

# The Boston Globe Magazine

## A Tutorial

**In a town crawling with experts the challenge isn't finding a tutor, it's finding the right one. We tell you how. Plus: Meet 17 surprising specialists.**

By Priya Giri Desai

When Emma Johnson of Cambridge was in high school, she dreaded essay assignments. She knew what she wanted to write but couldn't seem to organize her thoughts or her time. "I had no idea how to go about studying for exams," she says, "and every paper was a minor catastrophe of time management." Her parents asked around and heard about a dynamite tutor, one who worked with intelligent kids who weren't meeting their potential. They got on her waiting list – and stayed there for a year, says Emma's mother, Rosemarie Johnson, since "she came highly recommended." Sure enough, within two years of starting weekly sessions with Cambridge-based Jane Clark, Emma had turned C's into A's. She is now a freshman at Oberlin College.

The best tutors work not just on understanding one algebra proof or writing that paper about *The Catcher in the Rye*, they also teach students study and work skills, which in turn inspire confidence and self-reliance. "Kids know more than they think," says Rene Meshon, tutoring center manager at Cambridge Rindge and Latin School for more than a decade. Tutors should know how to read a kid as well as a syllabus, since many challenges at school have little to do with the subject at hand: Emotional problems or plain old adolescent angst can factor into academic success. If your child is frustrated to the point of rejecting a subject, the right tutor can get him or her back on track.

But before you hire a tutor, it's important to figure out whether your child simply needs homework help or if there is a more complex problem with how he or she learns. Ask a teacher to weigh in, and try employing an older high school or college student in your neighborhood to do homework with your child for a few hours a week instead of hiring a professional with years of specialized experience and high hourly rates. Boston is also home to many national tutoring companies, which offer group classes and one-on-one help with standardized-test preparation and academic subjects. Schools can usually help, too. Public schools in Cambridge, for instance, have free tutoring centers for ninth- through 12th-graders that any student in the district can use. Ask teachers or administrators about similar programs in your district.

If you do decide to enlist a tutor's help, begin by asking teachers for references for colleagues who moonlight. And ask friends with kids; they may have hired tutors you don't know about.

Just because a tutor is in the picture doesn't mean the parents' job ends. A parent should act as a go-between for the tutor and teacher to talk about course work, progress, and upcoming assignments and exams. "Unless there's communication, [the tutoring] could undermine the teacher's expectations in class," says Laura Vantine, a learning specialist who runs the Academic Achievement Center at Noble and Greenough School, a private middle and high school in Dedham.

The Boston area is home to many fine private instructors who specialize in everything from number theory to how to bend a soccer ball. In fact, there's a tutor to help kids with almost anything, whether it's understanding a particular subject in school, organizing their time, or getting a leg up in sports and other

activities. Our sampling of 17 of the most sought-after local tutors, coaches, and programs is nowhere near comprehensive. It also doesn't include locations, since though a tutor may be based in a particular city or town, most will consider traveling to work with clients. Some charge for travel time; parents should ask about individual arrangements when scouting tutors. (For more advice on how to hire a tutor, see Page 55.) When you're looking for help, just remember that a great tutor shows students the best way to learn how to learn, inspires confidence, and can even make tackling a torturous subject fun.

### Essay writing

Kate deLima says there's a specific point in English education where many kids stumble: making the leap from writing the simple book reports expected in primary school to producing high school's more analytical essays. She works with eighth- through 11th-graders on thinking beyond basic plot summary to forming an argument and backing it up with evidence. A bonus: DeLima is a well-rounded scholar herself. In addition to advanced degrees in English and music, she knows debate, sports, and theater.

Word on the street: Fans say deLima connects with students on a lot of levels, in part because of her range of interests. "This combination of the creative arts, athletics, and formal training make Kate able to look at challenges from a variety of perspectives," says Julie Badynee, director of the Academic Skills Center at Milton Academy.

Ages 12 to 18

Fees \$80 an hour

Best contact [kdelima@post.harvard.edu](mailto:kdelima@post.harvard.edu)

### Creative Mathematics

Beth O'Sullivan fell in love with math as a child and now believes anyone can master the subject. "Math is simply a language to describe patterns," she says. As a tutor, she uses everything from old-fashioned arithmetic to coloring – useful when she's explaining the four-color theorem, which looks at how maps work – to help students understand the work.

Word on the street: Genevra Pittman of Cambridge, now a Swarthmore College junior, worked with O'Sullivan in middle school on Euclid's geometric proofs. "It's hard to be around her and not get excited about her work in the way that she is," Genevra says.

