CHAPTER ONE

Finding the Right Tutor for Your Child

You've decided your child needs tutoring. Now, like so many parents, you wonder how to go about choosing the right tutor for your child.

The Introduction addressed the issue of who needs to be tutored, the answer to which was a version of "It depends." Not every student with driven parents should be tutored nor should every child with apparently poor study habits. Yet some students are stuck and need help.

Once you've decided that your child needs tutoring, how do you select a tutor? That question typically includes three concerns:

- *What underlying approach should the tutor take?* I know my child needs help on his study skills or on a particular subject, but how should the tutor approach the subject?
- *What does good tutoring look like?* I know this tutor comes highly recommended, but how do I judge whether he or she is good for the unique needs of my child?
- *What qualifications should the tutor of my child have?* I know this tutor has an impressive education, but is

that the most important factor? What else should I be looking for?

What Underlying Approach Should a Tutor Take?

The answer to this question takes us to the heart of this book. It advocates for an ambitious style of tutoring that will benefit your child the most. The Introduction ended by describing a goal of tutoring: not simply teaching a skill or increased competency in subject matter but also helping a child achieve *intellectual independence*.

Intellectual independence refers to the ability of your children to face the necessary challenges of learning on their own, drawing on the resources of their schools. It also includes your children's belief that they can overcome learning challenges.

And so this goal includes not only your child's increased ability but also his improved outlook toward learning—not panic or pessimism but confidence and determination. Tutors should work themselves out of a job, returning the student to the normal struggles of being in school.

The benefits of tutoring in this way work for students at every level, and they go far beyond your children's school years. That's why the *independence* to which this term refers is distinctly *intellectual* rather than simply academic. Learning doesn't stop with the end of formal education. Adults, too, face such challenges. The absence of the ability to meet learning challenges can cripple development, but its presence can go a long way toward enabling someone to advance her life.

Parents should therefore select tutors who teach more than skills or subject matter. Tutors should also be able to develop intellectual independence within the students

with whom they work. The focus of tutoring is then not simply enrichment but also *learning to learn*.

Learning Intellectual Independence

Let's look at the story of Carter to illustrate this approach. It doesn't matter what kind of student Carter is—whether strong or average in ability. It matters how he was helped.

When I first met Carter, three months into his freshman year of high school, he claimed that he was more frustrated with his parents than he was with his progress. They didn't understand, he told me. Middle school was over; high school was different. He was working as hard as he could.

Carter had attended a nurturing but weak middle school. He had been a good student there. His parents, a men's clothing salesman and a florist, were proud of him. Between middle school and high school, the family moved. He enrolled at a demanding high school, where everything was different for him.

He'd begun the year enthusiastic and confident, reporting to his parents how much he liked the classes and the students. That changed when he received a C-minus on his first substantial evaluation, an in-class essay on *The Odyssey*, by Homer. Carter was disappointed—"hurt and shocked," his mother reported. He reassured himself and his parents by stating that everyone in the class had done poorly.

In the next month, Carter continued to struggle. He scored a C-minus on a history test, received a mediocre grade on a lab report, and wrote another C-minus essay for English. His parents grew increasingly concerned and began to press him: Was he spending a lot of time on the phone or on the computer with friends? As a precaution,

they restricted his use of the Internet and limited his television watching. The new restrictions had little effect on Carter's performance. His parents contacted me.

Carter was willing to accept my help, he said, but he did not truly believe anything would come of it. He told me that his teachers had pegged him as an average-to-below-average student, and there he would remain. "Just the same," I said, "Would you mind if I gave it a try?"

I looked over his classes, books, binders, and returned work. His binders were nearly empty of notes. His graded lab reports, tests, and essays were filled with comments urging him to analyze more deeply and to provide more detail. Watching me study his work, Carter casually revealed that other students met with teachers outside class, but he had rarely done so.

I pointed out the obvious: he had in effect refused his teachers' assistance by refusing to ask for it. "They don't help," he insisted. Clearly, he wasn't ready to pursue working individually with his teachers.

Within two weeks, Carter had another essay to prepare for English on *The Odyssey*. I watched him start out. He opened his book, looked over the small amount of notes he had taken in class, and reread two underlined passages in the epic. Then he began to write the first draft of his essay.

"I've read it all and listened in class," he explained, "so I just go."

I started to offer suggestions, but he found them distracting. He was once again not ready to hear them.

Later that week, he e-mailed me that the essay was tough going because he had forgotten a great idea. It had been in his head the week before.

At our next session, Carter showed me a copy of the essay he'd turned in. "It's not very good," he said.

