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Are parents pushing their children too hard?

Parents are paying costly private tutors in a desperate bid to get their sons and daughters into top schools and universities



(undefined)

Girl climbing up a ladder.

Lesley White

At a godchild's birthday party I find myself seated next to a chatty six-year-old boy from an Anglo-Turkish family, London-born, privately educated, fizzing with confidence. What does he want to be when he grows up? A doctor, he replies, adding that he will need to attend a good university after a top school. His birthday party next January is being deferred for an extra-special "Getting into Westminster" celebration later in the year. "He will too," confides another mother when I report this impressive conversation. "He's bright and they're tutoring him in everything."

The rise of home tuition sounds like it should be a story about monstrous parents and overburdened kids. Instead, it is full of fear, anxiety and parents who are admirably determined that their children won't miss out. For sure, there are some horrors, not just the families who put birthday parties on hold. There are the kids who attend Kumon maths classes at two years old. There was the mother who cancelled her family's summer holiday so her daughter could be tutored and tested every single balmy day for entrance to St Paul's. Quite unsmilingly, she describes her eight-year-old son as "a nightmare? just terrible, all he wants to do is play".

The effect of this fierce ambition? On the oak-carved coffee table of one mother I talk to sits *The Price of Privilege* by the US psychologist Madeline Levine, describing America's new "at-risk child": not the tattooed trailer trash, but the ones whose parents employ tutors and coaches to shore up performance, eventually turning them into resentful adolescents, all A grades and emotional alienation. "I couldn't get past the first chapter," this mother, determined to do her best for her children, tells me ruefully. "It's about me. What are we doing to our children?"

In London there might well be more tutors than parking officers — some operations no more than a retired teacher with a husband who answers the phone; some, such as Fleet Tutors, robust, successful operations with thousands on their database. Records in Companies House suggest that others are vulnerable businesses, like those offering gardening and cleaning services, which is not too removed from what they do — servicing high-achieving households where nobody wants to let the side down. Then again, they might be employed by the nurse or taxi driver next door, trying to ensure that their kids get a shot at a better future.

The findings of a recent poll by the education charity the Sutton Trust showed that 43% of London pupils aged 11 to 16 had been tutored, up from 36% four years ago. The trust feared a climate of inequality that discriminated against the poor. The government has also weighed in: a white paper pledged 10 hours of one-to-one tuition for state pupils not performing "as expected" in maths and English. Its Making Good Progress initiative aims to reach 300,000 children between nine and 14 in maths, and the same number again in English, at a cost of £138m.

The National Union of Teachers' general secretary, Christine Blower, welcomes this commitment, which will see the recruitment of 10,000 tutors to be paid up to £29 an hour, a sum for which the supermodels of the trade wouldn't get out of bed. "But such well-intentioned plans need to be backed up with proper funding," she adds.

“Without this, the danger is that a social divide will continue between those parents who can afford to buy their children the advantage of private tuition, and those that can’t.” The government’s promise was not a sweetener to the middle-class vote — struggling children are unlikely to be from better-off homes — but it was a recognition that personal tuition is the bridge to attainment: from illiteracy to reading, from a sink school to the local grammar, from a London prep to Eton, or whatever kind of magic-carpet ride you need it to perform.

James Turner, director of policy at the Sutton Trust, describes an “arms race” in education. “One hypothesis before our survey was that the amount of tutoring would go down because of the recession,” he says. “That has not been the case. Parents may be leaving private education, but they feel they need to tutor to compensate for the large class sizes. Or they are tutoring to get their children into grammar schools. If you can’t afford to move house for a better catchment area or school fees, you can at least afford a tutor.”

Tutoring is another tale of two nations: in the northeast, Wales and Yorkshire, according to the Sutton Trust’s poll, only around one in 10 had had extra help. Mainly, it is big news in affluent metropolitan circles where parents fear their children missing out on education the way they once feared nuclear war and mass unemployment; where to be in the undesirable state school feels an even worse fate than being dumped in a secondary modern once did, a hopeless road to nowhere. In a world well-versed in human rights, we are not minded to tolerate second best. We might accept that fellow parents have trust funds and secret stores of Tamiflu, but we are thrown into a maelstrom of insecurity by the news that their kids are set for greater things than our own, having bagged the best local tutor.

If you want to transfer your child at 11 from a state school to a competitive private one, which may be working at least a year ahead, you will need a tutor. As the yearly terrors descend — GCSEs, A-levels, eleven-plus, scholarships, common entrance, Oxbridge — the super-tutors, heroes of the knowledge economy, can name their price. Do I need one? I am trying not to.

