

# Taking on a private tutor

*Some fundamental guidelines will help parents decide whether their child will benefit from private tutoring*



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**T**hroughout the world, the use of private tuition as a supplement to mainstream schooling is growing. The phenomenon is occurring from places as diverse as India, Taiwan and Hong Kong to Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Canada and Portugal. Australian parents are also increasingly turning to tutors to support their children through their years of schooling. So, what motivates parents to seek a tutor, and when is it appropriate or not appropriate for families to seek the support of tutors?

## Motivation for a private tutor

There are several reasons why parents seek the assistance of private tutors for their child(ren). This could be because the child needs remedial academic or learning support; or stimulus beyond that which is given by the school; a smooth transition for the child to move from one system to another, or to gain access to a particular school – so called ‘transfer test’ tutoring; to provide structured support for homework; to build self-confidence in the child; or when the school academic content is beyond the comfort level of the parent; and finally, to take some level of personal control of the outcomes of education.

## Remedial academic or learning support

A notable aspect of private tuition is the assistance parents know that it can give a child who is struggling to keep up, who has a particular learning style that is not well accommodated in the mainstream classroom or who finds particular academic concepts difficult. In this context, teaching and learning via a tutor can be tailored to meet the specific needs of the child.

## Stimulus beyond school

A small proportion of parents find that schoolwork is not enriching enough for their child, who needs additional stimulus to ensure a continued interest in learning. Typically such parents may have children identified as ‘gifted’; however it might also be the case that the parent has a child whose learning needs are not be appropriately catered for at school.

## ‘Transfer-test’ tuition

‘Transfer-test’ tutoring may be defined as arising when the desire is for the child to move from one system (eg public) to another (eg private) or to gain access to a particular educational institution (eg academically selective school or university). The goal can be a significant motivator for a particular type of private tuition called ‘coaching’, ‘cramming’ or ‘hothousing’. Here the purpose of the private tuition is to achieve a particular goal or outcome.

The parent may want their child to attempt particular tests (eg scholarship or selective schools tests, UMAT tests or other forms of entry test) with a view to gaining entry into a system or institution. Alternatively, the parent may also see that the investment in private tuition may save a lot of money later – such as private school fees.

## Structured support for homework

Structured support can provide a source of steadiness, predictability and significant academic assistance to the child. The predictable nature of the engagement of a private tutor can help the child and also the family, manage and negotiate schooling over time.

Reinforcement of concepts and content done at school are also desired by parents when taking on a private tutor, who should be well aware of the work that is done in the school. Reinforcement is likely to deepen understanding and also foster inquiry, which in turn can lead to deep knowledge.

## Building self-confidence

A most understated use of private tutors is that of confidence building. Often the tutor will tell the parent that the child’s understanding is fine but the child just ‘isn’t achieving’. Typically, the issue is self-confidence – the child has little self-belief. Thus, the role of the tutor is to help the child find confidence and self-esteem through affirmation, encouragement and reinforcement of the skills and knowledge required.

## The parent’s comfort level

Sometimes parents who have been able to help their own child have reached a point where they feel like they no longer have the ability to help. This can arise by virtue of little time, or a lack of confidence in the parent with the specific content matter and outcomes being



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covered by the child in school. This may be the case as a child progresses through high school, and may also arise with respect to problem solving for selective tests, scholarship exams and UMAT/GAMSAT preparation.

## Personal control of education outcomes

As the awareness of the importance of education and educational attainment increases, so too does the desire by parents to take personal control of the outcomes of education. That is, rather than simply rely on the school and teachers, the parents invest in making choices that they believe will help their child do their best as school and beyond. It is notable also that as incomes rise, the amount of discretionary income spent on private tuition can be as high as 30% in some families.

## Inappropriate times to engage private tutors

Despite parents turning to tutors for a multitude of reasons, there are times when taking on tutors is not appropriate. For example, parents should first ask themselves whether the use of a tutor or extra classes is necessary. After all, sometimes a simple restructuring of time can provide a child with the support they need from their own parent(s). Moreover, just because other children may attend private tuition classes is not a reason, of itself, to justify taking on private tutors.

A further aspect to this is the

lazy or dependent child. A tutor should not be engaged simply because the parent cannot motivate the child. However, if the lack of motivation arises from poor understanding, disengagement, lack of self-confidence, a particular learning need or some such, then a well-chosen tutor may be very helpful.

## What to look for in a private tutor

Parents need to be very careful when deciding to take on a private tutor for their child. Firstly they need to be able to articulate what it is they are seeking and why. Accountability for any chosen tutor begins with this. From this point parents should then determine whether the tuition should be

one-to-one or in a class or group, and whether it should be outside or inside the home. Many people prefer the child to be taught outside of home as there may be more seriousness associated with an actual physical site where private tuition and/or classes are conducted.

There are several very important things that parents must consider when choosing a tutor, as follows:

- The tutor is appropriately qualified, skilled and experienced to tutor the child or if not qualified, openly discloses that they are not. University students will be unqualified but may be excellent tutors as they are closer in age to students and may well understand curricular requirements very well.
- The tutor is clear about what

they can and cannot do, and their work is open to scrutiny

- The tutor seeks to make the child as independent as possible, rather than encouraging dependencies
- The tutor volunteers open and honest feedback about the tutoring and tuition sessions, including disclosing when the tuition is no longer beneficial
- The tutor communicates with confidence and helps the child to feel at ease
- The tutor has been properly screened by child protection agencies (such as having a ‘Working with Children’ check or a federal police check)
- The tutor comes to sessions prepared and considers the specific needs of the child, is reliable and consistent

## Tutors and businesses to avoid

All parents should avoid tutors who do not have these characteristics. They should ask tutors and tuition businesses about their refund policy and whether they are members of the Australian Tutoring Association (ATA), the peak body for tutors in Australia.

## In summary

Parents need to carefully consider the choices they make when it comes to taking on private tutors. They need to be prepared to ask questions and ensure that the tuition will be of benefit to their child. In this way the investment should be worth it.