

Afterschool

Tutoring or a Learning Intervention?

How to choose the right academic supplements for your child

By Geoff Nixon



Parents have access to a multitude of resources to help their children achieve academic success. Searching for the right program can be overwhelming, but essential to reach the sought-after result. Now is the time to select a program to get your child prepared for the upcoming school year. Options are often classified into two categories: tutoring and learning intervention. Tutoring re-teaches the same content in a new way; learning interventions strive to change the way children learn. By examining the area(s) where children struggle, parents can determine which genre of academic supplement would be most beneficial to their child.

A Tale of Two Learners

To help illustrate which academic supplement is most appropriate for different types of learners, we'll look at the fictional case studies of Sally and Tom.

Sally had always excelled in reading, but was challenged by math. Her parents wanted to help her succeed, but were unsure why she performed so strongly in some areas and struggled in others. Her teacher often commented that Sally did not try as hard on her math assignments. At times, Sally would catch her parents by surprise, failing to master a math fact when it was first taught and doing well on the final test. Her parents were stumped.

Sally's struggles make her a good candidate for tutoring because she is able to master math concepts with some extra time and instruction. Tutoring is particularly effective at filling in small knowledge gaps and helping children to master math facts. Children who only struggle with one subject matter are typically good candidates for tutoring.

While Sally could benefit from tutoring to overcome her math struggles, Tom's parents felt their son needed extra help in every area. At the onset

of fourth grade, Tom claimed to dislike nearly all subjects and never read for pleasure. He was defensive when his parents tried to help and was just as likely to fail a math test as he was a spelling quiz. Initially, Tom's parents thought he did not try his hardest to succeed in school and was just disinterested. When they thought about his performance in past school years, they saw a definitive pattern: as the material became more challenging, Tom's grades plummeted.

Since Tom's struggles are spread across multiple subjects and increased as the material became more difficult, he is not a good candidate for tutoring. Tom needs a program that can identify and target the cause of his learning challenge. What Tom needs is a learning intervention.

Learning intervention programs are built on the neuroscience principles of frequency and intensity, and strive to change the way children learn. Many work with the brain's natural ability to adapt to modify learning skills by engaging and 'exercising' the brain's neural pathways. Since the brain is constantly remapping, connections that are not being used or challenged are frequently dropped. By engaging Tom's brain and activating all regions, he can develop comprehensive learning skills to benefit him in every subject.

Identifying the Right Program

Parents should not feel alone in trying to find the right tools to help their children learn. Providers of supplemental learning programs can often help parents determine what is right for their child. Programs with upfront assessments often yield the best results for participants, having determined if the child is an appropriate candidate. If a child is not deemed to be an appropriate candidate, the program director can often refer parents to other providers whose offerings are better suited to meet their child's needs.

To ensure success, parents should monitor progress or ask program administrators to monitor the child's progress. Every child learns differently and at a different pace. The important thing is to do your research before enrolling your child in an inappropriate program that could ultimately cause more frustration. The right academic supplement can make all the difference.

GEOFF NIXON is founder of Gemm Learning, a learning-intervention service that targets the cause of reading and learning issues. The company's main offering is Fast ForWord software, available as an in-center or home-based program. Gemm Learning has centers in Pelham and Scarsdale, and Greenwich, CT. For more information visit www.GemmLearning.com, call 877-687-4366, or email gnixon@gemmlearning.com.

The Academic Supplement Quiz

When choosing an academic supplement for your child, consider the following. Take this True or False quiz to get started:

1. My child struggles in multiple subjects. T/F
2. My child does not learn the material even with extra time. T/F
3. My child does not read for pleasure. T/F
4. My child can struggle with attention and focus. T/F
5. My child used to be a strong reader, but now struggles with reading. T/F

If you answered mostly False, then a tutor is most likely appropriate. If your responses were mostly True, then a learning intervention will probably serve your child best.