

# LOVE TUTORING

**Be the tutor your  
student needs**



**Julia Silver**

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## Chapter 1

# SAFE, SKILLED AND SUPPORTED

## Learning Can Be Lovely

I have a very specific tutoring niche. I love to work with primary-age students who need a more personalised approach – those gentle souls struggling in boisterous classrooms who crave an opportunity to learn in a calm and reassuring space.

Give me a timid 9-year-old suffering with maths anxiety, and I will give them the time and space to really explore and experiment with mathematical thinking.

Give me an under-stimulated 11-year-old, eager to go beyond the confines of the curriculum, and we will create an awesome research project together.

Give me a 7-year-old who has gaps in their learning from a curriculum that is too fast-paced and an environment that is too distracting, and we will slow right down and take as much time as necessary to build solid foundations.

I have tutored on and off since I was seventeen, but when, at 31, my third child was born, I decided to try to make a career of it. As a qualified teacher in a close-knit community, word spread quickly about my tutoring. Within two weeks, I had filled my schedule

and, even more excitingly, I was hopeful that I could make a real difference to these young people.

At first it was delightful. Whilst my own children were sleeping or settled with a babysitter, the students came to my home, shuttled back and forth by eager parents. I would open the front door and warmly welcome the child in, waving their parents away with a confident smile.

Coming to me for tutoring was probably good fun. My home is an inviting and encouraging learning environment. On the bookcase, *The Gruffalo* and *Elmer* (the patchwork elephant) nestle amongst hundreds of much-loved and well-thumbed children's books. The cupboards are stacked with Numicon and Kinetic Sand, playing cards, dice and modelling clay. The walls are covered with posters, sticky notes and magic whiteboard paper. If we are counting, it will be with coloured pegs. If we are writing, it will be with scented gel pens. This is my way of setting out my stall, of creating a playful and welcoming environment that students can relax into and enjoy. It is my way of demonstrating that learning can be lovely, which is what my tutoring is all about. I use play-based, open-ended activities to bring back the natural love of learning that we all felt in our earliest years.

We usually sat across a corner of my kitchen table, the student at the head of the table and me on the mustard yellow bench against the wall. I always started with an enthusiastic, 'I'm so glad to see you!' or 'How's your day been so far?' I would give them a little time to chat, trying to really see and hear them, to connect with them and how they felt right there in the moment.

Then I would share my schedule for the session. I like to combine maths and English to keep things fresh and to build on strengths as well as weaknesses. For ease of planning and a sense of continuity, at least one of the activities tends to be a long-term project, such as a book we are reading together or a longer piece of writing.

About halfway through, I would stop to put some biscuits on a plate and pour a glass of juice for the student, who by then would be deeply engaged in an independent task. Sometimes I would put on some quiet instrumental music whilst they worked. For the final

activity of the session, we would do something lighter – some maths games or comic poetry – as they nibbled on a Petit Beurre.

When they left, it would be calmly and with a smile. It was an enjoyable hour in a quiet home with a friendly and reassuring adult. If nothing else, I had provided a welcome respite from the crowded classroom.

In my imagination, tutoring was the perfect job. It was fulfilling and flexible. It enabled me to make a difference on my own terms. But, again and again, at precisely the same point, I would begin to come unstuck.

The fifth session is usually when a tutor shifts gear into the long, slow work of making progress. By now, we have had the time to really assess the student and build up a rapport. We have found out what they know and can do, and how they feel about learning. We may also have picked up some quick wins along the way, such as reading the clock or multiplying fractions.

But learning is a marathon, not a sprint, and progress is not linear. It is a messy and organic process. Tutoring, especially for primary-age students, means revisiting the same skills in myriad different ways. They need to revise and apply what they are learning repeatedly, practising until they are confident. Switching activities before they tire and coming up with yet another way of approaching the same concept takes time and bucket loads of persistence.

But a month in, and the novelty begins to wear off. The parents begin to get antsy. Hope has been replaced with impatience. They are wondering: has it helped? Have we done enough? How long can we afford to continue?

Or, maybe, to be totally honest, it is not the parents getting antsy. Maybe it is me. Maybe it is not the parents doubting me. Maybe I am doubting myself, my ability to be the tutor my student needs.

