hire* (an educator trained and educated in the subject matter versus a layperson with little to no training or education) and the *method of tutoring the tutor employs* (**strategic tutoring**—where students are not only prepped for assignments, quizzes, and tests but are also taught how to master the learning strategies necessary for the particular subject (Hock et al., 1995)—**versus assignment based tutoring**—where students are only given assistance on specific assignments assigned by their teacher as class work or as homework) *have a tremendous impact on the success of the tutoring.*

As one would expect, research suggests that when skilled tutors perform one-on-one tutoring, the vast majority of test subjects show dramatic improvement—often by two or more letter grades as a result of the tutoring (Hock et al., 2001). The few students who do not excel seem to be limited to those students who refuse to attend their classes and their tutoring sessions (Hock et al., 2001). Thus, from such research, it can be inferred that for private tutoring to be successful, these two things must take

place. First, **students must** attend school and their tutoring sessions. And, second, **tutors should be** educated and trained in both the subject matter for which they are tutoring and in strategic tutoring methods.

In view of the research findings presented in this article, quality private tutoring will probably be beneficial to you (1) if your child needs any form of remedial help, (2) if your child is not intellectually challenged by his or her current school or curriculum, or (3) if you or your child plan on taking a college admissions test. But remember, for private tutoring to be successful, you must first investigate the **qualifications** of your tutor and/or tutoring agency as well as the **method** of tutoring used by that tutor or agency.

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