On a September afternoon last year I sat in the third row of the assembly hall at a smart, fee-paying independent junior school. The headmaster was addressing parents — prospective customers at £5,000 a term — on the ethos of his school, and after a nudge-nudge joke about exactly how far some mothers will go to get their sons a place, he gets to the point. “We are interested,” he says quite equably, “in the brightest children.” He and his rivals are basically agreed: they want children who are rounded and curious; they like them sporty, independent-minded and to come from supportive and loving families; but mainly they want them clever, since the school’s reputation and its commercial wellbeing rests on its exam results.

We in the audience, parents of children approaching seven, are under no illusions: our little ones might be charming personalities, fluent conversationalists, mines of knowledge on the workings of the Mallard steam locomotive and the dietary preferences of the hadrosaurus, but they won’t even get to the interview stage at this delightful establishment without passing tests in maths, English, verbal and non-verbal reasoning, and jumping through all gilded hoops with noteworthy ease. “Are you seeing a lot of tutoring?” inquires one parent, as one might ask a doctor about a nasty outbreak of chlamydia.

The head assumes a mildly pained expression: gently advising that he would rather parents didn’t, they always know. The fear of being caught “cheating” can make tutoring a cloak-and-dagger affair — not for nothing is it termed “shadow education”. One north London tutor, considered a catch by local parents, has allegedly got Golders Green “sewn up”, and told me (with a secrecy more fitting to international espionage) that I must never come to her house, and “never, EVER, tell anyone” we had spoken. One London tutor in his twenties tells me he has been asked to pretend he is “a big cousin” if an unexpected visitor to the home of his pupil interrupts their session.

This is the do-or-die discretion of the aesthetic surgeon, the interior designer, the dinner-party caterer, all those life-enhancers whose role is to improve our lives and make it appear we haven’t even tried. Their names are passed around with reluctance: good-hearted mothers who would give you their last bottle of Calpol will keep their tutor’s name to themselves. Dee Francken is a down-to-earth education consultant in north London, home of the hothouse. She guides parents on how their little ones might improve before various stages of testing, and recalls being thanked by one particularly grateful mother. “You have made such a difference to our lives,” she gushed. “I am going to tell everyone about you, but not until next year when she’s safely in the school.”

Unethical or not, tutoring is the weapon we deploy against that venomous paranoia coiled beneath all our touchy-feely claims to want to help children achieve their personal potential at their own pace. “My main advice is to be ready at the starting line in Year Seven [the start of the senior school], whatever sort of school they are at,” says Francken, who used to head the junior school at the prestigious girls’ independent day school North London Collegiate. “You want them to be on top of the game at that point, not playing catch-up. Get them some help if they need it. But intensive coaching can be counterproductive. We used to see that at interviews at North London. Eleven-year-olds whose every noun was prefaced by five adjectives of astonishing complexity. Or the ones who are so tutored that a think-out-of-the-box task, where there wasn’t a right or wrong answer, made them go glassy-eyed because it wasn’t what they had been doing with the tutor. At seven, they need to know their times

tables, one to five, and ten; they need to be able to tell the time, to use capitals and fullstops, to write one side of an exercise book. Parents need to get away from the myth that their kids must be Einstein to get into these schools.”

In a few months my six-year-old will sit exams at three schools. To quell the panic about failure, some parents repeat a particular mantra: if our kids can't get into a school without the push and shove of tutoring, they won't cope once they are there. One morning, as I am mouthing this well-worn platitude, a friendly mother (actually we are not all sabre-toothed competitors for places) takes me aside. “You're missing the point,” she chides gently. “He'll be competing for a place against kids who've been crammed to bursting point with private tuition. If you don't do it, you might be letting him down.”

Another mother fears her seven-year-old son would interpret the arrival of a tutor as a sign that he wasn't good enough, so she has decided to assume the role. I know what she means. When did my precious boy, who tiptoes to my bed and kisses me awake each morning (granted, at 5.45am, but who's clock-watching?), who slips his hand in mine when we are walking, become the kid who isn't quite good enough? “It's a competition,” she reasons, “so to not do it is like a unilateral disarmament. What I want is for everyone to commit to being sensible, and lay down their weapons.”

Hang on, though, haven't we insured ourselves by stumping up to send our sons to an energetic pre-prep school where expectations of achievement make my friends with kids at state primaries blink with a mixture of pity, envy and incredulity? My son has a class of 19. He has two fantastic teachers, kind, encouraging and focused at all times on the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Every night there is homework, at weekends there is a creative-writing assignment and spellings (hard ones: “hedgehog” and “stationary”); a recommended 15 minutes' reading a day. Montessori it ain't. We parents are invited into school to learn how the maths teacher works; lanky-legged bankers folded painfully onto tiny chairs, making notes about borrowing and paying back (they should know) on their shiny BlackBerrys.

