

Employing Private Tutors – a Guide for Parents

Written by NEIL ROSKILLY – CEO of the Independent Schools Association- ISA

Introduction

Many parents feel pressurized into engaging a private tutor. It could be that they hear of other families employing a tutor and understandably worry that their son or daughter will miss out in comparison. Such peer pressure can be particularly acute when parents speak at the school gate or discuss education with social contacts. Parents may become anxious and consider hiring a tutor in preparation for entrance examinations, such as for senior school admissions. Understandably such nervousness is strongest where admissions are highly competitive and places limited. Being aware of this, some tutors and agencies market this specialism and perhaps imply that they enjoy inside knowledge of the process. Parents may also approach a private tutor or agency when they feel, rightly or wrongly, that their son or daughter needs additional help beyond that offered at school, particularly if teachers report that a child may be slipping behind in core subjects or they suspect a learning difficulty. Whatever the reason for seeking the help of a private tutor, the following Q+A areas may help to inform the decision. After all, it's often an expensive commitment and there's a bewildering array of individuals and agencies that will help you to part with your money.

Q: My child's chances can only be improved if I employ a private tutor, surely?

A: Not necessarily. Research has shown that progress occurs most effectively when a child develops a strong, long-term learning relationship with a teacher. Few other actions or "interventions" are as powerful and the vast majority of teachers recognise this. Parents need to be aware that employing a private tutor could of course run counter to that relationship. In addition, unless a tutor liaises closely with a child's teachers (and very few ever do), the tutor may employ methods of teaching that are different to those used at school, thus creating uncertainty in the mind of the child. An everyday example occurs in mathematics, a subject where parents often seek help. Adverts and blogs advocating different approaches in the teaching of the subject are commonplace and care must be taken not to confuse a child if these are different to their experience at school.

Q: Surely a highly qualified and experienced private tutor must be good for my child?

A: Some parents assume that a child learns almost by a process of osmosis: just place the child in the presence of an academic and it will somehow learn. Unfortunately, there's no relationship between a tutor's personal academic qualifications and the outcomes of a child. Many of the best teachers are not highly qualified themselves, though they will be properly trained or experienced to teach the subjects they offer. While some tutors are experienced and qualified, others may not hold Qualified Teaching Status (QTS) or be able to demonstrate current and relevant teaching proficiency or training. Parents should keep in mind that many tutors are recent graduates who have not secured a teaching post, or are tutoring while they work towards a degree. Others may be retired and haven't experienced recent training or undertaken a refresher. If seeking help for a specific public examination, parents will need to ensure that the tutor has teaching and/or examining experience in that specification (syllabus) and not just the subject, as specifications change fairly regularly. Even when a tutor ticks all these boxes, it's essential to follow the same scheme of work as at school, otherwise topics can be taught out of sequence and that may confuse a child.

Q: Will my child fall behind if I don't employ a private tutor when others in the class are doing so?

A: Not at all. All children learn in different ways and at a variety of paces, even when the class is set by ability. Teachers employ a range of methodology and stimuli to ensure that children all make expected progress – known as “differentiation”. Teachers will also provide an invaluable update on progress through written reports and at parents’ evenings, occasionally suggesting how parents can support learning at home. It won't be necessary to employ a private tutor to follow that guidance and it isn't time-consuming. Parents also need to keep in mind that most private tutors demand a regular commitment and that could mean that other learning (or important social and sporting) opportunities are sacrificed, or “official” homework is rushed. That's counter-intuitive, of course and can result in a child feeling pressurised and discontented. An unhappy child won't learn and this can in certain cases lead to long-term psychological difficulties.

Q: Is employing a private tutor safe for my child, as they provide references?

A: Parents need to be aware of the risk they take when employing a private tutor, either in their own home or at a tutor's house. While schools are legally obliged to carry out a range of checks on adults they employ, there's no such requirement for private tutors. Under safeguarding legislation, a school has to ensure that a teacher is not prohibited from teaching (a “List 99” check) and must carry out a Disclosure and Barring (DBS, formerly CRB) check. In addition, schools have to check a teacher's identity and qualifications, check the teacher is fit to teach and is legally entitled to work in the UK. If parents employ a private tutor, they should ensure that the relationship is supervised and that the child is not left alone with the tutor for lengthy periods. Parents should also directly monitor any electronic contact between child and tutor, insisting that they are copied in on all correspondence.

Q: But the tutor I'm thinking of using is a member of an industry body or association. That must be safe and a guarantee of the tutor's quality?

A: Any tutor can pay a small membership fee to an industry body and claim their badge. Some insist that they carry out similar checks to schools, but few can operate the same safeguards as required of employed teachers and parents are unable to check any of this information independently. No agency is licensed by the Department for Education to accredit private tutors. In addition, working through an agency doesn't guarantee quality of experience, as no trade body independently assesses the quality of their tutors via observation and detailed feedback (unlike teachers). Some industry bodies operate a disciplinary procedure against non-complaint members, but this is largely meaningless as they have no powers to stop a tutor from operating and parents may only find out that a tutor is unsuitable for their child after the damage is done.

Q: But what if my private tutor is actually a teacher at a school, or is actually at my child's school?

A: Most private tutors are not directly employed by schools. It is obviously safest to use an employed teacher and even better if that's a respected teacher at your child's school. However, most schools insist through their contractual arrangements that permission is granted for such work outside of the school and many will want to understand why it's necessary. In addition, teachers are often too busy with their normal duties of marking and preparation to offer much time outside of the working day. If using an employed teacher from your child's school, parents should always check with the school's headteacher that such an arrangement is acceptable.

Q: My child is facing tough entrance examinations. Surely my child won't get into his chosen school unless I use a private tutor?

A: Perhaps surprisingly to some parents, there's no evidence that employing a private tutor ever makes a difference. Your son or daughter will probably do just as well without a tutor, though many tutors claim otherwise, perhaps insisting that they know a school's entry examinations inside out and have a proven track record of success. Parents should just see such claims as "marketing". Many senior schools use entry examinations that are content-free, particularly when they wish to encourage a wide range of applications. Other senior schools use schemes such as Common Entrance and preparation for these examinations are best left to the feeder school itself, as that is where the know-how resides. Even if a tutor is only recently retired, changes to specifications are frequent and it is easy for even experienced tutors to lose touch with requirements.

Q: If my child has Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND), will a private tutor help?

A: Very few private tutors are experienced or qualified in dealing with SEN. The variety and nature of SEND means that, when diagnosed, expert and qualified help is essential. Once more, the school is by far the best place to access such professional support. Parents suspecting any form of learning difficulty are advised to speak to their school without delay and only consider using specialist support, as minor difficulties can be amplified as a child grows if not appropriately addressed.

Q: Will my child's school get offended if I tell them I'm going to get a private tutor?

A: Not at all. However, they may question the necessity of doing so, particularly if your child is at a fee-paying school. If you have genuine concerns over any aspect of your child's progress, it is best to speak to the school before committing to the expense and potential damage of employing a tutor.