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Pushy parents? Private tutors for 3-year-olds

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This Christmas, London's well-off parents will not be fretting over whether their children are getting the right gifts, but instead they'll be stressed that their offspring won't be able to get into the city's most prestigious schools. Admission exams will be held in the new year, but experts are warning that undue pressure on young children can be counter-productive.

Many of London's top preparatory (or prep) or "pre-prep" schools are so over-subscribed that entrance exams are seen as the only way to assess a child's ability. As a result, the elite education system has created a whole industry in private tutoring.

Some parents are so anxious to get their children into the best public schools that they will employ private tutors to prepare their little ones for the entrance assessment.



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Pupils at Harrow School

The managing director of London-based private tutoring service William Clarence Education told CNBC he knew of children as young as five being privately tutored in order to get into London's most sought after and selective private schools.



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"It's frenzied at this time of year as many schools are about to hold entrance exams," Stephen Spriggs said, adding that parental anxiety over schools often started from their children's birth.

"Generally, the growing trend is that parents are in the hospital bed [having given birth] and they're already thinking about what nursery or school they're going to try to get their child into," he added.

His agency has about 100 tutors across all subjects with many specializing in getting children into certain preparatory schools -- such as Westminster, Dulwich Prep and King's College school among others. Fees for these schools vary but the fees at Dulwich Prep, for example, costs £3,470 (\$5,432) a term for pre-prep school children and £5,801 for children aged above seven. Similarly, fees at Westminster Under School (for children aged 7-13) are £5460 a term.

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According to the U.K.-based "Good Schools Guide," few pre-prep schools will expect children to read and write on entry but "such is the pressure for places at some pre-preps, particularly in London that, parents have been known to enlist the help of tutors for their 3-year-olds, to get the required head-start."

"Some pre-preps begin hot-housing in earnest from day one, others believe in a more gentle introduction to allow the child to settle, make friends and to feel comfortable in their new environment," the guide stated on its website, adding that it believed that emphasis should be placed on encouraging a love of learning rather than achievement at any cost.

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Faisal Nasim's consultancy Exam Papers Plus, which provides resources to students, told CNBC that although he was aware of tutors being engaged for children as young as three, his consultancy provided services to students aged between 7 and 13.

"From the ages of seven onwards, it is rare for a child to be accepted into a top school without some form of preparation from either parents, pre-prep schools, tutors or a combination of these. The level required at the most academic schools is well above the national average and so there are often gaps to be filled," he told CNBC.

There was a "great deal of misinformation and ensuing hysteria surrounding the whole entry process," Nasim said and that problems can occur "when parents harbour unrealistic expectations and thus

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subject their child to undue pressure."

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The demand for his company's services was "overwhelming" as the competition for school places increased, Nasim added -- a factor that one schools admissions expert said was driving parents to "unnecessary and counter-productive" measures such as employing tutors for three year olds.

"I think there are some very exceptional cases where some preparation for a child as young as three can be useful -- but I would see this kind of preparation as playing games and so forth," Susan Hamlyn, director of the "Good Schools Guide" advice service, told CNBC.

Hamlyn said some tutoring services seemed to be exploiting parental anxiety over the competition for school places but that it was totally counter-productive for a child to be pressured to learn.

"The best thing for any parent to do a year before they are looking for their child to go to prep school is for the child to spend a good year happily socialising with other children and adults in a nursery where they'll learn to understand and collaborate," Hamlyn added.

"What schools are looking for are children who are socialized," she said, "not ones that can do their ten times table."



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