

# DOES MY CHILD NEED A Tutor OR A Coach?

by Margaret Foster, MEd

*A tutor who tooted the flute  
Tried to teach two young tooters to toot;  
Said the two to the tutor,  
“Is it harder to toot, or  
To tutor two tooters to toot?”*



## TOUGH TONGUE TWISTER... GOOD QUESTION!

But perhaps more importantly, if you're not into flute instruction, when should you consider a tutor for your child with ADHD and when should you consider hiring a coach?

The answer is not all that obvious because many tutors coach their students, and many coaches tutor. In addition, professionals identify themselves as coaches, academic coaches, tutors, and counsellors, etc., while offering a wide range of overlapping services. This is enough to make your head swim... like that tongue twister above!

I've found it's easier to differentiate between tutoring and coaching as activities, and then identify the professionals who offer these services.

### Quick definitions

**Academic tutoring** has been interpreted many ways, but I like to think of it as *instruction* and *guided practice* in specific subject areas (like math, reading, science, etc.),

or specific academic skill areas (like writing or test-taking). Tutors have helped individuals in these areas for years.

**Academic coaching**, on the other hand is a bit newer and more specifically targets the processes that help a student manage their broader school life/day. So, areas like planning, organizing, self-monitoring, initiating work, and even emotional control are often addressed during coaching. Some of you will recognize this list as executive functioning skills and perhaps also recognize the impact they have on a student before, during, and after school...sometimes even on the weekends.

**ADHD coaching** is also new and broad but does not necessarily include academic support. This coaching is offered for students who may have problems organizing their days, weeks, and activities, but not necessarily the academic areas.





**A** S YOU CAN SEE, I prefer to use the word “academic” in front of some of these activities to further clarify that their content is school-based. There are other general instructors (piano, tae kwon do) and coaches (career, transition, sports) who are not educationally trained and often do not have the skills needed to cross over and work with students with specialized educational needs.

So, how do you choose between tutoring, coaching, and counseling?

### Academic tutoring

Generally, if a student is clearly struggling in one academic or skill area, tutoring can help. And, at the elementary and middle school levels, an experienced instructor can support a wide range of subjects. However, once the student is engaged in high school or college level material, he or she will probably need a subject-specific tutor. While many can offer support in first year algebra, fewer can teach calculus, or chemistry, or high level writing—subject area experts are required for these.

But what if this student has ADHD and needs tutoring in a specific area? Then you must find someone who not only understands the content area, but also understands students who struggle with features of ADHD. It is essential that the professional not only understands ADHD in general, but will identify your child’s *particular* challenge areas and tailor instruction and practice accordingly.

CHADD’s website has a good list of the separate ADHD characteristics for reference (go to [www.chadd.org](http://www.chadd.org) or [www.help4adhd.org](http://www.help4adhd.org)).

### Academic coaching

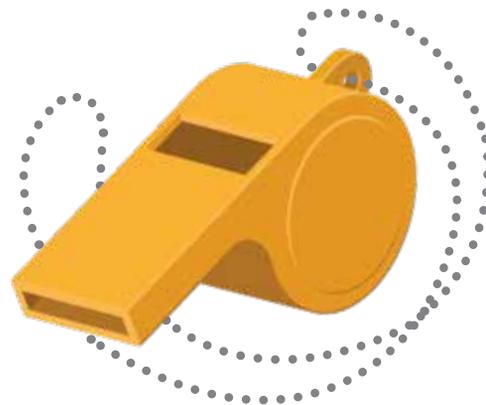
If a student’s areas of need are broader, perhaps impacting a majority of the school day, then academic coaching may be necessary. I specify *academic* coaching, which requires the professional to have a base in both learning theory and coaching practice. And, as you guessed, if the student struggles with both ADHD and executive functioning, then you will need a professional who can address these as well. However, since this is pretty common combination, most professionals who work with students with ADHD are adept at tailoring their instruction to EF as well.

The BRIEF-2 (Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Function) by Gerard A. Gioia, PhD, et al., is a great instrument report to have to isolate the executive challenges for each student—it delivers clear and practical definitions and recommendations when the full report is printed out.

### ADHD coaching

If a student is generally doing well with their school subjects, but is having difficulty managing their days, weeks, and extracurricular activities, an ADHD coach can help. Typically they can address organization, planning, and prioritizing. Again, knowing the specifics of executive functioning is essential.