"There's a reason for that," I said, "and if you're ready to listen, I think I can help you."

I told him that he hadn't developed any habits that helped him address writing or remember his thoughts on a book. In fact, he had no idea how he went about studying for any subject other than "I just go."

I established a process for reading and note taking that he began to use for all of his classes. I made him think rigorously about his argument and his organization as he prepared essays. I also insisted that he read his teachers' comments on all of his returned work. Once he began to follow this advice, it became apparent that Carter needed work in particular areas of analysis, especially inferential thinking. But he was a quick study.

In a short time, Carter's complaints about his abilities lessened. They didn't stop altogether. There were occasional lapses. Still, in the next few months, Carter focused on his difficulties. He began to seek out teachers, at first reluctantly but later willingly.

By the end of the next semester, Carter had made steady progress. His parents, too, saw that his confidence was back. He was learning intellectual independence. I ended my work with him.

One way to describe the origin of Carter's problems is that he had no clear sense of *how* to learn. He had never encountered genuine academic difficulty before he reached ninth grade. His experience in middle school did not help him, so he needed to learn that he was capable of overcoming challenges. His first reaction, however, had been despair and his second to commit himself to remaining in this state. He shut down. He preferred hopelessness to change when in fact he was at a new school that challenged him to develop his abilities to solve problems or to seek appropriate help.

For sixteen-year old Celia, a sophomore in high school with ADD, the problem was slightly different. She insisted that she knew how she learned. If she had an essay to write, she knew exactly what her ideas were. She wrote them down. She opened her notebook to show pages of notes that literally covered all white space on the pages, a sea of ink in which any attempt to focus her thinking quickly drowned.

When Celia went to write an essay, her ideas didn't come together, except as a list of seemingly disconnected thoughts. Sometimes she had a really good thesis statement, she said, but the teacher always told her it had nothing to do with the other ideas in her essay. It was totally frustrating. She worked so hard. Where was the reward for all that hard work?

Celia's unfiltered style of taking notes was the tip of the iceberg. Overall, she had a way of working that guaranteed there would be a disconnection between her particular and her general observations. The problem appeared in more than essays and reading, too. When she studied for tests in science, she slaved for hours. But general principles were lost amid a swarm of facts and details.

Celia knew something was wrong, but she was unable to see its source. As we examined how she learned, she was open to changing her habits. She learned to prioritize, to distinguish the more-important ideas from the less-important ones. Her notes began to serve as a filter for her experience of class and of reading. Her work gradually improved.

For Carter and Celia, their problems with writing were a symptom. The style with which they met learning challenges was its cause. They lacked a clear sense of how they went about their work and which of their habits stopped them from working more easily. Once a tutor taught them *how* they learned, they were ready to make changes. They developed intellectual independence.

Different Styles of Learning

Parents may recognize Carter and Celia's styles of learning. There are also many other styles of learning that can lead students to trouble. Here are a few more examples:

- A fifteen-year-old student's style was to wait until the last minute to do an assignment, prepare for a test, or write an essay, because the student believed that it led to better concentration and performance—and it was more exciting.
- A fourteen-year-old with ADHD raced through history readings and then despaired that she couldn't ever remember the details.
- A thirteen-year-old had his "own way of doing math," which didn't require showing any work. He was infuriated that he always made careless mistakes on tests.
- A sixteen-year-old had been told so often she was brilliant that she ripped up every draft of an essay unless it immediately met her expectations. Preparing papers was sheer torture for her.

Parents may look over this list, nod their heads, and declare each of these styles to be problems. But that's too general. Not every student who learns in these styles needs help, at least not immediately. The students I encountered did, however, because their habits had inhibited their ability to meet the challenges of their education. They were frustrated, angry, anxious, or despairing.

Once these students were shown how the styles they had adopted caused their problems, they were more open to changing their habits. And once they changed their habits, they were profoundly more available for learning. They were able to fix their problems and become independent of me rapidly. They developed intellectual independence.

Parents should therefore look for tutors who do more than teach their children geometry, explain chemical bonds, analyze *Jane Eyre*, or tease out the causes of the French Revolution. They should look for tutors who build their children's ability to learn independently by teaching them *how* they learn, reinforcing good habits, and replacing bad ones. Even as tutors focus on the necessary subjects and skills, they should teach the students about their own learning style.

Parents should expect tutors to make use of any resources available to determine what their child's learning style is. The list of potential resources is long. It includes parents, teachers, learning specialists, neuropsychologists, child psychiatrists, social workers, psychologists, school counselors, and anyone else who formally or informally has evaluated their child. A good tutor will be comprehensive and vigilant at gathering information on how the student learns. The more complete a sense of how the student learns, the better the tutor can work with the student.

