

## Key Points to Consider *When Hiring a Tutor*

*“Mom, leave me alone!”...“Sally, you don’t seem to get it. You are a junior and this year is critical! What are you going to do next year when your friends are all applying to college?”...“I don’t care! Just leave me alone!”*

**Sound familiar?** This all too often confrontation can be avoided through some simple proactive steps. Hiring a tutor may be the first step and is tantamount to purchasing life insurance. By hiring a tutor, you have transferred the responsibility, burden, and risk to a third party. The truth is that a third party will derive much more efficient and effective results than most parents can achieve. If you and your spouse work full-time and come home after a long day at the office, doesn’t it make more sense to enjoy the time you have with your child rather than engage in the nightly “battle of the books?”

The goal of this article is to break down into manageable steps the often-daunting process of hiring a tutor. Many of the considerations a parent must address fall into one of the following categories:

- Do you need to hire a tutor to work with your child?
- What results do you want your child to achieve?
- Does your child need an academic tutor or an academic coach/mentor?
- Where and when do you want tutoring to take place?
- Should your child be tested?
- What are the benefits to the rest of the family?
- What are the qualities of a good tutor?
- Where do you find a tutor?
- What should you expect from a tutoring service?
- What can you expect to pay for quality tutoring?
- Should you take a proactive or reactive approach?

As you work through the following steps, it is critical that you step away from the emotional side of the issues. This will allow you to use this model to get the objective, unbiased, unfettered help for

your child that will lead to the path to success – and give your life back to you!

### **Do You Need to Hire a Tutor to Work With Your Child?**

The first question that must be addressed is whether a tutor is needed to help your child improve his or her performance in school. As with any decision, careful review of the situation enables you to arrive at a rational decision.

#### *Considerations include:*

- Student avoids doing work at almost any cost
  - Indications of declining grades are apparent
  - Student needs excessive help with homework
  - Student takes excessive time to complete homework
  - Parents find themselves re-teaching basic skills
  - Student seems frustrated and inclined to make excuses for inadequate performance in school
- If any or all of these symptoms seem apparent, serious consideration should be given to hiring a tutor.

### **What Should You Expect a Tutor to Do for Your Child and Your Family?**

#### **What Results Do You Want Your Child to Achieve?**

When deciding to hire a tutor to work with their child, parents must first ask one fundamental question: What results do I want my child to achieve? First, lay out specific goals. These goals may include a desired, realistic and attainable grade level, an increase in overall self-confidence, an enhanced level of academic independence and overall self-sufficiency. You may want the tutor to help in one or more of the following areas: a specific subject; special education instruction; general remediation; enrichment to “raise the bar” for a student who may seem satisfied with mediocrity; test prep for the PSAT, SAT, SSAT, or ACT examinations; or to challenge a gifted child. If possible, you should work with your child’s school in defining these goals. Take advantage of the knowledge and experience of your child’s teachers, guidance counselors, and even the school’s principal. Once the exact problem has been identified, working to resolve the problem is much more manageable.

### **Does Your Child Need an Academic Tutor or an Academic Coach/Mentor?**

The first part of defining your child’s goals is answering the broader question of whether the student requires an academic tutor or an academic coach/mentor. Academic tutoring should be subject-specific with short-term goals and of limited duration. The aim should be to resolve a very targeted, specific academic need. This may be a deficiency in some aspect of math that is hindering a student at the higher levels, a weakness in the writing process such as difficulty developing a basic five-paragraph essay, or confusion about conjugating verbs in a foreign language. Academic coaching, on the other hand, involves modeling and mentoring. Tutoring of this nature will be longer in duration; goals may be less specific and more general. For the student who is struggling with study and organizational skills and who may need to meet with a third party once a week to “touch base” and keep on task, this is often an effective strategy. Draw on the goals you have for your child, and keep this broader goal in mind as you speak to tutors later in the process.

### **Where and When Do You Want Tutoring to Take Place?**

Another consideration is where and when you would like tutoring to take place. You may pay a premium for a tutor to come to your home, or to a public library near your home, but don’t forget to factor convenience into the cost. Or, perhaps weekdays are so filled with your job and your child’s activities that weekends would be better. Decide when and where you would like tutoring to occur, and then make certain anyone you contact can meet that need. Remember, your time has an opportunity cost associated with it that should not be ignored.

