

THE BEST WAYS TO PREPARE FOR A NEW TUTOR: HOW PARENTS CAN PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE

TOP OF THE CLASS
professional tuition

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Different parents decide to hire a private tutor for different reasons. Some parents **hire a tutor with Top of the Class** when their child is already performing well at school, and just want to do even better. Many parents however **come here to us** because their child is struggling in one or more areas, and often has been for some time.

No matter how long your child has been struggling at school, one thing has become very clear. The longer the child is left to struggle without **the right support**, the greater the problem becomes, and the more difficult it becomes to intervene. This is for two reasons, both of which I feel that all parents should be aware of.

The first is because of the cracks in their skills foundation. If your child has been lagging behind for many years, then trying to catch up quickly can be like trying to build a new house on a poor foundation; the new additions are not supported properly and crumble too easily under the slightest pressure. This is why any good tutor should aim to identify where those foundational weaknesses are precisely, and work on strengthening them as a priority above all else.

The second and most common reason is because of the foundational beliefs that a child develops about their own abilities. No matter what we as adults verbally explain to our children, they tend to take things very personally. When they see that their peers around them seem to be able to 'get it' whilst they don't, it often leaves them with the feeling that "I'm dumb" or "I'm just not good enough at this and I can't do it." These experiences can cause humiliation, shame and a huge gap in their confidence.

As kids get older, the last thing they want is for their parents (or anyone else for that matter) to be focusing on their weak spots. You may notice that when you try to speak to your child about their struggles, they may become shy, irritable, frustrated or even angry and do everything they can to avoid mum or dad focusing on it. This often causes mums and dads a lot of frustration as well, which only further serves to make the situation worse. In fact, in many instances, mum or dad is knowledgeable enough to be able to help their son or daughter with their schoolwork, but the irritability and frustration factor pose the biggest hurdle, and can often lead to a feeling of helplessness.

If this situation is one that you can associate with, the first thing you need to be aware of is that you are not alone. This is very common. The frustration you may experience is normal. The helplessness however is unnecessary, as now you can rest assured that you've found the right help.

You know that your son or daughter does have their particular strengths, is very capable in some areas, and is certainly not 'dumb'. You want them to be able to see how capable they really are but you don't know how to show it to them because the reality is that their experiences at school are not painting the picture you wished they could see. **You want the best** for them but your attempts to help them either don't help as much as you wished they could, or, in some circumstances, may just add fuel to an already out of control fire.

A lot of parents however feel a bit reluctant to express just how much of a worry this whole situation is to them out of fear of not being understood. I can't guarantee miracles, but if you talk to me about it openly, one thing I can guarantee is that I will understand. I am an experienced school teacher with four university degrees and own a tutoring company where I train other tutors how to be the best tutors for goodness sake, and yet I still choose independent tutors for my own son for these very reasons. When **you want the best** for your child, you can't always be objective and rational. That's an unfortunate side effect of being a caring parent. It doesn't mean that you've failed to support them properly – it means that you've succeeded in caring enough to want to **make a positive difference**. By looking for the right tutor, you've also succeeded in knowing what it will take to **get that difference happening**.

THE BIGGEST HURDLES WHEN STARTING TUITION

Here's the problem we face. By the time many parents come to us, there is a chance that their child is already well aware that they are struggling, and probably not feeling too good about that. For that reason, there is a chance they may see that getting a tutor is a representation of their failure. They're hearing your voice of logic and reason explaining that everything will be okay, but meanwhile their inner voice is saying "you're such a disappointment now that you need a tutor." For some students, having their first session with a private tutor is almost like having to see a medical specialist for a really humiliating disease. It can be embarrassing and very disempowering for a vulnerable young mind that is at a stage in their life where the way their self-esteem develops will affect them for years to come.

For that reason, the way that your son or daughter views the idea of getting a tutor is crucially important. As I'm sure you've already figured out, it's important that they don't perceive the process as a punishment or an indication of inadequacy. Whilst I can't tell you a perfect formula for how to approach this, what I can tell you is based on the experiences we've had feedback from with hundreds of parents, all in very similar situations to you.

WHAT NOT TO DO

When many parents reach the point where they finally decide that getting a tutor is the right way to go, they actually take the worst possible option available to them. In fact, many of the clients who come to us do so to repair the damage that

has already been done by taking this option; they took their child to a class based tutoring centre.

Tutoring centres (or coaching colleges as they are often called) are typically populated by student's that come from cultural backgrounds where obtaining the best possible mark is a mandatory requirement. They often come from families with unreasonably high expectations, where nothing is ever good enough. Either that, or they are gifted students themselves with very high intellectual capacities who attend coaching colleges because they need extra stimuli as they are not being challenged enough at school.