Some of the kids in the class attend the Kumon after-school maths programme. One of them, the class superstar, asks during a playdate why my son doesn't go too. As soon as we get in the car, he turns to me seriously. “Mummy, I don't want to go to Kumon.” He looks genuinely anxious, so to make him laugh I adapt the lyrics to an Amy Winehouse number: “They tried to make me go to Kumon and I said no, no, no?” We sing it all the way home, and he giggles, relieved: this kid wants extra work the way dear old Amy wants a life of early nights and bitter lemon. He has learnt at a young age that life is a game of winners and losers, all spoils to the victor; cut along, Dumbo.

One doting father, a big player in the City, has qualms about the tutoring of his three children for entrance to top London day schools. “When have we sat down in our home,” he says, “and done nothing for an afternoon? But the point is, the working world of the future will be increasingly tough to succeed in, with emerging competition from economies like India and China? You had better be ready to be the best. Or at least one of the best.”

One of the masters at Westminster Under School told this resolute realist that his 13-year-old pupils are ready to sit their geography GCSEs and get A*s tomorrow. “I looked at him, and I thought, ‘Why?’ The schools are so competitive, they are raising the bar all the time.”

One night, my child — born happy, robust, carefree — says: “Mummy, I'm rubbish at maths? I'll never be as good as Luke.” He brings school work home with “More focus please” written at the top. He can tell you more than you ever needed to know (believe me) about the comparative engine power of a Bugatti Veyron versus a Ferrari, and eats up facts about sharks' teeth and Dr Beeching's crimes against the railways. He has a vibrant curiosity, deep interests, but will he perform on the day, or will he be, as my friend Cathy laughingly predicts for her own little treasure, “happily adding up all the subtractions”?

The angst around tuition is classically middle class, at its heart is a concern with appearances: ruthlessness masquerading as insouciance, ambition mitigated by the desire to appear fair at all costs; the impulse to intervene and engineer success. For the upper classes, it is a matter of birthright; generations eased into the rigorous privilege of Eton and Rugby, their success as perennial and predictable as the Glorious Twelfth. Meet the divine Malachy Guinness, 23, whose London-based Bright Young Things Tuition has been running for only a year, gathering admirers apace, with 10 new requests a day for tutoring. Scion of the great Anglo-Irish dynasty, the Oxford biology graduate Guinness is so popular with his clients that they try to adopt him as a big brother on a regular basis. He recently spent a month living in luxury on New York's Upper East Side, tutoring a boy for Eton. “People want to take us skiing because the Easter holidays are just before the common- entrance tests. Actually, we're planning to set up a revision course in Méribel before common entrance next year because there are so many people out there with tutors.”

Educated at Marlborough and fabulously posh, he must be a reassuring helpmate to the aspiring classes. I doubt he spends too much time springing sink-school kids to the nearest grammar: common entrance is his bread and

butter, especially getting boys into Eton. "A lot of last year was taken up with that." Scholarships to the high-ranking London schools are also a forte, and involve even more pressure for the pupil. He laughs: "That's like asking the child to save its parents £100,000!" How much does he charge? Tutoring for common entrance costs £45 an hour; for A-levels he charges upwards of £50. He knows someone in London who prepares students for the American Sat exams — in which technique is all — when they want to go to US universities. She has a very good name and charges \$250 an hour. "It seems expensive, but then if you think what you would pay a plumber in London..." He sees the fear in his younger students' eyes. "It's awful that a 13-year-old should be feeling the pressure. They've been told about the exams so much at school that they are terrified." Terror is good for business, I laugh. So does he, but really we both know it's true. So, of course, is pedigree.

"Parents like to see an Oxford degree, especially if it's a young tutor." Are they impressed by the Guinness name? "I don't know. I didn't call it Guinness Tutors on purpose." But the name of his agency sounds more smart than scholarly, conjuring the *jeunesse dorée* of an Evelyn Waugh novel. He shrugs: "I wanted a name that represented how we were." Guinness thinks tutoring provides the perfect solution for the smart graduates who can no longer find a lucrative niche in the city. "Anyone with a science degree who gets on with people is well placed."