#### **Should Your Child Be Tested?**

Among the most mysterious, perplexing, and costly decisions facing parents is the question of testing. The education world has created a subculture that at times seems unintelligible to the average parent. So what is a parent to do?

If a student attends a public school and has been identified by teachers, administrators and support staff as in need of testing services, the answer to this question is generally resolved at little or no cost to the parent. The maze of

BY DR. RALPH G. PERRINO |

acronyms that may be assigned to a student is daunting to most parents. Public schools are required by law to provide special accommodations outlined in what is termed an “IEP”, an individualized education plan. Such designations can be a valuable asset to parents and students as they maneuver through the maze of elementary, middle and high school class and standardized testing requirements.

Parents whose children attend private school are in a much different position. Most, but not all, private schools do not provide testing services, nor do they address the needs of special education students. In fact, it is commonly understood that any private school can simply turn away a student who may have special needs, something that public schools cannot do. For parents of students who attend private school (or parents of children who attend public school who choose to not use the special education services afforded by the public schools), there are many options in the private sector from which to select an educational diagnostician. These services are often more efficient, sometimes more effective, and almost always more expensive, with costs in the range of several thousand dollars for a full battery of tests.

Regardless of the need for formal, professional testing and evaluation, parents should insist on a minimum of an informal evaluation by a tutor prior to commencing with the tutoring process. This should include a review of any homework assignments, tests, textbooks, and related materials to determine the most effective course of action. The tutor should then establish a plan of action and arrange regular tutoring sessions. The need for formal testing or informal evaluation should be determined through close consultation with teachers, counselors, and other involved professionals.

### **What are the Benefits to the Rest of the Family?**

Returning to the insurance metaphor, by transferring responsibility for a specific academic area to a third party, hiring a tutor takes the tension out of the relationship a parent may have with their child. Goals you set for a tutor should have far-reaching implications for the entire family, not just your

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child. Bringing peace back to the family by ending the battle of the books is a worthwhile reason to hire a qualified tutor.

### *How Do You Find and Choose Tutor?*

#### *What Are the Qualities of a Good Tutor?*

Now that you know what you would like your child to learn from a tutor, it is time to find a good tutor. To begin the process, you need to know what to look for. First and foremost, a tutor should enjoy the company of children and young adults. They should also have a little "kid" left in them. Any service that does not clearly exhibit enthusiasm for children and their academic success should be avoided. Other qualities that should be apparent are: the tutor should come to all sessions regularly and on time; the tutor should be organized (why would a disorganized student choose to become organized if his/her tutor does not demonstrate this trait?); the tutor should set clear goals and expectations; the tutor should work at a level that is comfortable for the student; the tutor should not do the work for the student and, most importantly, the tutor should teach independent learning skills.

Of course, any tutor who works with a student should be technically qualified to perform the task at hand. This should entail a minimum of a Bachelor's Degree. Should you hire a tutor who does not possess state teaching certification or an education background? The answer to that question lies in the nature of the problem. If a child is in the elementary or middle school years, it is best to employ the services of a teaching professional that has knowledge of and experience with those age groups. That rule generally does not have to apply when the issue is high school and college level math, science, languages, and research/writing. Eliminating non-teachers in these areas removes a large, highly qualified segment of the population from your pool of options.

### *Where Do You Find a Tutor?*

Exploring the range of options available to you is a critical factor. Options available to parents include large commercial franchises, private independent tutoring services, after-school programs, college tutoring centers, on-line tutoring, SAT prep centers, no-cost tutoring at schools that qualify under federal "No Child Left

Behind" guidelines, and independent tutors.

Each of these options varies in 1) *reliability* - a company is likely to be more reliable than a college student looking to make extra money 2) *personalization* - smaller companies and individual tutors may be more likely to cater to your child's specific needs, rather than a program they developed 3) *accessibility* - working with a company gives you additional accountability and support staff to talk to if you ever have a problem.

In arriving at a decision, consider more than just the cost of tutoring (see "What Can I Expect to Pay? for more information). Quality, convenience, dependability and flexibility are all factors you should include. Although tutoring can be expensive, the opportunity costs of a wrong decision that is based purely on an hourly rate can be disastrous. Parents need to balance cost and cost-effectiveness, because both play a crucial role in this decision.