What Does Good Tutoring Look Like?

It's one thing for tutors to declare that they want to make students independent and confident. It's quite another to achieve this goal for your individual child. Understandably, parents want to know how to detect if the tutor they select is succeeding. My work with Chloe is a good example of what parents should pay attention to.

Over the phone, Chloe's mother explained that Chloe, a thirteen-year-old eighth grader, was "very upset" for the second time in as many days. School overwhelmed Chloe, her mother reported, even though she was intelligent and capable. On any given evening when she sat down to study, she interrupted herself frequently with phone calls and instant messaging. Her mother believed

that Chloe did that because she was frustrated and uncertain of how to work, especially in history and English. Could I help?

When I met Chloe and her mother, Chloe told me a different story. She was simply unhappy at her school. She worked steadily and without interruption each night, sometimes until eleven o'clock or midnight. Did she instant-message while she studied? Of course not. She pursed her lips and shot a glance at her mother. Did she make phone calls? Rarely, and only when it helped her work. The problem was, Chloe explained, she was unhappy. That's all. Then she started to cry.

This wasn't the time to point out to Chloe that her explanation of her problem made no sense. It also wasn't the moment to ask her if she was stretching the truth about her study habits. I handed her a tissue and asked to see her alone from then on.

During my next visit with Chloe, she did a spectacular job of avoiding work. She claimed that she had done it all. (This was clearly not the case.) She wanted to discuss the schools she preferred to attend rather than the one she was at. I told her that I'd do my best to help her go to the school of her choice. But she needed to be able to work better if she were to have a chance to attend that terrific school she so wanted.

My focus on her goal pleased her a great deal. Then I told her that if she wanted my help, she should always bring in all of her work, including recently returned work.

She glowered at me. She accused me of being just like her mother. I said, "Far from it. I'm here to help you get what you want if you want to be helped. But it's your choice. Otherwise, I can't help you." Slowly, Chloe began to reveal her work habits to me. First, she admitted that on rare occasions she used instant messaging. Next,

she told me that at night, she sometimes talked with friends about something other than school. In time, she admitted she used instant messaging and the phone a lot. She studied for about an hour and a half per night rather than the four hours she had originally reported.

Then we began to look at why she had been avoiding her work. Each time she faced something that was difficult in English and history, she grew frustrated. She dismissed the work as irrelevant to her life. I appeared to sympathize with her but only briefly. Then I refocused her on the challenge.

It turned out that her problems began with reading itself. Unlike math, reading just wasn't "definite" enough, as she put it. She was uncomfortable with the ambiguity of reading a novel or understanding the variety of influences that determined a historical event. Faced with such uncertainty, she gave up. I taught her a way of gaining greater ease while reading. It involved providing her with a systemized approach to what she read. In history, it included making separate outlines of important historical events on the one hand and causes and influences on the other. Chloe then compared the causes-and-influences outline with the important-historical-events outline to evaluate the significance of an event—and then did it in the reverse. In English, it began with her outlining the plot; listing important speech, actions, and descriptions of characters; and eventually identifying themes. Each step made Chloe more comfortable with the ambiguities of reading by imposing organization on it.

Chloe began to complete reading assignments regularly, first with a tentative understanding of what she read and then with some confidence. That led to work on writing. By the middle of the next semester, she was turning in all of her work on time and had increasingly less worry about either history or English.

Along the way, her mother reported that Chloe had changed her mind. She liked her school a little more than she had thought. Maybe she didn't have to change schools after all.

Three Characteristics of Good Tutoring

Your child may be far different from Chloe. And yet her story identifies three characteristics of good tutoring that you should focus on as you evaluate which tutor will be effective with your child:

- The tutor gains the trust of the student, who increasingly reveals what the experience of learning is like, including what gets in the way.
- The student doesn't think of the tutor as either a parent or a teacher.
- The tutor helps the student by supplying specific habits and skills that ease the student's ability to adapt to the challenges of particular subjects or the pedagogical style of a particular teacher.

The Tutor Gains the Trust of Your Child

Tutoring won't do much good unless students believe it's worth telling the tutor how they are struggling. Students must feel comfortable disclosing as much as they can about their difficulties. If they don't, tutors won't have much to work with. Just as important, it may be a sign that your child has little faith that the tutoring will help or is simply not ready to be tutored.

Parents should therefore look for whether the tutor they select is building a rapport with their children. You must believe your children will reveal to the tutor

all the relevant aspects of their school habits, including what work they do or fail to do, how they study, and any other details of their learning experience. Without this trust relationship, the core of a student's problems won't be addressed, and the student will be unlikely to make changes at the tutor's suggestion.