Ages 4 and up

Fees \$75 an hour, with some flexibility for families in financial need best contact [bethos@alum.mit.edu](mailto:bethos@alum.mit.edu)

### High-octane Academics

If your child writes screenplays but can't manage an English essay, don't worry. Ted Sutton has seen it before and has developed a specialty working with idiosyncratic learners. He encourages families to ease up on the pressure but to be practical about the realities of school. Sutton's goal for all of his students is that "they'll know what their gifts are and what they want to do well."

Word on the street: **Dr. Srin Pillay**, a psychiatrist at **McLean Hospital** in Belmont, has referred several patients to Sutton. "Every person that has worked with him has instituted life change in the direction they want," he says.

Ages 8 and up

Fees \$150 to \$200 per session, with some flexibility for families in financial need

best contact 617-354-2078, [tedsutton@aol.com](mailto:tedsutton@aol.com)

### **Coping With Learning Difficulties**

If your child is lost at school, Louise Hozid can give directions. In her 30 years of evaluating and teaching kids with learning difficulties and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, Hozid has gotten a firm grasp on the challenges these students face – and how they can succeed. "When kids have difficulties diagnosed early on," she says, "they know how to roll up their sleeves and get the job done."

Word on the street: Barbara Timken's seventh-grade daughter, Anna, has worked with Hozid for four years. "Louise had an intuitive grasp of Anna based on their first meeting," Timken says, and her flexible approach took advantage of Anna's strengths and preferences, such as typing on a computer instead of writing longhand. The Belmont mom also says that Hozid helps kids with learning problems "feel like 'Wait, my brain just works a different way. I can do this stuff; I just have to figure out my own way of doing it.'"

Ages 6 and up Fees \$110 to \$150 an hour, depending on the service  
Best contact 617-923-4143

### **College Application For Athletes**

Jamie Hagerman and her mother, Parnell Hagerman, help get kids – especially student athletes – into elite colleges. Jamie is a 2006 Olympic bronze medalist and a former Harvard women's ice hockey team captain; Parnell worked in college and high school admissions for 35 years. Their methods: Assess abilities and interests, target the right colleges (or, on occasion, prep schools), then map out a route clients can follow to get there. Their work ranges from making a training plan to drafting letters to coaches. Now they're branching out from athletics – they just got a bagpiper into Colgate.

Word on the street: "It's great to have someone tell you what you need to do," says Margaret Sheldon, whose daughter Claire, a three-sport player at Milton, is now on Harvard's golf team.

Ages high school (also available to younger students for preparatory school placement)  
Fees \$1,000 to \$3,500 per service, such as developing a targeted list of schools

Best contact 617-834-6602, [edu-edge.com](http://edu-edge.com)

### **Math-science-writing Connections**

John Canaday wrote a book about literature and physics and taught the children of King Hussein and Queen Noor in Jordan. These days, he's a tutor with a particular skill for academic cross-training. Many students are strong in some subjects but limited in others, and Canaday helps them make connections between, say, math and reading. With word lovers, Canaday engages their interpretive skills. "Think about math as a way of making sentences," he suggests – not a bunch of numbers, but a language, with meaning. Word on the street: "To spend time with John teaches kids how good scientists and poets read and think and observe and produce," says Daniel Bosch, director of the Walnut Hill School's Writing Studio.

Ages 9 and up  
Fees \$150 an hour  
Best contact 781-646-0279, [canaday@poetrynet.org](mailto:canaday@poetrynet.org)

### **Organization And Study**

With her broad knowledge base (including, for example, Latin and ancient history) and an insight into the adolescent mind gained over two decades of teaching and tutoring, Jane Clark identifies and helps solve the unique problems of smart kids who aren't meeting "the expectations of the school," as she puts it. Besides

tutoring in a range of academic subjects, she helps students learn how to handle deadlines, homework, and other challenges. "I have some students where it's just organization of their papers, their time," she says. For others, it's note taking or learning how to break down complicated ideas into bite-size parts. Word on the street: Cambridge mom Rosemarie Johnson says her daughter, Emma, "became a more confident student and felt equipped with the tools to help her manage a very heavy homework workload."

