

# WHAT WORKS?

## *Research into Practice*

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Research Monograph # 21

Is there a cost-effective way to help students become better readers?

## Try Literacy Tutoring First

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### Research Tells Us

- One-to-one teaching enables a tutor to identify specific learning needs on the spot.
- The most successful literacy tutors are credentialed teachers but trained adult volunteers can provide an effective alternative.
- Literacy tutors can achieve significant results if they (a) receive training, (b) follow an expertly designed tutoring structure and (c) are closely supervised by teachers.

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“Well, when the teacher helps me read, I try to do it and when I do it I get more used to [it] and then when I see the word trouble and I don’t know what it is and I don’t know what that word means. The teacher will say ‘tr-o-bl’. And then [when] I see those exact letters again I can say that so I won’t get it wrong.”

– Child in Grade 2

In everyday teaching practice, teachers are on the move, circulating to see who needs help and pausing to give individualized, focused support. Yet, some children need significantly more time than teachers with responsibilities to the whole class can provide. Teachers know who these children are and find various ways to support their learning, from pairing them with more able peers and structuring guided reading activities, to providing differentiated instruction with materials for different ability levels. However, some children need still more assistance, both in terms of the frequency and the duration of the support they require.

What else can teachers do?

Tutoring has long been touted for the opportunity it provides for supporting individual learning. In principle, one-to-one teaching enables a tutor to identify specific learning needs and address them on the spot, within the context of the task at hand. The idea is that by working from a child’s assets, tutors are able to support that child’s learning and then decrease the support until the child is able to perform independently. But what evidence is there that tutoring actually achieves its promise.

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## What is meant by “tutoring?”

First, we must be clear about we mean by tutoring. In recent years, both Canadian and U.S. governments have targeted funding to support lower achieving schools, prompting an exponential increase in the use of tutors. Service providers include peer tutors, adult tutors with for-profit companies and non-profit groups. Across this range of providers, tutoring may be constructed as anything from one-to-one teaching to small class instruction, with class sizes as large as fifteen students.<sup>1</sup> The tutoring referred to in this paper refers to one-to-one tutoring of a child by an adult volunteer.

## What Research Tells Us

Several meta-analyses of the effectiveness of literacy tutoring show that volunteer adult, one-to-one tutoring with young children can be very effective.<sup>2,3,4,5</sup> This is good news and provides a strong rationale for using volunteer tutors to support literacy development.

However, the situation is not quite as simple as that. Studies also show that, in order to be effective, tutors must be trained and the tutoring program needs to follow certain criteria. Tutors must explicitly model reading and writing strategies and, for young readers especially, they must be actively involved in figuring out grapheme-phoneme relationships.<sup>2</sup>

### Who should tutor?

Research clearly demonstrates that the most effective literacy tutors are credentialed teachers who have additional expertise in reading.<sup>6,7</sup> Yet, employing teachers in this way is very costly and few schools can afford this option. Adult volunteer tutors – people who are not credentialed teachers – can provide a very effective alternative.<sup>8,9</sup>

### Components of an effective tutoring program

When the tutoring program is of appropriate frequency and duration, literacy tutors can achieve significant results if they (a) receive training and continual suggestions regarding tutoring behaviours and instructional strategies, (b) follow an expertly designed tutoring structure, and (c) are closely supervised by teachers with the expertise to coach tutors.<sup>7,10,11</sup> Research shows that literacy tutoring that follows these criteria is effective with both younger and older children.

Specifically, tutoring needs to occur at least twice-weekly and to continue over at least a 10-week period. Tutoring sessions need to be long enough for initial conversation with the child, followed by a solid block of literacy activities: 45 minutes is optimum. Talking time in each session is important, both to establish and maintain a strong relationship of trust and to assure the child of his or her importance. Children who are reading below grade level expectations need to know that they are valued as persons. Research shows that the focused attention of a caring adult twice weekly is one of the most important aspects of tutoring.<sup>12</sup>

The format of the tutoring session should include three things: (a) an opportunity for the child to read at his or her independent level, using texts of interest to the child; (b) a focus on comprehension involving strategic reading and writing activities, with explicit teaching of strategies; and (c) word study arising from meaningful reading or writing, focusing on word patterns and the building of sight word vocabulary. By the time children are in the junior grades, use of computers for word processing, supported by graphic organizers the children have created electronically, can be very helpful for both comprehension and writing development. Similarly, word-prompt software can be very beneficial for some children.

