
Educational Connections

W.G. FORD, PH.D., C. PSYCH.
DIRECTOR

226 Lawrence Avenue West
TORONTO, ON
CANADA M5M 1B1

Tel: (416) 783-3606
FAX: (416) 783-2347
EMAIL: connect@schoolsearch.ca

TUTORING OR REMEDIATION¹

When seeking extra academic support for your child it is important to differentiate between 'tutoring' and 'remedial' intervention. Determining your child's learning style and educational needs is a critical first step to take when searching for outside intervention.

Parents have become more sophisticated and increasingly critical of the educational process. Lack of national standards, perceived teacher apathy, superficial phonics vs. whole language controversies, funding cutbacks are but a few of the issues cited daily in the media. A recent conference sponsored by the Counsel of Concerned Parents concluded that children's learning needs in Ontario are not being adequately addressed. In response to this disturbing view, some families have opted for private schools while others are looking to 'tutoring' as a means to ensure their children learn more than the basic skills and get a 'leg up' on international competition. However, before proceeding to seek supplementary educational supports for your child, an important distinction should be made between the terms *tutoring* and *remedial*.

WHEN TO TUTOR; WHEN TO REMEDIATE?

Tutoring focuses primarily on *content*. A tutor makes sure that the student understands the concepts and materials relevant to a specific subject or course of study. Tutoring, therefore, involves the student's day today school work or provides "catch up" opportunities for the student who has missed information (e.g., due to illness or a family move). In contrast to remedial intervention, tutoring does not necessarily deal with or address the student's individual learning style. The tutor's goals are to "coach" the student by explaining material in more detail or by actually "re-teaching" the student. Tutoring is appropriate when the child has no special learning needs and the focus is primarily content in orientation. The instructor teaches the child individually, or in a small group, using the same general teaching methods that are used in the classroom.

In contrast, remediation focuses on *process* and takes into account 'how' the individual student actually learns and provides the student with personally tailored skills (i.e., compensatory strategies) in an effort to capitalize on his² learning strengths and to compensate for specific learning weaknesses or disability (e.g., memory, language). The primary emphasis in remediation is to focus on the learning process itself in addition to specific content. Remedial intervention focuses on choosing teaching methods and strategies which match the learning style of the individual student. Once the student grasps the method, he receives assistance in transferring the learning process best suited to his needs to school related assignments. The goal is one of ensuring generalization of new learning and the development of compensatory skills.

HOW DO I KNOW WHICH TYPE OF INTERVENTION TO USE?

In most cases the terms "tutorial" and "remedial" are used interchangeably by educators in that tutoring is used as a generic term for both terms. A good tutor, of course, should recognize if a shift to more of a remedial focus is needed. An adolescent, for example, may be experiencing difficulty understanding the content of a history lesson or geography course. That is he may not understand notes he copied in class or his text book readings. If the lack of understanding is the result of the student's having missed classes or changed schools, etc., then straight "tutoring" may help him fill in the missing information needed to comprehend the current school work.

¹ by William G. Ford, Ph.D., C.Psych (Educational Psychologist)

² No gender bias is intended by the use of the male gender in this article although the ratio of males to females of youngsters in remediation is 4:1.

However, if the lack of understanding stems from difficulties with reading comprehension, the focus of instruction must become more "remedial". In this case, the student needs to be taught strategies to improve his comprehension skills. Otherwise, he will continue to experience difficulty each time he is presented with new content and create a weak foundation for later learning.

WHEN DOES TUTORIAL BECOME REMEDIAL?

Sometimes tutorial work becomes remedial when reviewing and explaining ongoing math content from school. While working through math word problems or helping the student prepare for tests, it may become apparent that the student may be missing foundations skills, may not know how to study for a math test or experience specific difficulty writing tests. There could be any number of underlying reasons why the student did not retain certain skills, and so simple tutoring would not necessary "fill in the gaps". More directly, however, when the student's learning struggles reflect underlying organizational problems or difficulty understanding and/or comprehending the language of the questions, instructions, etc., the focus needs to become remedial by taking into account the student's underlying learning profile. A careful diagnostic approach to teaching is the mark of a strong teacher.

TUTORING ELEMENTARY AGED STUDENTS

When instructing elementary students, the emphasis is almost always remedial. The focus is not on teaching content, per se, but on teaching processes and strategies whether in reading, writing, spelling or math. An important consideration is the application of teaching methodologies to the student's individual differences. While the content of instruction is important in that it should be relevant to the student's interests and daily school work, it is secondary to the skills which are developed through the content.

The ultimate goal of any form of instructional intervention, of course, is to reduce the degree to which students rely on "tutors" and to ensure that your child's tutor is helping him "take over" the learning process. A sign of dependency occurs when the child says during a difficult lesson in school: "Oh well, I'll ask my tutor to explain it tonight" and tunes out. The goal of any tutoring or remedial intervention is to ensure ownership of the learning process by the student.

HOW DO I FIND THE BEST TUTOR FOR MY CHILD?

How to find the 'right' tutor is a challenge. Although tutorials are traditionally provided primarily by teachers supplementing their income after school hours or by large Learning Centres specializing in specific types of interventions, tutorial instruction has truly become "big business". Witness the rise of the multi-national educational franchises which use appealing ads, usually around report card times, to capture the attention of the concerned parent. Tutorial intervention has become the new growth industry in education in this new millennium.

Take a close look at the tutorial ads that appear routinely in your local newspaper or neighbourhood newsletter. They are clearly directed at the concerned parent: "You know his true potential but you just can't seem to bring it out"; "Building Skills, Building Success"; "Our tutoring programs can make all the difference"; "Raising your voice won't raise her grades". "Concerned . . ."; "Confused..."; etc. The obvious implication of these assertions is that the pressure is on and the competition is getting stiff. "Can your child make it through High School?" The seductive appeal of these ads to the parent whose child is experiencing a real struggle with reading or math, has failed a grade or is trying to prepare for entrance to that "best" private school is beguiling. As the saying goes, consume beware! It is important to know what approach the tutoring service is using, and if it matches your child's learning needs.

Let's assume that you have decided to seek a tutor for your child. Where do you begin? The first step is to obtain a clear and objective identification of your child's learning strengths and needs. Ask yourself if you in a situation where you simply want to ensure that your child is building skills within a particular content area, such as, reading or math? Or, is your child actually experiencing an underlying struggle with the learning process itself? Identifying whether your child requires "tutorial" support or more specialized "remedial" intervention is a critical first step toward meeting your child's educational needs.