Ages 11 to 18

Fees \$75 to \$100 an hour

Best contact 617-547-1344, [janeblinnclark@praeceptrix.com](mailto:janeblinnclark@praeceptrix.com)

### **Writing, Speaking, And Presentations**

Ariane Henry started out as a tutor with an expertise in essay writing – she got a perfect score in analytical writing on her own GRE exam, taught in the Peace Corps, and has deferred entry to the child-development master's program at Tufts University – but her gift is her ability to take on academic as well as other coaching jobs, helping students with everything from public speaking to understanding Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. Word on the street: "My son wasn't looking for homework help," says Julian Jiang, father of Timothy, a seventh-grader at Thayer Academy in Braintree. "This is preparation for real life." His son and the tutor work on presentation skills and writing. Jiang has been so happy with Henry's work that he signed up for his own sessions in modifying his native Chinese accent.

Ages 11 and up

Fees from \$35 an hour

Best contact 774-217-1944, [info@alphalearning.biz](mailto:info@alphalearning.biz)

### **Learning And School Strategy**

A public school teacher in the 1970s, Betsy Shapiro began her private career working with students who were struggling with reading and writing skills. Nowadays, her focus is more on figuring out learning styles. She examines students' inherent strengths as well as any personality issues that play into how they process information and then offers strategies that can be applied to any academic subject. She also coaches parents on how to cope. "When your child is suffering because of school, it's highly charged emotionally," Shapiro says. "Parents need to know they're not alone. That's a big piece of my work."

Word on the street: Newton's Debby Moore says that nine years ago, her son Zachary had reading and classroom comprehension challenges. "He was a kid that wanted to learn so badly," and Shapiro "opened so many doors for him." Now Zachary is a junior at Milton Academy, and his younger sister is working with Shapiro.

Ages 4 to 24

Fees \$80 an hour, with some flexibility for families in financial need

Best contact 617-923-4088

### **Reading for dyslexics**

Scottish Rite Masons around the country offer free one-on-one tutoring twice a week to dyslexic school-age children at their Children's Learning Centers. Kids are tested before they enter the program and are evaluated every year to track their progress. In Massachusetts, there are centers in Newtonville, Lexington, Lowell, and Worcester.

Word on the street: Early on, Jerelyn Richardson of Wilmington saw clues that her son wasn't learning the way he was supposed to. He would sing the alphabet but couldn't point to any particular letter. A

pediatrician diagnosed dyslexia, then Kevin spent a year on the Lexington Masons' waiting list. At 8, he's now in the program, loves his tutor, and his reading level is climbing. Ages 6 to 18

Fees Free

Contact [childrenslearningcenters.org](http://childrenslearningcenters.org)

### **Competitive Soccer**

Brian Kelly owns and runs Ahead of the Game, a physical-education consultancy that works mostly with preschools to develop age-appropriate fitness programs. But he also has years of experience coaching indoor and outdoor soccer teams and still offers private soccer coaching for boys and girls. Students work on passing, shooting, agility, and whatever else it takes to improve their skills.

Word on the street: After five sessions last summer, Julian Albert, a Newton South sophomore, became captain of his school's junior varsity team and has also played with the varsity team. Julian's mom, Jean Smith, says of Kelly: "You know how hard he tries for you," adding that he'll sometimes even throw in a ride home from the field.

Ages 9 to 17

Fees \$70 an hour Best contact 781-209-0686, [brian@beaheadofthegame.com](mailto:brian@beaheadofthegame.com)

### **Music composition**

John McDonald is a full-time associate professor of music at Tufts University, but he also works with a few private composition pupils on the side. The difference between his college-age students and their younger counterparts? The latter, he says, "tend to be freer and also more independently motivated."

Word on the street: Fourteen-year-old Ben Boyajian is a piano student who also studies composition with McDonald. Ben's mother, Sally Savelle, appreciates McDonald's ability to add to her son's music education. "His knowledge is so comprehensive," she says. "He knows there's a million different avenues to travel down."

Ages 10 and up

Fees \$75 an hour

Best contact [johndmcdonald.com](http://johndmcdonald.com), [john.mcdonald@tufts.edu](mailto:john.mcdonald@tufts.edu)

### **Personalized Learning**

"I help people understand how they learn," says Annie Powell, a former fifth-grade teacher with 20 years' teaching and tutoring experience. In initial sessions, Powell interviews a student to try and determine how his or her mind works best. "What [parents] can expect is that their child will feel more empowered about their learning."

Word on the street: Debbie Funkhouser signed up her son Evan with Powell in grade school. "She helped him understand what his approach might be," she says. Now in high school and on his own, Evan still employs the spelling tricks Powell taught. "She's helping you go beyond just memorizing and into why it works," he says, "so you can apply it again."

Ages 6 and up

Fees \$75 an hour

best Contact 617-484-2407, [apowell106@aol.com](mailto:apowell106@aol.com)