That trust isn't easy to achieve. A bright sixteen-year-old I worked with lied to me and to his parents for nearly two months until he was expelled from school for not doing his work. With that student, knowing how and when to talk to him was challenging, as it can be for many students. The tutor you should select must be able to speak the language of your child.

The personality and timing of the tutor can be important for establishing a connection with your child. For example, I had a timid thirteen-year-old student whom I managed to alienate by pushing her to work harder at exactly the wrong moment to make such a demand. After that, she withdrew. As much as I tried to convince her that I was a kinder, gentler person than she had thought, I'd blown it through my misperception of when to speak and what to say.

As parents evaluate a tutor, they should observe whether the rapport between the student and the tutor seems to be developing. You should look for signs that your child believes in the ability of the tutor and shows as much through words and actions, however gradually those signs occur.

The Tutor Is Neither Parent nor Teacher

To a young person, tutors can be those rarest of creatures: adults who don't punish them, bother them, order them around, or give them a grade. Tutors aren't going to take

away their privileges or cramp their style. Tutors aren't going to jeopardize their futures with a C or D for the semester. On top of that, tutors aren't in their face every day at school or when they get home. Parents should select tutors who exploit this difference to the hilt.

A tutor often needs to avoid being directly associated with parents or teachers. They should forge a relationship with the student that is less antagonistic than it sometimes is with parents and less freighted than it can be with teachers.

For example, I worked with a fifteen-year-old who was challenged by ADHD. The student's progress at adjusting to it had been slowed as much by the volatile relationship she had with her mother as by anything else. They fought constantly. The mother's well-intentioned desire to be active in her daughter's education made matters worse. So the student responded by hiding her work from both of her parents. That way, her mother couldn't look it over.

In tutoring, I had to reassure the student repeatedly that I wouldn't share her work with her mother. The student also wanted assurances that I wasn't going to behave like her mother. She wanted my assistance but only if she asked for it. I couldn't be seen as insisting that I help. As the student grew to believe me, she progressed rapidly.

In this and many other cases, the very act of tutoring created a different relationship with an adult for the student, one where she could assess her work in relative tranquility.

Parents shouldn't expect the tutor to be an extension of themselves. The tutor's work, including the tutor's reports to parents about that work, shouldn't be something the student associates with the disciplining parents must do. The parent of one student with whom I worked had the habit of waiting until she and her son were in

front of me to express her displeasure with his work. I had to encourage the mother to wait for a more private moment to scold her child.

Tutors should be distinctly more neutral in their response to a student (unless it involves some success). They shouldn't express much disappointment when a student fails to meet a goal or show impatience at the student's rate of progress if it is slow.

That does not mean that a tutor should baby students, treat them as victims of their difficulties, or patronize them. One thirteen-year-old student enjoyed working with me but consistently failed to complete the tasks that we had set for him to finish by the next meeting. I told him gently but firmly that I would have to cancel our meetings if he didn't make an honest effort to complete his work for each session. He changed his behavior very quickly.

Parents should also expect tutors to have a distinctly different relationship to their children than teachers do. Unlike teachers, tutors have the ability to observe a student alone for extended time and to provide sustained, personalized instruction. Teachers can provide intense, occasional scrutiny of individual students; but as I found while teaching college and high school, there is never enough time to work individually with each student on a regular basis. Teachers also know the importance of maintaining a kind of studied distance from students. They have to challenge the students and then give the students time to meet those challenges on their own.

Tutors provide some of that studied distance, but they offer considerably more close scrutiny and advice. Without spoon-feeding or excessive hand-holding, they observe and comment on the student's thinking and habits.

Gabe, a sixteen-year-old, Spanish-speaking boy with whom I worked, for example, was tentative and withdrawn in English. He was terrified of his teacher because the teacher was demanding and a hard grader. This was no fault of the teacher, who was known to be an excellent instructor.

There was no doubt that English was a tough subject for Gabe. He improved because we focused on interpreting his teacher's comments and helping Gabe to follow them. In the tutoring sessions, I challenged him as much as his teacher wanted him challenged. But Gabe temporarily needed the circumstances that tutoring provided. In tutoring sessions, he learned to concentrate on his teacher's instructions without feeling intimidated or judged by the threat of grades. Tutoring also provided him with concrete habits that he could rely on for improving his ability to analyze and to write. Eventually, he gained from his English class and even enjoyed it sometimes, even if he wasn't a great student.

