

Private Tutoring – is it worth it?

The pressure on young people to gain good academic results has led many adults to feel that unless they obtain private tutoring for their son/daughter, they are failing as parents. This is a harsh judgement, as not all parents can afford private tutoring, and not every young person wants or needs it.

Private tutoring (PT) was once an option considered by few besides the well-off. However, a recent survey by the Sutton Trust (a charity which promotes equal educational opportunities) found that over 25% of all state school pupils have undertaken PT, and over 40% of those living in London. To outsiders, educational inequalities may seem to lie less in differing standards of schooling, and more between those who receive PT, and those who don't.

There are agencies (such as Tutors International) catering for clients with deep pockets. This article is aimed rather at parents of reasonable but limited income, for whom the financial cost is likely to be at least a factor when contemplating PT.

Many students undertake PT in subjects compulsory up to GCSE (e.g. English, Maths and Science), and on passing which progression (more or less) depends. Whatever the subject, a school parents' evening offers an opportunity to talk over with the relevant teacher(s) whether your son/daughter might benefit from PT. However, it is advisable to discuss this with him/her in advance, and important to identify anything in particular worth raising with the teacher(s) on the night. (Meetings with staff can, of course, be arranged for other times, too).

Dyslexia (which affects reading and spelling) or dyspraxia (a physical co-ordination disorder) may be the hidden cause of any under-achievement. Your son/daughter's school would probably already have had them assessed if they suspected them of suffering from either. However, you can arrange this independently if you wish, and the British Dyslexia Association <https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/> and Dyspraxia UK <https://www.dyspraxiauk.com/> have websites which tell you more.

If it's concluded that your son/daughter would earn better grades just by taking more care with assignments, PT may be unnecessary. However, a failure to grasp concepts, significant gaps in their knowledge, or their need to approach assignments or exams differently all strengthen the case for extra help.

Mindful of the negative effect of low-performing students on their ranking, some schools offer (free) after-school classes to those at risk of poor grades. However, this may be only in specific subjects, and at particular stages. Also, these may not be practical if your son/daughter must catch a school bus, and/or has a long journey home.

PT can take several forms, but here are the three most common.

One-to-One.

This usually involves the tutor coming to the student's home, helping them by themselves, with each session lasting an hour. A regular weekly meeting is often enough to produce the desired improvement, but more frequent contact can be arranged. Variations are possible - some tutors prefer to avoid travelling, so students come to them. This may also be preferable where a quiet room in the student's home is rarely available.

A Tutor Group.

These are normally run at a tutoring centre, of which there are many. Initially, a joining fee is paid, then charges made per session, or for a limited number during a set period. Drop-in sessions are possible or even customary, and several tutors may be present at one time. Typically, groups are small, and tutors circulate, helping students with assignments or exercises as needed. These are often undertaken on a computer screen, using software packages.

Help from Current Teacher.

Some teachers earn extra money by offering their daytime pupils PT.

This may work well provided your son/daughter is comfortable with the teacher. However, many students admit their own difficulties more readily to someone unconnected with their school, and a new person can often explain things in fresh ways which can lead to a quicker understanding.

Standard tutor or agency information normally specifies charges, but most other parents will happily tell you the 'going rate'. Their impressions should also help in assessing different tutors or agencies before committing to one. Length of experience can be a guide to quality, but even tutors new to this work can be very competent, and 'spark' a student with their enthusiasm.

Whether the tutor is attached to an agency or operating independently, it is best to check if they have Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance which enables them to work with under 18s.

Since even the best learner could improve, it may be argued that all students should engage in PT. But, for most, the object is to reach a required standard, rather than overtake their classmates.

In a well-taught group of conscientious students, for instance, all may pass without any resorting to PT. However, where a high grade in a subject is needed to progress with it, or a spread of excellent results is required to enter a prestigious sixth form or university, the appeal of PT may strengthen.

Your son/daughter will have to give up time (and perhaps an enjoyable activity) to do PT, so they need some self-motivation. Eventual access to desired further study, training or work may be an appetising 'carrot' for the long-term, but better marks and avoiding embarrassment in class may be speedy but very welcome rewards.

Parents lead busy lives, and you must also consider how your son/daughter's PT may affect you. Will paying for tutorials mean working more hours, or spending time driving them to sessions? Will you be patient if they don't improve as quickly as some? It is vital that your son/daughter understands that your love for them does NOT depend on them passing an exam, however important.