



TOO MANY CHOICES

Not sure about splurging for after-school classes? Our guide makes it easy to pick the one that fits your kid's learning needs

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Another mom recently asked me if I was enrolling my kids in Kumon. I'm not, but that didn't stop me from worrying. Yes, my kids are doing fine, but couldn't they use a boost? School standards are tougher than ever and there's so much stress on academic success, it almost feels irresponsible *not* to give them every possible advantage. I'm not the only one: Parents shell out between \$5 and \$7 billion annually on tutoring for their kids, beginning in preschool, says Steve Pines, executive director of the Education Industry Association. "The newest phenomenon is prepping kids for kindergarten and first grade," he notes.

With so much hoopla surrounding supplemental classes, deciding whether your child needs one—and which one to sign up for—can be overwhelming. Luckily, we're here to make the process easier. For some kids, extra help is a no-brainer. Others will do just fine no matter what program you pick. And if your child is hitting benchmarks and getting decent grades, he probably doesn't even need extra tutoring help. For help figuring out your next move, turn the page. First find where your child falls on the learning spectrum, then match up his needs with the right option, be it a tutoring center or a free online site.

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FIND YOUR KID

Not all students need supplemental classes. But if one of the following descriptions hits close to home, then your little learner may benefit from an after-school program.



EASILY FRUSTRATED

► **WATCH FOR** Frequent homework drama, giving up on work without trying. High anxiety and low morale can stymie classwork. Students have to believe in themselves before they tackle the work. That's why extra practice and cheerleading can go a long way with these kinds of kids.

► **CONSIDER** Private tutoring with confidence-boosting high-school students; tutoring centers



HIGHLY GIFTED

► **WATCH FOR** Off-the-chart performances in one or more subjects, either academic or artistic. When a child is truly gifted, you want to stretch her as far and wide as she can go without leapfrogging her so far ahead of her classmates that she becomes bored at school and loses interest; otherwise, her motivation may plummet.

► **CONSIDER** Private tutoring; online classes



STUCK IN A SO-SO CLASS (OR SCHOOL)

► **WATCH FOR** Huge classes, few chances for one-on-one or small-group instruction, uncharacteristic complaints from your kid. Every now and then, it's the teacher or school that isn't up to par. If your child isn't getting a solid foundation, tutoring can be a valuable form of damage control.

► **CONSIDER** Private tutoring; online classes; tutoring centers



SERIOUSLY SCATTER-BRAINED

► **WATCH FOR** Lost books, misplaced homework, lack of attention to detail. A kid might know his math facts like the back of his hand, but if he spends the first 45 seconds of a one-minute quiz fishing around in his backpack for a pencil, it won't translate into good grades. Ditto if he's off in la-la land instead of listening to directions.

► **CONSIDER** Private tutoring



STRUGGLING

► **WATCH FOR** Poor grades in a core subject, a lack of interest in learning or school. Sometimes challenges come from a learning disability (like dyslexia); other times they're tied to a concept (like fractions). Experts recommend supplementing if kids score below the 50th percentile on their standardized tests.

► **CONSIDER** Private tutoring, especially if your kid doesn't get in-school services.

CHOOSE THE PROGRAM

TUTORING CENTERS

(\$200 to \$500+ per month)

GOOD FOR *Struggling, distracted, easily frustrated, and gifted students; those who are in lousy schools; families with flexible schedules*

WHAT THEY DO Tutoring centers like Kumon, Sylvan, and Mathnasium focus on hammering in the basics. While the details of each program's curriculum vary, the general drill remains the same: Students take a diagnostic test, then methodically move through a standardized instruction series based on their skill levels.

"It's a cycle of assessment, instructional plan, and reassessment," says Pines. Teaching may be individualized (more expensive), small group (less pricey), or some combo of both, and it revolves around program-specific assignments (not your kid's homework).

WHY THEY WORK Review and repetition can be effective at solidifying math facts and computing skills while boosting a kid's confidence. Skill-based curriculums also help firm up a shaky foundation, perfect for kids in bad schools or who have trouble focusing. Plus, the individualized pacing makes it possible for advanced students to learn new concepts at a faster rate than they would in class.

NOT SO GREAT FOR *Kids with learning challenges; kids who just need a hand with specific assignments or concepts like graphing or writing book reports; large, busy families*

Most tutoring centers follow a standard curriculum that isn't appropriate for kids with learning disorders—who require more targeted interventions with specially trained tutors—or those who just need some targeted help. Center hours are also fixed. So if your afternoons are spoken for by work or the multiple after-school schedules of different-aged kids, these may not be the best option.



PRIVATE TUTORS

(\$30 to \$100+ per hour-long session)

GOOD FOR *Just about any type of challenged learner; busy families*

WHAT THEY DO Specially trained educators are free to pull from a range of resources to create individualized learning plans based on a kid's needs and the teacher's expectations. They can also consult with the teacher about each week's lesson plan in order to prep your kid. To find a good tutor, ask around the school. Or check out Wyzant.com, with its free database of prescreened tutors (criminal background checks cost extra). You'll be able to scroll through Facebook-style profiles that include specializations, rates, and reviews from other parents.

WHY THEY WORK Tutors can tailor their instruction to whatever your child needs at the moment—on your timetable. Look for tutors who have experience in working with kids the same grade level as yours—and in the same subject matter that challenges your child the most. For kids with learning disabilities, pick a tutor who was a special ed teacher or has trained in the Orton Gillingham or Wilson methods, both great for struggling readers. If your child could use a cheerleader during homework, a high-school or college student may be a great fit. Same goes for the seriously gifted child, who may thrive

with a college kid helping him delve into his particular academic obsession, from astronomy to Japanese.

NOT SO GREAT FOR *The kid who's doing well enough in class*

If her teacher isn't worried, relax!

HIGH-TECH TEACHERS

(Cost: \$0 to \$99+ per month)

GOOD FOR *Kids who could use review; gifted kids; tweens; busy and/or budget-conscious families*

WHAT THEY DO No surprise—the fastest growing tutoring option is the online one, says Pines: It's more convenient, less pricey, and feels less like school than tutoring centers. Digital teaching runs the gamut. There's Kaplankids.com, which

provides a mix of skill-building drills and games (complete with rewards). Starfall.com offers pre-K through second-graders free animated phonics-based reading instruction. Grade-schoolers love Khanacademy.com, another free site that teaches math via YouTube-style tutorials. Or they can log onto Tutor.com to get some real-time help with a real-live tutor in any subject.

WHY THEY WORK Sites that target younger students reinforce basic math and reading concepts, which most kids could use. Plus, the games and virtual rewards keep them coming

back for more. Tweens get a kick out of watching videos, which Khan does well, and gifted children will love the idea of learning about such esoteric subjects as art history. One caveat: Kids need to be inner-directed to get the most out of online help, but since it's such a cheap and convenient way to learn, it's definitely worth a try.

NOT SO GREAT FOR *Kids with learning disabilities (at least as the primary source of tutoring); easily distracted kids; parents who'd rather let another adult supervise after-hours learning*

Digital tutoring isn't tailored enough for kids with LDs. It also comes with limitations for other learners—from the lack of human-to-human interaction to the many temptations on the computer (hello, Minecraft!). ■

Remember, balance is key. While extra academics can benefit many kids, too many classes can make them feel disengaged. If you supplement schoolwork, serve it up with an extra helping of downtime and fun on other days of the week.