

The Good Schools Guide review of Simply Learning Tuition, current 21.07.14

1. Who are they?

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2. Staff

Simply Learning Tuition is run by Nathaniel McCullagh, who read Archaeology at Durham University and, to his 'frequent regret', turned down the offer of a place at Sandhurst to join the Household Cavalry. Instead, he became a 'super tutor' working with families around the world to allow him time to follow his other passion of making films. Living between London and Los Angeles, he spent the next 10 years alternately working on film sets and building a reputation as a brilliant private tutor (2 A* entries to Eton in the same summer). After completing an MFA in film production at the University of Southern California, he tutored every morning before work to 'augment my tiny Hollywood assistant's salary'. When he returned to London, he had more tutoring work than he could cope with, and started acting as an agent, introducing other carefully vetted tutors to the families he knew. He set up Simply Learning Tuition formally in 2009. He no longer tutors himself, but instead developed the agency to specialise in the matching of tutors and clients. His MD, Katie Haigh, came for an interview as a tutor 'just as I was collapsing under the weight of work'. She now focuses entirely on running the day-to-day operations of the company, which with 5 staff in the office gets, 'quite busy'.

3. What do they offer?

They have two separate parts, the introductory agency (SLTA) and a separate Educational Consultancy. The agency provides introductions to expert tutors who cover the full range of subjects, from pre-school to undergraduate level tuition. The tutors specialise in scholarships and home schooling as well as help with school and university placements; CVs, UCAS forms and Oxbridge applications. Another speciality is international tuition (tutors travel all over the world), full-time home schooling programmes and academic mentoring. 'Bringing out the best in gifted children is great [the tutors they have introduced have had recent successes with Westminster, St Paul's and all the usual destinations for high-fliers] but we're equally proud when tutors get through to the more difficult and troubled young learners.' Around a third of students have some form of learning difficulty, and many of the tutors on SLT's register are trained and experienced in SEN. On the consultancy side, they work with several educational psychologists and a Harley Street speech and language therapist, often introducing tutors who can work with

children with dyslexia, dyspraxia and speech delays. Tutors can also create bespoke home-schooling courses, including several for children with ADHD, dyslexia or dyspraxia who are having time out from school, as well as those in peripatetic families. 'Whenever possible, tutors maintain relationships with the school and view it as a success getting the child back into school. Sometimes the child's relationship with their parents is causing half the difficulty, and the tutor can act as intermediary.' They also introduce residential tutors, so far to Russia, Monaco, the US, Sweden, France and 'a lot of rather beautiful places' in the UK. The passion for residential work stems from Nathaniel's own experiences: 'I had so much fun – the intensive work/play relationship really delivers results and you get to form a lasting friendship with the children. To be honest, it's can also be pretty good fun for tutors to be teaching at 10,000 feet in a private jet...'

4. Background and basics

Tutors on the register are already professional tutors or teachers – 'we never seem to have enough tutors on our register, and have to go to surprisingly elaborate lengths to get the absolutely best tutor for a particular job'. They approach all the major universities to find tutors for their register– young tutors are a key part of their appeal – and interview about one in 10 of those who apply. All have a good degree, and some have post-grad qualifications, but 'personality and character are more important than previous teaching experience – either you have an affinity for tutoring or you don't.' They have about 2000 tutors on their register and around 350 take assignments on a regular basis. Some are new graduates – one parent commented that her son 'felt like he was having a friend over' when the tutor came round; others have years of teaching experience. The agency's great skill is in introducing the right tutor to the right child: 'Every child's needs are different and every tutor's knowledge is different .

5. Money and small print

Clients pay a £75 registration fee – which is refunded if they aren't 'delighted' with their tutor – and tutors charge from £58 an hour. Tutors keep between £30-40 per hour, with the rest being accounted for by SLT's commission and VAT.

6. They say

'We believe that many problems stem from a lack of confidence. An unpleasant teacher, illness or a learning difficulty (or even just dealing with the pressures of growing up) can reduce the child's confidence so that they no longer enjoy school in general, or studying in particular. This can lead to frustration and behavioural problems. Individual tuition bridges this gap by getting to the root of the problem. Working together, the tutor and the child can rebuild the child's self-esteem and restore their will to try again.'

7. Remarks

Parents who have used the educational consultancy say: 'You get a very personal service with lots of insight and intelligence.' For the agency introduction work; 'All our tutors had amazing CVs, and they were rounded people too.' 'He has an astute and intelligent way of matching tutor and child.' Tutors say: 'I love developing the whole child, not just the academic side.' They seem to have clients who adore their agency service and get excellent results. There is a dash of snob value – the website offers polo/tutor vacations and 'cultural exchanges' to Argentina– but we are particularly impressed by their care for children who do not find learning easy.