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INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Give your child a helping hand

A little extra teaching at the critical stages of your children's schooling can make a big difference. **Catherine Paver** explains how to find and use a private tutor

Children are like honeysuckle. Sometimes they need a bit of support before they see the light and grow by themselves. This can happen at any point and hiring a private tutor can be the answer.

Private tuition is thriving. Fleet Tutors, the largest agency in the UK, has seen a huge rise in the number of young people they teach: 30 per cent average growth per year since 2004. "The biggest increase is in tutoring for school entrance exams," says Mylene Curtis, the agency's managing director. Another peak occurs at GCSE and A-level.

The current government believes in tutors, too, and this year it started phasing in one-to-one tuition in state schools.

How to use a tutor

"What don't you understand?" If your child's answer to this question is, "I don't know," a tutor could help. Adults often perceive a tutor as an extra source of stress. Yet a good one should reduce stress. To a frustrated child it can be a relief to ask a tutor as many questions as necessary. Away from the classroom there is no fear of looking stupid or uncool in front of friends.

However, don't hire too many tutors at once. It's counter-productive: the brain has no time to rest and absorb what it has learned.

Students who are of similar ability and not shy about asking questions may get a great deal out of paired or even group lessons. However, one-to-one is still best for calming a confused child.

Tackling any problem involves seeing the subject from the child's point of view. I know of a little girl whose parents were terribly worried because she couldn't read. In a one-to-one it emerged that, because people kept asking her, "What does it say?" she expected to hear sounds when she looked at letters. Once the misunderstanding was cleared up, the problem was solved.

If your child has never done verbal and non-verbal reasoning tests, it may be worth doing some with a tutor to practise for entrance exams. Like training for a marathon, it doesn't pay to overdo it, though. They should be practised just enough so your child knows what to expect and how to pace themselves.

Homework can consolidate a lesson but, if you don't want

HOW TO FIND A GOOD TUTOR

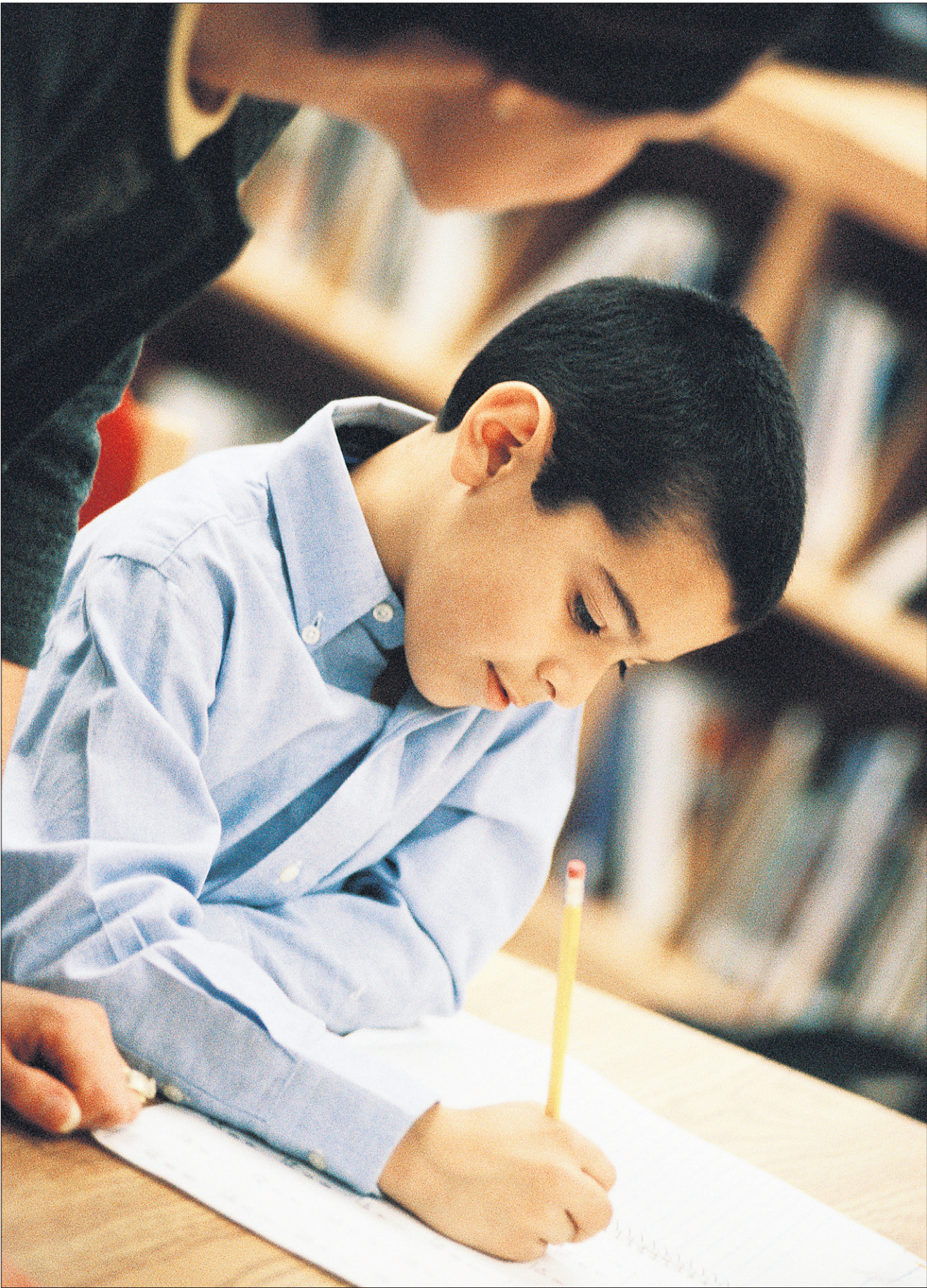
As well as asking teachers and other parents, the following can help you find tutors in your area:

