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School's out forever: why super-rich parents are opting to educate their children using private tutors

Liberal parents and the super-wealthy are opting for wall-to-wall private tutoring instead of paying for a top school. Joshi Herrmann reports on the children who are enjoying a bespoke education



Home rule: more parents are choosing have their children educated by private tutors (Picture: Getty)

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It reads like an average school timetable: two hours of maths on Monday, two more on Friday afternoon; Tuesday afternoon physics, double English on Wednesday. Latin on Thursday. The difference is that this child's lessons are taken at home, with a rotation of tutors who charge between £60-100 an hour.

They are children who would ordinarily be educated at the capital's top private schools, but an increasing number of parents have decided that one-on-one tutoring cuts out any doubt that their children won't get all the academic attention they need.

This week the actor Greg Wise told The Times that he and his wife Emma Thompson have withdrawn their 15-year-old daughter Gaia from her private school in north London in the run-up to her GCSEs. Instead they've created a classroom in a shed in their garden staffed by top tutors.

"She loves learning and she's terribly focused and hard-working," he

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said. "But she didn't like the sausage factory of formal education. I've no argument with that."

This view is shared by a growing number of private-school parents, as well as wealthy foreigners who call London home, and perhaps it is a logical conclusion to the boom in use of private tutors in the past few years. One parent described it to the Standard as a radical iteration of "parent power" that returns education to the format enjoyed by princes and aristocrats for centuries.

In addition, competition for places at top academic schools — such as Westminster and St Paul's girls' and boys' schools — is now so tough that parents of children who don't get in are wondering if there are alternatives to sending their offspring to what they think of as "second-tier schools".

The Standard spoke to a number of tutors and parents involved in "wall-to-wall tutoring" or "tutored home-schooling".

One mother hailed it as "the best thing that could have happened" to her daughter. On the other hand, one tutor told us how she had endured a "disastrous" few months trying to school the daughter of a wealthy London family originally from the Middle East. "I think that is probably the last time I will take on a home-schooling student," she said, adding that she believed the method can leave children "undisciplined, socially imbalanced and less capable than most children of independent thought".

The 1996 Education Act says that parents are responsible for giving children an education suitable to their age, ability and aptitude, but the law does not require them to follow the national curriculum or teach for a prescribed number of hours.

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A mother whose 16-year-old daughter — an only child — wanted to leave her mixed-ability London private school said she agreed because the slow pace of learning was "driving her mad", and "they were spending lesson after lesson going over the same chemistry question, when she had understood it the first time".

Her daughter is bright, she says, but not someone who copes well under pressure. This meant highly academic schools such as St Paul's Girls would "not be a good fit".

She had also heard "bad stories" about the pressurised environments at some schools — and the knock-on side-effects associated with girls who put themselves under too much stress over school, such as anorexia.

Instead she called the head of a tutoring agency and together they designed a home-school programme for her daughter's A-levels. "We devised it ourselves," she says. "I had four separate tutors for the subjects, and they were great. She did four hours a day, and on top of that they set homework. You do two hours straight at a time, with a 10-minute break in the middle, and then the same after lunch.

"It is expensive, but it wasn't much more expensive than the termly fee of the school she was at. The school was £18,000 a year, and I worked out this this cost £20,000.

"I made sure I was always at home, because she is a very young pretty girl, and three of her tutors were male. Not because I felt any of them were affecting her, and I could have trusted them I'm sure, but for my own peace of mind I stayed at home."

After two years of the regime, her daughter scored three As and one B in her exams, and her mother speculates that she would have got "Bs and Cs" had she stayed on at the private school.

She says her husband had concerns about the social isolation inherent in the tutor home-schooling project, but she wasn't worried. "Even at her old school, she didn't have that many friends, and she was bullied a bit, so she didn't miss the social contact."



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Home-educated: Emma Thompson with her daughter Gaia (Picture: JB Lacroix/WireImage)

Sir Anthony Seldon, the head of Wellington College, whose counsel on education is listened to closely in Whitehall, believes home-schooling isn't a long-term alternative to the classroom. "The problem with home-schooling is that all they are getting is academic – they are not getting the benefits of culture, or sport, or the whole myriad of interactions with other children. Transitionally it can be good for a child to gain confidence if they have been bullied or unwell, so I can see a role for it. But school is about far more than exams."

Kate Shand, whose company Enjoy Education, provides tutors for home schooling says she has "seen a rise in families requesting long-term tutors who are brought on to replace rather than supplement traditional schooling." Cyrus Afkhami, founder of My Tutor Club, says parents who don't get their child into the first choice state school sometimes go for tutored home-schooling because, "the second or third options might be in some way undesirable." He adds that in the average school, the amount of one to one attention a student will receive per week is about six minutes, whereas tutored home schooling typically gives them four or five hours per day. "You can see the attraction."

The tutor tasked with the home-schooling of the eight-year-old daughter of an Arab businessman, is an Oxford-educated actress, who supplements her income. She says she has witnessed the downsides of tutor schooling first hand. "When I was there the family setup was pretty mad in terms of levels of security and levels of luxury, compared to how hands-off the parents were."

She was charging £60 an hour, but says the home-schooling system didn't work because the parents let the child run the agenda, in a household where security guards and drivers called the eight-year-old "boss". "I think putting a child like that in a school would have helped massively for discipline. No one ever tells her no, and the education side of things always gave way to whatever was going on."

However Stephen Spriggs, managing director of [William Clarence Education](#), recently designed home-schooling programme for a Bahraini family whose home was a whole Mayfair apartment block, and says it went well. "Usually the governess will answer the door, the butler will serve you coffee and driver will drive you home, but the boy was well behaved and the education he got was second to none."

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Sir Anthony Seldon may claim that school is about more than academic learning, his school with fees of £8,000+ per term could not justify them on that basis alone. However he is obviously unaware of the plethora of activities offered by a multitude of organisations bringing children of all backgrounds together for group activities ranging from, music, film making, theatre and cookery to sport and fitness training. Home schooled children are no longer restricted in their extracurricular activities, the internet has provided not only access to all the academia a school can offer, but connections to local communities that provide all the experiences he seems to think can only be offered by a school. Except perhaps for the fact that a schooled child has no choice about what is on offer.

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