But can you really trust in your tutor to deliver? Angela Cohen, a north London tutor who runs an agency called Boost — "It's about bolstering confidence, not pushing" — says she never makes promises. "Even if you have really enhanced a child's learning, it might not be good enough for the school they are trying for. That's life. That's reality." She says that most parents — smart, educated, loving — have a keen idea of what their child can achieve, and usually present the idea of tutoring sensitively. "But I have also heard, 'If you don't get in you will have shattered our dreams.' They are usually the ones who have been living vicariously because they didn't get to go to a top school themselves."

Perhaps some overdo it, but mightn't the fact that busy, hard-pressed parents go to the trouble of finding and funding tutors indicate an improved parental involvement, more caring about where the next generation ends up in life? Things have changed. At my bog-standard comprehensive, tutoring was unheard of: Bond books were spy fiction, kids who struggled were dumped in the bottom stream or the "remedial class" staffed by older pupils. I helped a little boy with his reading, a child obviously blinded by dyslexia, but at the time just assumed to be dim. The kids next door came over to our house so I could help them with their French homework; there was nothing angst-ridden or embarrassing about it; nobody got stressed (to be more accurate, nobody cared), or entertained any notion of entitlement to excellent teaching for their child.

Was it better when we trusted the comprehensive ethic, when deferential parents kept their distance? It was less fraught, perhaps; less of a bunfight, but also less focused on outcomes for the child. Boy, I could have done with a tutor 30 years ago when I sat my S-level English paper in my headmaster's kitchen, the only pupil in his school to attempt such an Everest, while the potatoes for his family lunch bubbled beside me. When I turned over the paper I was horrified: what the hell was an "iambic pentameter"? I had a stab at it, forgot it, failed. The school had singled out a bright child and not had a clue how to prepare her. Tutor? Who would have paid for that? In those days the spending priorities of even aspiring working-class families did not include bespoke education.

Some talk of tutoring undermining schools. Fiona Millar, chair of the Family and Parenting Institute and chair of governors at Gospel Oak Primary School in London, sees tutoring in state primaries as a way of obscuring a school's true performance. "I could show you several satisfactory London primary schools," she says, "which have artificially inflated test results. A lot of children in years 5 and 6 are being tutored because their parents want to send them on to selective schools or because they are generally anxious about their progress. That discriminates against schools like the one where I'm the chair of governors. Our children don't have tuition because most of the parents wouldn't be able to afford it."

A teacher for 15 years who has recently switched to tutoring, Francine Almandoz, 43, of Winchmore Tutors in north London, agrees that tutoring can create a prejudicial climate, but she also knows that it's effective. She is one of those recruited to the pilot scheme for the Making Good Progress initiative. She has recently started work in two Islington schools, offering 10 hours' help a week to children who have fallen behind two levels from the expected Sats results. "I have my private clients," she says, "but I like to think I'm putting something back into the state system, working with children who really need it." Might not tutored children help the teacher, leaving them free to concentrate on the strugglers?

Professor Judy Ireson, of the Institute of Education, who conducted a 2005 survey on tutoring, disagrees. "International research suggests that because a tutor tackles the subject in a different way, the child can get confused. Also, children are less interested in the class because they think, 'I'm going to do this with my tutor', or 'I've already done it with my tutor'. It can lead to them being bored, disengaged or disruptive."

Moreover, not all practitioners agree about the boom in tutoring. Dr Karina Halstead, owner of Home Tutors of Muswell Hill, takes issue with the Sutton Trust's assertion of growth in tutoring, talking of the small 7% change over the four-year period in question. "In the 1990s," she says indignantly, "we had heavy-duty tuition. Some

children had a tutor for the whole two-year A-level course. In the 1980s, 46% of our children were under the age of 11. Now they go to after-school clubs, homework clubs, community centres? that's all business we are losing. There's not huge money to be made. I'm dealing with Mrs Middle Class of Muswell Hill, and Mrs Begum who can hardly speak English on a council estate in Camden, who might have two or three children, for whom we are trying to roll maths, English and science into an hour at a reasonable price."

Tutoring has also helped to discredit grammar schools as instruments of social mobility for brainy working-class kids. David Willetts' 2007 speech to the CBI crystallised why even the Tories — those historical champions of bootstraps betterment — can no longer endorse grammars: thanks to private tuition they are "entrenching social advantage", with poor children no longer standing a chance. Once upon a time, all blue-collar parents had to do was find the money for a fancy uniform (no small obstacle); now they are required to mastermind their clever child's path to glory.