- The Good Schools Guide has an excellent section entitled *Tutors and Tutoring*, both online and in the book. Subscription to access the whole website costs £9.99 a month or £35 a year. (0845 221 1347; www.goodschoolsguide.co.uk)
- Local libraries, local papers and telephone directories (look under *Tutoring, Tutors and Tuition*).
- Mumsnet has useful threads on private tutors and entrance exams. (www.mumsnet.com)

Tutor agencies include:

- Fleet Tutors (nationwide). (0845 644 5452; www.fleet-tutors.co.uk)
- Harrison Allen (London). (020 8874 0233; www.harrisonallen.co.uk)
- Elite Tutorials Ltd (Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Essex). (0845 230 2840; www.elitetutors.co.uk)
- Select Tutors (Midlands, north west, Leeds). (0500 179407; www.select-tutors.co.uk)

Teachers in schools are often under pressure to praise, whereas a tutor will give a very honest opinion, if you ask them



Calming influence: one-to-one tutoring can alleviate confusion

to overload your child, let the tutor know. In this case, they can help by improving the way your child tackles the work set by the school.

Checking credentials

Your child's teacher could be the best person to ask about finding a good tutor. If the teacher is part of the problem, ask your friends if they can recommend one, and get your child to ask their friends, too.

Safety is paramount in this unregulated business, whether your child is going to the tutor's house or the tutor is coming to you. Ask for a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check. "Don't assume tutorial agencies will have vetted their tutors for this," says Curtis. "Some agencies are responsible; others are just websites with no telephone numbers. These may be nothing more than online advertisement hubs."

Does the tutor have a degree in the subject they are teaching, qualified teacher status and experience of teaching in a school? The answer to all three questions should be yes. There are exceptions, such as the tutor with good results in a subject different from, but genuinely related to, their degree subject. Check their references carefully, though, and follow these up by talking to one or two previous clients.