The Tutor Helps Your Child Adjust to School

Let's look at Chloe and Carter again. As she was tutored, Chloe rethought her desire to change schools. During tutoring, Carter learned to make use of the resources at his school. Both changed their relationship to school through tutoring. They learned to handle the workload of school, seek out teachers for help, and meet their particular challenges through what tutoring provided. In the Introduction, I described John, who needed a brief, precise form of tutoring to adapt to the style of teaching in one class. As all of these cases demonstrate, part of learning is adapting to the pedagogical style of the teachers and the school. It is part of the goal of intellectual independence.

So parents should expect tutors to avoid making judgments of the school or the teachers in front of the student. In fact, tutors should strive to make students able to learn in spite of their difficulties with individual teachers. Although the student may complain about particular teachers, the tutor should focus on helping the student analyze what the teacher requires and the challenges of the teacher's class. Consider Gabe once more. He learned how to listen and how "to read" his English teacher as part of the process of tutoring.

A focus on helping the student adapt to the teacher is also prudent. It's likely that the tutor doesn't know the teacher or has at best only partial knowledge of what is going on in the class. Instead, the tutor knows only the student's experience. It is also possible that a student's attitude toward a teacher or a school can change substantially. Chloe had just this kind of wholesale change in her attitude.

Parents should expect the tutor to help a student adjust to a school, because the tutor's authority with a student should in most cases be temporary. It shouldn't override the central importance of the school in your child's education. Although tutoring is distinct and significant, it is not a substitute for the classroom. The tutor's work with a student is reactive. It responds to the school, the subject, and the teacher rather than replaces them. The tutor shouldn't make the student dependent on the tutor for instruction; tutors should return students to the teacher and classroom as soon as possible.

What Qualifications Should a Tutor Have?

Across the nation, tutoring centers have been set up in suburbs and on city streets. Well-funded chains advertise that they have just the test to ferret out the problems

your child is having. They promise to diagnose your child by using a standardized test, teach him or her the proper study skills, and improve your child's test scores and grades. The solutions these centers provide for your children, however, depend less on your child's unique style than on your child's general type.

Certainly, there are similarities between some students and study techniques that work with many students. But for most students with difficulties, to make changes in how they learn requires distinctly more individualized attention. If you look back on the teachers who most affected you, those who changed how you thought and learned, you'll see that they connected to you in some profound way. They were able to explain a subject in a way that stayed with you for years. It is likely that you remember that teacher because you appreciated some deeply personal connection with the teacher's style.

The qualifications of a tutor that you should focus on are those intangibles that have been identified in earlier sections of this chapter:

- The ability to teach students how they learn and thereby transform their ability to meet challenges
- The ability to build trust with students
- The commitment to making students independent

Parents will know what these look like in a tutor when they see it in practice.

There are also other necessary if more obvious qualifications. Expertise matters if a tutor is going to meet the unique needs of your child. Parents should seek someone who is capable of assessing the student's difficulties and instructing in the exact skills or subjects where the student's difficulties lie.

You wouldn't select someone without the appropriate experience to tutor reading to a dyslexic or tutor organization to someone with executive-functioning problems (*executive functioning* refers to the ability to manage the many tasks of life, including the completion of assignments and the necessary studying for tests and quizzes at school). You wouldn't expect someone without knowledge of Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy to tutor in Russian literature.

Training in the relevant subject matter or skill is important; and yet it isn't enough to say, "The more education, the better the instructor." A college student I know struggled in his elementary chemistry course because of the inability of his instructor, a renowned physical chemist, to teach at such a basic level.

To some extent, the capacity to teach the fundamentals of chemistry, physics, mathematics, English, or history develops in an instructor through experience. If I were to generalize, I'd prefer a seasoned tutor to a recently graduated college student. But these are simply generalizations. The point is for parents to evaluate the expertise of tutors to ensure that they are both educated in the subject area *and* able to convey what they know in a style that fits your child.

Parents should also select a tutor with experience working with the age and grade level of the student. At the urging of a testing neuropsychologist, I briefly took on an eight-year-old student in elementary school until I realized I simply didn't know how to instruct someone that young.

In sum, parents should select a tutor who can teach their children how they learn, and who can use that knowledge to create new styles of learning for them. When students understand *how they learn,* they become better able to adjust to the challenges of their education.

They find it easier to break destructive habits and to form new, constructive ones. Building on the unique learning style of each student, the tutors that parents select should provide more than occasional help with homework. They should help change students into increasingly confident and effective learners.

The tutor doesn't do this alone, however. Parents know their children, and they should use that knowledge first to select a tutor who makes that happen and, second, to create the circumstances that will make the tutoring process successful. Those circumstances are the subject of the next chapter.