## Effective Tutoring

- provides a child with the the focused attention of a caring adult
- takes place at least twice weekly, for a minimum of 45 minutes, over ten weeks
- includes opportunity for the child to read independently
- focuses on comprehension (involving explicit teaching of strategies)
- zeroes-in on word study arising from meaningful reading (or writing)
- makes time for talk followed by a solid block of literacy activities



## What degree of impact can be expected from literacy tutoring?

Research provides strong evidence that literacy development is well supported through structured tutoring by adult volunteers. My recent research bears this out.<sup>13</sup> I studied children in Grades 2 and 3 who were tutored using the above structures and criteria and established a control group who received delayed tutoring. Results indicate that immediately following 10 weeks of twice-weekly in-school tutoring, almost half of both the tutored group and the control group made no reading gains. More than 35 per cent of both groups made reading gains of half a grade, the kind of progress expected. An additional 20 per cent of children who were tutored made reading gains of a full grade or more; no child in the control group showed this degree of gain.

Over a longer period of time, a much larger percentage of the tutored children demonstrated significant reading gains. By the end of the school year, 67 per cent of the weakest readers – those initially reading more than one grade below expectations in September – had made gains of a full grade or more, a degree of gain these children had never made before. The same was true of children who had started the year reading from one-half to one full grade below expectations. Children who were reading just below grade level expectations in September achieved even more dramatic results, with almost 90 per cent making reading gains of one full grade or more.

The true impact of literacy tutoring may not be apparent until children have had time to internalize what they have learned. For weaker readers, this may take a bit longer than it would for children who are already reading at grade level expectations. The exciting thing for us as educational researchers is the degree of impact of the tutoring: The very large majority of children tutored showed significant literacy gains.

## Implications for Classroom Practice

**Try tutoring first.** For children who are reading below grade level expectations, tutoring can provide just the kind of additional support they need. If volunteer tutors are used, the cost to schools is negligible. By trying tutoring first, schools can be more strategic in their use of expensive teacher time.

**Build a team of volunteer tutors for your classroom – and for the school.**<sup>14</sup> Using volunteer tutors works best if there is a school-wide understanding of the important role trained volunteers can play in supporting children's learning. Programs run more smoothly if one person coordinates all volunteers for the school and works in collaboration with teacher colleagues and school administrators.

The idea is to build a team of individuals who will return year after year to tutor children. Inform community members that a 10-week commitment is all that is needed; many will be able to dedicate this amount of time to the school. Showing appreciation at the end of a tutoring program demonstrates to volunteers how deeply they are valued by the school and encourages their continued participation as well.

**Recruit volunteer tutors.** Volunteers may include adults from the wider school community, students enrolled in a local college or university or members of the business community. Partnerships with institutions can be established, with realistic expectations clearly articulated to ensure sustainable partnerships.

**Train tutors well.** Research emphasizes the critical importance of tutor training – regarding both tutoring strategies and literacy approaches. When more than one teacher in a school is involved, it makes sense to have a common tutor-training strategy. Materials and suggestions for tutor training can be found in *Tutoring Adolescent Readers*.<sup>14</sup> Many of the suggestions are equally effective for all ages.

## Tips for Practice

- Try tutoring first (and save on expensive teacher time).
- Build a team of volunteer tutors and ensure school wide understanding – and appreciation – of their role.
- Pursue a recruitment strategy with partners.
- Provide tutor training, focusing on student engagement strategies as well as teaching more specific decoding and comprehension skills.
- Involve classroom teachers in monitoring and assessing the program.
- Enlist support of school administration.

*“Although tutoring programs do require some time from school personnel, the benefits to children are well documented and dramatic.”*

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Tutoring strategies include working from children's areas of interest and learning style preferences, using positive reinforcement and encouraging children to use the techniques they have been taught, rather than giving them the answers.

Literacy approaches include ways to teach phonemic awareness (important for people of all ages who are learning to read), decoding skills (such as finding smaller words in bigger words and recognizing root words, prefixes and suffixes), and strategic comprehension skills (such as identifying the main idea and most important details, re-telling and summarizing a text and making inferences).

**Define classroom teachers' responsibilities.** Classroom teachers have a central responsibility to provide their tutors with strategic tutoring goals and tutoring materials, and to communicate weekly with them. Teachers need to use their expertise to monitor and assess progress, and to give tutors ongoing suggestions and specific strategies. When tutors return to the same teachers year after year, they become increasingly strong partners in literacy learning.

**Enlist the support of school administration.** The tangible support of school administrators is key to successful volunteer programming. School administrators can show their support by ensuring that the time needed to coordinate volunteers is appropriately acknowledged, that teachers who are training volunteers are released from classroom duties to prepare and deliver that training, that there are quiet places in the school where tutoring can occur, and that computers and supplies for tutoring are available. School administrators should also be visibly involved in volunteer appreciation events.

## In Sum

Volunteer literacy tutoring programs hold great promise for supporting children's literacy learning. The training and retention of tutors is key to the success of these programs. Although tutoring programs do require some time from school personnel, the benefits to children are well documented and dramatic.

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