



The Great Tutor Debate

We asked Ben Thomas, headmaster of Thomas' Battersea, for his (uncomprising) views on tutoring children and then spoke to tutors and a secondary head for their opinions. Compiled by Emily Turner and Suzie Skipper

“ I believe that there is such a thing as good tutoring – and far too much bad tutoring. Where there is a specific need, identified by the school, then one-to-one tutoring can and does make a positive difference. A child with a specific learning difficulty, for example, or one for whom English is not the mother tongue will benefit from such intervention for a finite period of time to help them ‘catch up’ with the curriculum.

The kind of tutoring I rail against – bad tutoring – is that instigated by FOMO: the Fear Of Missing Out. Parents who hear that “everyone else is doing it” can quickly become anxious that they will disadvantage their child if they do not join in. Suddenly, the child is subjected to late hours of additional work after school and at weekends, often on top of homework already set by the school, with no specific aim other than to ‘get ahead’.

This kind of bad tutoring leads to an erosion of childhood. Children should be using this precious time, which they will never have again, to expand their imagination: to play, to explore, to create, relax, read and think. Even, sometimes, to learn to be bored. Bad tutoring can also send a dangerous message to a child that he or she is not ‘good enough’, along with associated stress, anxiety and, in extreme cases, a breakdown in a child’s confidence, self-esteem and mental health.

And to what end? Employers tell me that many A* students from

top universities are not recruited, because, although their academic record is impeccable, they do not have the human and social skills which are necessary to succeed in the workplace. In my view, such skills come from a self-confidence that is bred in childhood and is born out of being affirmed, loved and valued, most particularly in the early years of life.

I fully understand that it is hard for parents to hold the line. With significant pressure for senior school and university places, I know why putting in place bad tutoring can feel like good parenting. But it is not.

Good education is about nurturing human flourishing in its broadest sense. Bad tutoring reduces this noble ideal to a narrow, prosaic, uninspiring pursuit of grades.

Parents need to ask themselves – in consultation with their child’s school – if there is a genuine reason, specific to their child, why extra tuition might be required. If there is not, then they must make a firm decision to love and accept their child for who they are and, if necessary, make a different plan. Good parenting means making a plan to fit the child, with all their strengths, weaknesses and idiosyncrasies, not forcing a child to become a high-functioning robot in pursuit of a narrow and often misguided goal.

My final advice to parents? Trust your instincts. Hold your nerve. Love your child for who they are. ”

The Tutors' View

Whilst 'FOMO' is certainly a factor that makes parents turn to private tuition, it is worth mentioning that the main reason for this is that competition for places at London day schools is incredibly high, says Morgan Griffiths, Managing Director at Holland Park Tuition & Education Consultants. "There has been a huge increase in the number of, and number of applicants to, selective and highly competitive pre-prep, prep and secondary schools (i.e. for entry at 4+, 7+, 8+, 11+ and 13+, not to mention pre-tests) across London."

Bad tutoring, agrees Amanda McLeod of the McLeod Centre for Learning, pushes children beyond the level that they would achieve naturally and this can cause emotional damage. "I have seen too many children tutored to death, scrape into a 'top' school and, consequently, experience a horrid education as, actually, it was the wrong school for that child to start off with," says McLeod.

A good tutor should set a schedule that doesn't result in a depressed and stressed pupil and should also work with parents to identify the best school for their child.

Many parents who pay for a tutor feel that a private hour or two gives their child confidence and the chance to go over stuff they may have missed or just not understood. "If used effectively, however, tuition can actually act to reduce stress and to increase the amount of free time a child has, since time spent on academic work with a tutor is a great deal more effective than struggling, either alone at home or in the classroom, in silence," says Griffiths.

"Of course if you're paying for an hour a week to help with a subject that you're not too strong on yourself or feel you'd rather pick your battles with your child, then targeted tutoring is worthwhile," says Mrs McLeod.

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Interestingly, not every parent who seeks out a tutor is interested in preparing for entrance exams, or even academic tuition at all, says Mr Griffiths. "For instance, we have witnessed an increasing desire for parents to provide a fully-rounded education for their children, hence they seek music, sport, drama, dance and/or art tuition to supplement that provided (or not provided) at school," says Mr Griffiths, who also says he sees a rise in requests for EAL (English as an additional language) and other MFL (modern foreign languages) tuition too.

The Secondary Head's View

Lucy Elphinstone, head of Francis Holland Sloane Square, vigorously endorses Ben Thomas' views. She says that the level of stress displayed by children at Open Mornings is marked.

This continues once the girls arrive at secondary school. Tutoring often continues the whole way through school, reducing self-confidence and self-belief. In addition, children that have been 'shoe-horned' into the wrong school continue to struggle and feel under-achievers. She says that girls approach exams in a state of hyper-anxiety.

Next year she is considering bringing the Y7 summer exams (which she is going to re-name 'assessments') forward to come before half term so that pupils can go and enjoy the break rather than face a week of intense tutoring.

Tutoring also undermines the confidence of and in a child's teacher. Elphinstone says it is exasperating for class teachers either to have their work supplemented unnecessarily or, increasingly, for pushy parents to expect schools to run weekend and holiday revision 'clubs'.

The other effect of tutoring is that pupils lose their natural creativity. They come up with formulaic pre-prepared answers, including the right amount of adjectives and interesting nouns, but devoid of sensitivity. In this regard, Elphinstone will be consulting with other secondary heads to discuss ways of changing the 11+ English entrance exams to enable pupils to better display their natural ability. In addition, she is open to the idea that some form of biometric testing should be introduced.

Like Griffiths, however, she agrees that one of the major problems is that there is huge demand for a limited number of places. The level of competition is only ever going to go down if there are more secondary schools she finishes.

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