	TUTORING	COACHING	COUNSELING
Favorite answer	<p><b>FOR ELEMENTARY STUDENTS:</b> “A degree in education with training and experience working with students with ADHD.”</p> <p><b>FOR HIGH SCHOOL AND ABOVE:</b> “A degree in the subject area with training and experience working with students with ADHD.”</p>	<p>“An advanced degree in special education or learning theory with training and experience in coaching executive functions.”</p>	<p>“An advanced degree in psychology with training and experience in ADHD and executive functions.”</p>
Good answer	<p><b>FOR ELEMENTARY STUDENTS:</b> “A college degree with training and experience working with students with ADHD.”</p> <p><b>FOR HIGH SCHOOL AND ABOVE:</b> “A major or minor in the subject area with training and experience working with students with ADHD.”</p>	<p><b>ACADEMIC COACHING:</b> “A degree in special education or learning theory with some training and experience in coaching executive functions.”</p> <p><b>ADHD COACHING:</b> “A college degree with training and experience in coaching.” Often these coaches have certification from special centers.</p>	<p>“An advance degree in psychology with training and experience in ADHD or executive functions.”</p>
Keep looking	<p>“I like children...”</p>	<p>“My sister (aunt, son, friend) has learning problems, too.”</p>	<p>“I give advice to lots of young people with problems.”</p>



## Counseling

What if the student's most significant area of need is emotional control (an executive skill) as well as anxiety, depression, or another mood disorder? In this case, you should probably look to a counselor who understands EF and ADHD to act as the primary support person. These professionals are usually experienced in both therapy and coaching and should be able to provide the most critical form of support in these cases.

## Finding a good tutor/coach/counselor

So, how can you find a good tutor/coach/counselor for your child with ADHD? This can be tricky, but it's certainly possible.

I would suggest using the following websites to find those who self-identify as being trained and experienced with tutoring, coaching, and therapy—CHADD ([www.chadd.org](http://www.chadd.org)) and the Council for Exceptional Children's ([www.cec.sped.org](http://www.cec.sped.org)). Remember, both local and online support are available these days; online may be especially appropriate for students from middle school through adulthood. In addition, you could ask the principal at your child's school, a friend who has a child with similar concerns, as well as local colleges and universities who offer special education degrees.

Next, I would be prepared to ask some questions of this tutor/coach/counselor. You will find my favorite responses below.

Start by asking question number one: What kind of training do they have and what is their level of experience? (See table at left)

In addition, you can make the best match for your child if, during your first conversations with your potential support person, you can determine whether they are:

- kind or strident,
- high energy or more quiet
- a good communicator
- sufficiently organized
- available and affordable.

Because we can't always access folks who have the highest level of training and experience and have the perfect personality match, you will have to decide which features are most important for your child and choose accordingly.

## How can you get help if you can't afford a professional?

While there are no hard and fast rules, peer mentoring is often a good place to start. Peer mentoring is defined as getting help from another student, sometimes the same age or sometimes slightly older. Peers can offer a

**As you wade into finding the help you need, go step by step, ask questions, and track your findings.**

really nice “way in” to understanding the challenge, the teacher's instructional style, and the assigned work. Peers are also convenient and uniquely tuned into each other's moods. They have travelled that same problematic road recently and often recall how to bridge the gaps.

If peer mentoring is not available or sufficient, you can ask the professionals in your area if they can offer you help on a sliding scale. Often community action agencies, large groups, or universities offer this. If not, look to tutoring groups at your school, library, or community for help. With a bit of a “written prescription” from the professional(s) who diagnosed your child, a caring volunteer can put together a plan that is nicely supportive.

Finally, if you have a fairly positive relationship with your child regarding school issues, you may consider doing the work yourself with the help of an educator's guide like *Boosting Executive Skills in the Classroom* (Jossey-Bass, 2013). Two of the chapters address the school environment itself and may provide suggestions you can use at your next conference. The rest of the book is dedicated to definitions and very practical strategies you can use to help your child develop and practice effective EF strategies at home.

Helping our children with ADHD engage in effective strategies is vitally important, and building the right support system can be a crucial part of this. As you wade into finding the help you need, go step by step, ask questions, and track your findings. Don't be afraid to ask teachers and friends for help as you go, and eventually you should find the supports you're looking for. 🗨️

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**Margaret Foster, MEd**, is a learning specialist and educational consultant. She trains leaders internationally through WIDE World, a professional development program for educators. She is the coauthor (with Joyce Cooper-Kahn, PhD) of *Late, Lost, and Unprepared: A Parent's Guide to Helping Children with Executive Functioning* (Woodbine, 2012) and *Boosting Executive Skills in the Classroom: A Practical Guide for Educators* (Jossey-Bass, 2013).