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## Too Much Tutoring?

More and more parents are hiring help to give their kids an edge at school. Anne Georg looks at who really pays  
Anne Georg

Every Wednesday and Saturday, Gen Photopoulos takes her three children to their tutors at the Kumon Centre in Halifax. Steffany, 12, and Christopher, ten, even four-year-old Gregory, have been tutored in math and reading since they were two.

"It's better than preschool where the kids just do fingerpainting," says Photopoulos. "Children are capable of much more than others credit them for." Her husband, Spiro, has no problem paying \$300 a month to see his children do better than their peers. "It's very competitive out there," he says. "I think if they start at an early age, they get accustomed to a certain stress level. They develop good routines," he explains. "This gives them an edge over their peers. All three of them are way ahead of other kids in the same grade." When Steffany was in grade six, he says, she was reading at a grade-nine level.

The couple believe that edge frees their children to concentrate on the social aspects of school and on learning French in their immersion program. The tutoring also helps their kids avoid the frustration of falling behind in class.

While the eager Photopoulos children shoulder their satchels and head off to their biweekly tutoring sessions, critics question whether tutoring is getting out of hand.

Eleanor Evans is a retired teacher and former executive director of the Teachers' Tutoring Service, an agency that uses only accredited teachers, in Vancouver. She recalls being asked to tutor a 3½-year-old so he could pass entrance exams at an elite private school. "Now that's what I call child abuse," she says.

Evans believes strongly that tutoring has a place — as a supplement to classroom education, to stimulate high achievers and help other kids catch up. But she warns against over-tutoring, especially with very young children. "Kids are being force-fed intellectually at a stage where they are just not ready for it," she says. "They need to run around and be kids. The expectations of these parents are very, very high. Their children are monitored so closely, their environments are so structured. There's a constant push to do better and to get higher marks at a younger age."

Even with older children, Evans laments the pressure that is forcing students, who may be better suited to the trades, into an academic stream. "I'm very concerned about losing the well-rounded child in the process of tutoring to push kids into university," she says. "Are we producing grads at the expense of turning off kids that we shouldn't be losing?"

Concerns like this are not putting much of a dent in the demand for tutors. In a 2002 Decima Research survey of Canadian parents with school-aged children, nine out of ten respondents said that elementary and high school students need access to educational resources outside the classroom. The research was conducted for Sylvan Learning Centre, which has seen a 50-percent increase in enrolment at its 77 centres across Canada in the last five years. Other tutoring agencies report similar increases.

Fuelling the boom is the frustration many parents feel over what they see as a faltering school system with a rapidly changing curriculum, crowded classrooms and overstretched teachers. The situation has some parents fearful their kids will be left behind. Last year, Isabella Montana of Toronto began sending four-year-old Sabrina to weekly Kumon sessions so she could learn to read. Satisfied that her daughter was making progress, Montana switched Sabrina to math. "She's in the new kindergarten curriculum and it's very difficult," says the concerned mother. "I feel anxious because expectations are so much higher now and I wanted to give her a head start."

Calgary psychologist Larry Fong believes high expectations can be a good thing, but he's seen what happens when kids face excessive pressure. "Too much training or tutoring can lead to burnout," Fong warns, adding that every child has a different threshold. When he sees burnout — a child who loses interest in everything when demands become overwhelming — he'll suggest that parents ease off, perhaps cancelling tutoring or another activity and allowing the child to find balance and "let off steam."

Still, it can be hard to judge where high expectations end and unreasonable pressure begins — especially when tutoring agencies are feeding parental anxiety. Tutoring Web sites abound, many with strong claims. The Hooked on Phonics® site guarantees your child's reading will be "supercharged" this school year and advertises better grades in 60 days. The Academy for Mathematics and Science boasts that its math tutoring system can increase student performance one to two grade levels in six months.

Claims like these have some skeptics steaming. Carol Leroy, associate professor of education and director of the reading clinic at the University of Alberta, says little research has been done on the benefits of private tutoring. She is especially critical of tutoring agencies that promise to correct learning disabilities such as dyslexia; she calls such claims "no better than snake oil." The university reading clinic frequently sees kids whose parents are convinced — wrongly — they are dyslexic, thanks to a "diagnosis" from a tutoring agency. "These are private companies promoting solutions and selling products."