If your child is already outstandingly competent and performs better in a competitive environment, then by all means consider a tutoring centre. Where the student is struggling however and may feel insecure about their weaknesses being on display to those around them; imagine the irreparable damage it has on their self esteem when they are placed in an environment where the kids around them are even more 'high achievers' than at school, so comparatively, they feel even 'dumber'. That is the unfortunate reality of placing a struggling child in among students who are competitive performers and high achievers. It typically does more harm than good.

The reason it is appealing to some parents however is that because of the class approach, tutoring centres can be a cheaper option. By the time that the parents come to us however, the first part of the process is to try to undo the negative view that their child has developed about tutoring thanks to the self-esteem deteriorating effect of the more competitive environment.

The other mistake that parents often make is the value they place on solving the problem. The situation described above is often obvious to many parents who realise that one-on-one in a familiar setting such as the home is the most effective option. Many well-meaning mums and dads that are struggling to keep up with the cost of living, decide to opt for someone 'cheap' and end up with someone who simply doesn't know what they're doing.

If the tutor has the wrong approach, the wrong personality match or does not understand the way in which your child learns best, it is also likely to have disastrous consequences. Just when the student gets their hopes up that maybe, finally, someone will be able to come along that can help them overcome their hurdles, if they end up with the wrong tutor, the only message they get is that there really is no hope for them after all.

You and I can see the more rational picture of course, which is that there is always the option to get another tutor. For a young vulnerable mind however facing a very delicate situation they take very personally, their early experiences with a private tutor can either bring them out of their shell if you **get the right tutor**, or bury them in it even deeper if you get the wrong one.

ONCE YOU FIND THE RIGHT TUTOR – WHAT THEN?

Once you **find the right tutor** here, it is very important to prepare your son or daughter to be in the right frame of mind so that they can **get the best** out of their tuition. After all, if you're going to go to the effort to make sure **you've found the right tutor** for them, you might as well take a few simple steps to ensure that they are ready to **get the best results** that they can.

There is no complicated procedure in place here; it basically comes down to making sure you speak about the idea of getting a tutor in a positive light, as though it were a reward or a special privilege. The first thing to be aware of is to make sure that you only ever speak to your child about the idea of tuition when they are in a positive state of mind. When you can see that they are already in a confident state, then is the best time to discuss the idea to **get a great tutor**.

Some questions you might try asking to 'warm them up' to the idea might include asking them about which teachers at school they like and don't like. By this stage you will have some idea about the potential tutors that we have on offer if you have **become familiar with their profiles**, so you can link personality traits that our tutors have with those that you suspect **your child will connect with**.

When introducing the idea of a tutor, discuss the idea in a way so that **it feels like a special privilege** or reward, rather than a chore or a punishment. The ideal situation is where you manage to plant a seed of thought into your son or daughters mind about the **excitement of having their own personal helper**. If done in the right positive light, your child may even ask you or indicate that **they want their own tutor**. If the child feels that it is even partly their idea, then they are almost always going to have a much more positive response, and **approach tuition with excitement** rather than intimidation.

WHAT YOU CAN DO DO DURING THE LESSONS

Irrespective of your son or daughters expectations about meeting their new tutor for the first time, it is important that they see the experience as one that fosters encouragement, hope and excitement. It is common that even parents might feel a bit nervous about meeting a new tutor. It is important however that your child see you demonstrating a positive attitude both about your new tutor as well as to your new tutor.

To start off with, there are likely going to be lots of concerns that you'd like to discuss with the tutor. Please make sure that any 'problems' or anything at all that your child might feel insecure about are not discussed in front of them. You can always contact your tutor by phone or email to talk about these issues when your son or daughter is not present. We find that one of the most encouraging things is that when parents talk about something with the tutor that their child is proud of, whilst conversing in front of them. Even if it's not necessarily related to the areas the tutor will be covering, it is an important part of the process of getting your child to feel comfortable enough with their new tutor to 'open up' and get the most out of their tuition sessions.

WHAT YOU CAN DO AFTER THE LESSONS

It is important that the student feel a sense of 'control' over their situation, and that it is 'their tutor' not their parents tutor. As mentioned before, to get the best results, it is important to wait until your son or daughter is in a good mood before discussing anything about their tutor. When you find that they are in a positive state, it is best to ask questions about their tuition that are positively worded, or even open ended, so that they retain a sense of empowerment about the topic they are speaking about.

Examples of positively worded questions may be "so how good is it having your own tutor?" "What do you like best about your tutor?" and "What parts are starting to seem a bit easier now?" If your child seems a bit hesitant about how to respond, many parents report that using open-ended questions can be helpful so that they still feel a sense of empowerment, whereas close-ended questions can make them feel "backed into a corner."