### *What Should You Expect From a Tutoring Service?*

Any tutoring service that is being seriously considered should provide prompt, reliable, efficient, and effective service. It should also be responsive, accountable, and committed to the education process. It should provide qualified, compassionate, caring, and knowledgeable tutors who are motivators as well as educators. Tutors should suggest specific strategies to resolve a problem and offer guidance through the process of identifying a solution. Last, any tutoring service that is in serious consideration should demonstrate honesty and a sense of professional ethics and freely offer to provide references.

### *What Can You Expect to Pay for Quality Tutoring?*

Last, of course are the logistics of tutoring and costs and contractual obligations associated with the process. Considerations such as how far one is willing to travel to a tutoring service and whether a service is willing to come to your home are quality of life factors that should not be discounted. In today's hectic world in which both parents often work, the convenience if a tutor coming to the home is something that should be factored in. The cost for this convenience may well be worth it in the long term.

Costs for tutoring vary significantly, depending on the model chosen. Options

include teachers and individuals who may be tutoring independently. Depending on age and experience, you might pay anywhere from \$15 per hour (for a high school kid who knows a little more than your child) to \$60 per hour (for someone with a master's degree who is providing her own materials). Other possibilities are large national chains, which might be more expensive and less flexible; yet offer reliability, accessibility, and consistency. With a small independent tutoring service you can expect to pay between \$60 - \$85 per hour, reflecting a pre-screened, high-quality tutor, as well as overhead office and advertising costs. High school or college tutoring centers might even be free, but be sure to consider the background and level of commitment of the tutors. Costs will vary by subject, with math and science tutors commanding the higher hourly rates.

Each of these models has positive and negative aspects. Among these are the contractual obligations of the arrangement. Many firms require a long-term contract commitment. Others offer more open-ended contracts, which assume that when the client, in consultation with the tutor, teachers, and the tutoring service, determines that tutoring is no longer needed, that the contractual obligation should cease. The choice should be driven by the specific needs of the student and the family, not by the bottom line of the tutoring service.

*A checklist of questions you should ask a tutor/tutoring service may include:*

1. How do you select your tutors? What kind of expertise and experience do tutors have in their subject area?
2. What happens if I want to change tutors?
3. Where does tutoring take place?
4. What is the cost of tutoring? Are there any administrative fees?
5. Does the contract obligate me to a long-term commitment?
6. Can you provide references?

### *The "Why" and "How" of Being Proactive*

#### *Should You Take a Proactive or Reactive Approach?*

To maximize the benefit of tutoring and academic coaching, don't wait for bad grades and reports from teachers. Keep an eye out for the following signs

that may be more subtle indicators of an impending problem - frustration with school, work consistently avoided, work not turned in, an unwillingness to wake up in the morning. Most importantly, be alert to signs of exhaustion and depression. These often manifest themselves in subtle ways in teens. A keen parental eye should spot this early.

You can also take proactive steps in your everyday behavior at home by modeling the importance of learning. Make learning a priority and part of the family culture. Teach by modeling and do not accept below par, self-defeatist attitudes. Remember, kids often mimic what they see at home. The family, as the first socializing agent, is the first line of defense against an increasingly intrusive popular culture. Parents who are tuned into their children's academic, emotional, and social needs and who are proactive in addressing those needs generally will have far happier, more successful children.

It's not ideal, but sometimes the grades fall suddenly and we, as parents, are caught off guard. Don't panic! Follow the suggestions outlined in this article, but be realistic. Tutoring is not the same thing as a miracle. But it is a key component to turning academic performance around and improving your child's general attitude toward school. That, of course, is the first step toward resolution of the problem.

These key points to consider when hiring a tutor are important to thoroughly review before signing on the dotted line with any firm. A methodical, rational, decision devoid of emotion will result in a cost-effective decision that addresses the core problem. Only then can a student begin to enjoy the academic success he or she deserves. As well, parents can remove themselves from the academically volatile situation with their children and enjoy family time once again! ❖

*Dr. Perrino, Owner and Director of Northern Virginia Tutoring Service, LLC is also an Associate Professor of Sociology at Northern Virginia Community College. NVTS offers subject-specific tutoring in all areas as well as academic coaching and mentoring to students from kindergarten through graduate school. Dr. Perrino can be reached at 703-534-5779 or via email at DrPerrino@nvtutoring.com. The website for NVTS is www.nvtutoring.com.*