Leroy also believes that the tutoring trend undermines the public school system, which relies on parents and community for its survival. "Parents expect schools to provide education, yet they don't contribute to that process. Instead they send their children to tutors." Leroy would prefer to see more parents becoming involved in their children's education by working with teachers and joining school councils.

Leroy's argument doesn't make it any easier for parents who see their kids' classmates trotting off to tutorials and wondering if they're shortchanging their own children. That was the dilemma faced by Sally Mews\*, who lives in an affluent area in Toronto. Her nine-year-old son Tom\* is in grade four at the local public school. Despite her own private school background, Mews has been a believer in the public education system. But when Tom was struggling with math and it became apparent that help was not forthcoming at school, Mews reluctantly joined other families in her community, falling into line to hire tutors. She's happy with Tom's progress and spends \$40 for his weekly one-hour tutoring sessions. But Mews wonders why she should cough up the money to provide Tom with the fundamentals he should be getting at school. "Teachers are throwing their hands up in the air and it's up to parents to make sure their kids know the basic stuff," says Mews. "I feel let down."

"Teachers are doing their best," counters Noel Jantzie, president of the Calgary local of the Alberta Teachers' Association. Neither for nor against tutoring, Jantzie holds government cutbacks accountable for the pressure parents feel to use tutors. And it's a vicious circle. "Bigger class sizes and increased expectations from parents and school boards to do more with less support — from those same parents and school boards — is causing a lot of stress," Jantzie argues.

Debate will continue over the pros and cons of tutoring. But it's unlikely to dampen the enthusiasm of 12-year-old Steffany Photopoulos as she hauls out those books twice a week and heads off to see her tutor. For her, the benefits are obvious: "If I quit, I'd forget everything and be like everyone else."

\* Names changed by request.

**To Tutor or Not**

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Could your child benefit from tutoring? Here's how to decide — and how to choose the right tutor. You may want to consider tutoring if:

- your child displays a lack of interest and is having difficulty in a subject;
- his grades decline noticeably;
- he has a poor relationship with the teacher;
- you can't help because of your child's attitude or because you don't know the material.

If you've decided that a tutor could help your child, talk to her teacher to determine the specifics of her needs. Often the teacher can supply a list of recommended tutors. Note that anyone can hang out a shingle and call themselves a tutor, so the basic advice is buyer beware. Some parents prefer established agencies like Kumon and Sylvan Learning Centres with their standardized programs; private tutors may offer more flexibility but the selection process can be more involved. Expect to pay \$30 to \$50 an hour. These pointers may help in finding the right tutor:

- Ensure that the tutor has a recognized teacher's certificate and proper accreditation for the subject they are teaching. Ask for references and call them.
- Ask the tutor for proof of a recent criminal record check. Current members of provincial colleges of teachers will have had this done; ask the tutor for a current member card. Or conduct a record check yourself through your local police department.
- Don't pay large sums or commit to a set number of hours up front. Supervise the first visit to ensure the fit is suitable. Ask your child for feedback before booking a second session.
- Ensure that the tutor is not doing your child's schoolwork by editing homework assignments to be turned into the teacher. The tutor should be helping him solve problems by himself.
- Follow up with the teacher after several sessions to see if tutoring has improved your child's performance.

Source: *Teachers' Tutoring Service, Vancouver*

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When we asked Todaysparent.com users about tutoring, two-thirds of respondents said they had hired tutors for their children. Most of the students were in grades one to six, and three-quarters were being tutored in either math or reading. Here are some of the reasons the parents gave for hiring tutors:

- "I think the public school system is offering kids a curriculum that guarantees failure for anyone who cannot afford a tutor."
- "He was getting D's, yet I was told he wasn't bad enough to get help from school."
- "I don't believe she is being challenged enough in her current class. Because she does well, she is ignored in favour of helping those who are falling behind."
- "I could not find a good way to help him at home. I myself did not understand the material being taught."
- "My child was not getting the individual attention she needed. She was an A student getting C's and B's. One hour a week has improved her confidence and her marks."
- "My daughter's attitude about learning from a tutor is much better than if I try to teach her. She is more focused and open to what she is being taught."

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