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE TO SEE RESULTS?

The answer to this question depends on what you're looking for. Imagine a person throws a handful of seeds in the soil with the intention of growing a tree. A short while later, one of the seeds have germinated and has started to grow into a shrub. The person looking on however does not see the tree they were expecting, and as a result abandoned their efforts before the tree had the chance to fully grow.

If your student has been struggling with a particular subject area, whether it be literacy, numeracy or even both; it's important you know how to judge whether or not 'it's working' by knowing what the signs of short term improvements are and what the signs of long term improvements are.

The first signs of improvement will generally take at least 4-8 lessons, and will manifest as a slight change in your child's attitude. The biggest hurdle to improving their skills is to first improve their confidence towards doing the things they previously believed they were no good at. Remember that it probably took many months or even years to establish the problematic mindset. If you start to see even small improvements in the way your child feels towards their schoolwork in as little as 4 -8 hours worth of tutoring, you can rest assure they are on the right track.

If you're not sure, the easiest way to tell is to pick up on subtle clues, such as their facial expressions and the tone in their voice when they are speaking about the subject. Most parents whose children go on to turn their weakness into their strengths, generally report that after the first 1-2 months, their children's attitude has gone from "I really don't like this" to at least "I'm not too keen on it but I'm not so bothered by it anymore." Then about 6 months down the track, their attitude is likely to evolve into "actually I don't mind this at all anymore" whilst the 12 month mark is likely to result in a greater expression of certainty.

By the time a year is up, the student may or may not like the subject that was previously their Achilles heel, but at least the uncertainty they had about it previously will have worn away, to develop into, at very least, a comfortable understanding.

Whether or not your child is 'connecting' with their tutor is another important thing to ensure too. The best way to judge this is to see how your child appears in the hour or two leading up to the tutor's arrival. For the first few weeks, you might detect a bit of anxiety, however this may be because they are worried that they will 'disappoint' their new role model. The best way to tell if their tutor is not having much impact is when your child simply doesn't seem to care less about whether the tutor shows up or not. Any signs of anticipation, whether they be mild signs of excitement or even nervous signs of wanting to impress, are all an indication that your child is at least 'looking forward' to their arrival. If they look forward to their tutoring, they are more likely to be 'open' during the lesson, take more in and be motivated to want to get more out of it.

Once again, if you are not noticing the desired effect in your son or daughter, many parents have reported to us that making sure that they speak about the tutor in a positive light and at times the child is feeling good can make an impact on the way they feel towards tuition.

Remember that private tuition should be seen as a long-term investment, not a quick fix. If you take the time to prepare your child for the right mindset and continue nurturing that in between and during tuition, it will ensure that you are doing everything you can do to make sure your child gets the most out of their private tuition.

SUMMARY

- Children who have been struggling with a particular area of their school work are likely to lack the necessary foundational skills and confidence they would need to start making progress.
- Parents often feel frustrated and sometimes even helpless when their attempts to help don't seem to do much good.
- Because the child has formed a negative attitude towards this particular area of their schooling, they may see the idea of getting a tutor as intimidating or humiliating.
- Tutoring centres with other students in the class are often filled with very competitive 'high achieving' kids. Placing a student with low confidence in among students like this often impairs their confidence even more and causes them to develop a negative attitude towards tutoring.
- Cheap tutors who are not specifically trained to combat low confidence and low motivation may cause more harm than good, as any hope the child had of being helped can dissolve if they don't feel adequately supported by their tutor. Again, this can cause a poor attitude towards tutoring and make the child feel even more inadequate.
- It is important to plant positive seeds of thought about private tutoring in your child's mind, so that they will feel that it is there idea.

- You should only discuss the idea of tutoring when your child is in a good mood and do so in a positive, enthusiastic and encouraging tone.
- When communicating with your child's new tutor, it is important to discuss encouraging things with them, especially about things your child is proud of. Any concerns you have or problems you wish to discuss should be done in private and not in front of your child.
- During the week, when you speak to your child about their tutoring, be sure to always do so in a positive manner, and ask open ended questions so that your child maintains an empowering feeling about their tutoring.
- The first signs that tutoring is having a positive impact on your child include subtle differences in the attitude they express towards the subject they are being tutored in, as well as 'looking forward' to seeing the tutor each week.
- You will usually notice mild improvements in their attitude within the first month or two, however it may take up to a year before assessment marks at school indicate a significant improvement. To get the most out of your child's tuition, you should see it as a long term investment that takes time and preparation; not a quick fix.