If you still like the sound of the tutor, ask for a trial lesson. This may or may not be free. Arrange with the tutor that your child will bring along something specific he or she needs help with. This will give your child a chance to test-drive the tutor.

Prices vary, but £30 per hour for a one-to-one session is the average. This includes all preparation and marking time, but may not include the tutor's travel expenses to your home:

establish this with them before the first lesson. Worksheets should be included but, in general, you'll be expected to buy any books yourself.

Book lessons on a pay-as-you-go basis, if possible, rather than paying for a block in advance. You never know when your child will be ready to fly solo again.

Getting results

How will you know whether private tuition is working? Grades can take a term to climb, but if your child comes back from a session with the tutor smiling and does homework more readily, that's a good sign. Enjoyment, confidence and interest can't be measured in marks, but they do underpin progress.

Tell the tutor from the start that you want to know the truth. Teachers in schools are often under pressure to praise. But when you hire a tutor, you are also paying for their honest opinion. Take advantage of this and ask the tutor how your child is doing.

Also, take their advice, even if it hurts. "It may be hard, but listen if the tutor tells you your child would struggle at the school you've set your heart on," says Sue Fieldman, regional editor of *The Good Schools Guide*. The tutor may be able to suggest a school where your child would be much happier.

Some tutors equate teaching with talking – or think that parents do. Yet children need time to think. Also, they vary in how they learn. Some students absorb a lot simply by listening, while others are punch-drunk from listening all day at school and pounce on the coloured pens. What matters most is that they feel able to ask whatever they want and that they get feedback they are able to understand.



COMMENT

Vicky Tuck

Parents, including those already paying school fees, who are keen to see their child do well in forthcoming exams, are sometimes persuaded that what is needed to guarantee success is the top-up a private tutor can provide. Resorting to tutoring does not always imply dissatisfaction with the teaching at a child's school but is more a recognition that some one-to-one sessions will serve to demystify parts of the syllabus that are proving problematic.

The individual attention and tailored practice a tutor will provide can do wonders for a child's confidence and help improve examination technique. But before you put "private tutor" into Google, here are three points worth considering.

First, some tutors are failed teachers, so go for word-of-mouth

recommendations – you don't want the visit to the tutor to feel like an ordeal and extinguish enthusiasm for learning.

Second, if possible, avoid arranging tuition in a clandestine way and tell the school you feel extra help is needed; your child may not be giving you the full story of his or her shortcomings and the school may already be laying on clinics.

Third, while private tuition can provide a boost that justifies the investment, the benefits need to be genuinely educational. There is little point in being prepped successfully for an examination to enter a selective school or university only to flounder once you are there. A good tutor, just like a good school, should foster independence, not dependence.

✦ Vicky Tuck is Principal of The Cheltenham Ladies' College and a past President of the Girls' Schools Association



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CASE STUDY

MOHAMED ALI ABDISHIRE, A-LEVEL STUDENT



Mohamed Ali Abdishire saw a tutor from Harrison Allen for help with Economics A-level and a tutor recommended by a friend for help with English Literature A-level. He gained a B in English Literature and a C in Economics. He has been offered a place to read International Relations by both the University of Sussex and Goldsmiths, University of London, subject to an improved grade in Maths, which he will re-sit next year.

"My economics tutor stimulated my curiosity and lent me books and articles," says Mohamed. "He helped me choose the right material to answer a question by encouraging me to think of myself as an economist, in addition to thinking about what the examiners wanted. Imagining myself as a writer made it easier to select the right evidence."

When it came to English Literature AS-level, Chaucer was Mohamed's biggest challenge. "I read *The Canterbury Tales* religiously,

Then I discussed them and wrote essays for my tutor. She was friendly and I felt she could recognise exactly where I was going wrong."

After hard work and half a dozen lessons, Mohamed's best mark was in this paper: a high A.

One-to-one tuition helped Mohamed "feel more efficient during class and in exams. I would go in with a different mindset. When I was writing a paragraph, I wasn't having doubts any more – I knew exactly where I was going with it".