Now come with me down Millionaires' Row to meet charming Michaela and Steven, a banker. When I drive my battered Nissan Micra down their street, the road's permanent security man eyes me curiously from his van, probably thinks I'm the relief nanny. Or the tutor. Each of their five beautiful children is more accomplished, clever and delightful than the last. They have not relaxed into their affluence, their household staff are supporters of industrious achievement rather than indolent luxury, they make every second count, a family of strivers and winners: talented chess players, Suzuki violinists, tennis aces, their children "never have time" to watch TV. Their two eldest attend Westminster and St Paul's, simply the ne plus ultra (the Latin wouldn't faze them) of London day schools. "My wife," laughs Steven indulgently, "has her sights set on the top schools. We felt we should go for the safe option by tutoring and not risk not getting in."

Michaela continues: "What you learn is that when the teaching is good enough, you don't need to tutor. I believe you only get a top education at the very top schools. To my mind it's worth doing what you need to do to get there." What about kids whose parents don't tutor?

"If you want to go to a selective school and can't afford tutoring, you can afford time. Do it yourself. What part of WH Smith is expanding? Test papers, the Bond assessment papers, the Letts series, everyone is targeted. Everyone is in this zone."

Fiona Millar worries about children under 10 who are tutored after school. "They should be playing with their friends, which is educational too." I hardly dare tell her about three-year-old girls tutored before they can even use a pair of scissors for entry to their independent schools at four. "It's ridiculous," laughs Angela Cohen. "Really it's about reassuring parents, not helping children. All you can do is check that the little one is chatty and sociable."

Should we be teaching children that life is a ferocious competition? "But that is what life is," smiles Michaela. "It's cut-throat, and if you are not ready to face that, you had better wake up." It seems that an increasing number of us agree. Gripped by an educational hypochondria, we are dashing into A&E for a case of mild indigestion, playing Mozart to cloth-eared embryos, propping infants in front of Baby Bright DVDs, snaffling tutors, pouring brain-enhancing fish oils down our children's throats (it's easier to score hard drugs than a bottle of Eskimo Omega-3 in my neighbourhood). There are writing prizes and piano grades to strive for, excellence to pursue, idiotic mothers hollering "focus! focus!" during the sack race on sports day (actually, that was me), all of us smiling through gritted teeth and reassuring each other, but mostly ourselves: "All I want is for my children to be happy." Who are we kidding?

CASE STUDY: Rhea Khatri, 7

Rhea, the daughter of a finance manager and a secretary, started at Kumon's Finchley Central branch when she was five years old. "We want her to do well, be bright, be confident," says her mother, Kavita. "At Kumon she sees other kids working on the next level up and she wants to get there too. She has never resisted it. Sometimes she'll say 'Ooh, Mum, I'll do it later.' But once she starts, she gets into it." Rhea tells me that the daily routine of worksheets, on which pupils must spend 10 to 20 minutes a day, has "made me feel clever and more confident with my times tables and my take-aways".

Jennifer Ramos, who runs the Finchley Central class, says that her youngest pupil was three years old. "I believe it's beneficial going at an early age, recognising numbers, developing concentration, getting into a routine, even learning how to apply the correct pressure when holding the pencil."

THE TUTOR'S TALE: A trainee teacher, Preeya tutored GCSE and A-level students while at Oxford

"Tutoring can be absolutely nerve-racking. You never know if parents are going to sue you if you don't deliver. One girl was very talented artistically, but her parents were only interested in academic achievement. They constantly put her down in front of me, saying 'She's lazy, she doesn't work as hard as her sisters.' It was heartbreaking. Some parents were threatening towards their children, but obsequious to me. The mother of one boy would say, 'I know he's difficult. I'm just so grateful for everything you're doing.' Another father was desperate for me to

persuade his son to choose an academic subject, while the boy was sport mad and wanted to do physical education. Parents are keen to talk for hours about their child. Often it's: 'His attitude is terrible, his sister works much harder.' Then you meet the kid and he's just a normal teenage boy. I have often been asked to do students' coursework, or if not asked outright, then realised that it's expected. Some private schools don't care how students get their results, they'll get them through any way they can, often by bringing tutors into the school to supplement teaching. Some of these kids have such a blasé attitude. They know their parents will hire a tutor for them, and their attitude to coursework is: 'I'll get my tutor to do it.' I saw the worst examples of pushy parents when I helped with student interviews at Oxford. One boy who'd come with his father was telling him what had happened in the interview. He said:

'I managed to answer most of the questions, but then when he asked me this, my mind went blank.' He was desperate for reassurance, but instead the father lost his temper and said: 'That was in the book you were told to read. It will be totally your fault if you don't get in.' And then he turned on his heel and marched off. I was horrified. And that was not an isolated incident."

Interview by Caroline Scott

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