I struggled on, but my smile became strained. Within a few months tutoring began to feel like a burden, not a blessing. It became the field for an internal battle, a clash of my values and beliefs. I felt alone, bored and insecure. This wasn't the no-brainer career I had expected when I started out.

# The Plan B Mindset

Is there a professional working within the education sector who is as misunderstood as the tutor? Teaching assistants, speech and language therapists, and peripatetic music teachers are all absorbed into the generally well-intentioned, gently forward-moving juggernaut of the mainstream school system. But, with only a few exceptions, tutors have been left out in the cold. We contribute in the background, boosting results and rehabilitating learners, but we are rarely given a seat at the table.

This cycle of neglect, fuelled by a lack of representation in mainstream education, led one influential paper to call private tuition 'shadow schooling' and 'the hidden secret of education'.<sup>1</sup> These phrases are deeply problematic. Those of us who already love tutoring take our role and responsibilities very seriously. We recognise that our greatest impact is on the confidence, resilience and self-esteem of our students. Helping a young person to gain a passing grade in functional maths or to discover a love of biology goes well beyond academic results. It gives purpose, meaning and hope to the student and their tutor.

Mainstream education has turned its back on tutoring for too long. Leaving tutors to languish in the shadows is irresponsible. It makes it harder to keep children safe, and it means that tutors aren't receiving the support and development that every professional needs to do their best work.

Too often, I read posts about tutoring as a great 'side hustle'. In the United States, the phrase simply means a second job, but to my British ears, 'hustling' evokes cowboys, pirates and smarmy second-hand car-dealers. No wonder many tutors wince when they tell people what they do for a living.

Tutoring is not yet seen as a first-choice career. Every tutor I know came to it in their own way and for their own reasons. Many of us

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Lamp, Foreword. In P. Kirby, *Shadow Schooling: Private Tuition and Social Mobility in the UK* (London: Sutton Trust, 2016), p. 1. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/shadowschooling-private-tuition-social-mobility>.

left the classroom or the corporate world for a life less rigid. Some of us tutor when we retire or whilst we study or apply for graduate positions. A few of us have long-term health issues or are caring for someone else. In fact, in the hundreds of interviews I have conducted with tutors, I have never yet met anyone who intended to become a tutor. Instead, I hear 'I couldn't afford childcare, so I became a tutor.' 'My managers weren't understanding of my chronic health issues, so I decided to tutor.' 'I needed to pay off my student debt, so I thought I'd tutor.' 'I couldn't face another minute in the classroom, so I figured I'd tutor.' This is what I call the 'Plan B mindset', and I believe it has a lot to answer for.

In my case, I chose not to go back to the classroom after I'd had children because it was too much to juggle. In 2009, I had three children under 5 years of age. Childcare would have cost more than my teacher's salary, and being at home with my kids felt right, but we needed a second income. Plus, the stamina required to teach thirty individuals full time was something I didn't think I could sustain – and still don't. I wouldn't have had the energy to come home and look after my own kids. I knew it was just too much. So I decided to tutor.

I now know that I am not alone in side-stepping a lifetime of classroom service. Many teachers have taken the same decision in recent years to guard their well-being, choosing to repurpose their skill sets as tutors rather than allowing themselves to be crushed under the weight of the school system.



I have  
interviewed  
tutors at  
**every level  
of expertise  
from all over  
the world,** and  
they all agree  
that **tutoring  
can be lonely.**

And it is not only teachers who are turning to tutoring as a career choice. I know of professionals from accounting to marketing, pharmaceuticals to social work, and even the police force, who have left their positions to explore a role in tutoring. But no matter what our path into tutoring looks like, the only way to be trusted and accepted by the wider teaching community is to approach our work with care and commitment and to ensure that we always put the needs of our students first.

## That'll Do, Pig

Tutoring can be a solitary existence. More than a decade later, I can still feel the loneliness that would crash over me as I stood by the kitchen window anticipating the arrival of the next student. Yes, I was grateful to be able to stay at home with my children and still work, but I felt isolated. This feeling is not unique to me and my lived experience. I have interviewed tutors at every level of expertise from all over the world, and they all agree that tutoring can be lonely.

I do my best thinking when I talk over issues with peers and mentors – with people who 'get it'. In a primary school, there is usually a friendly teacher or wise teaching assistant happy to spend ten quiet minutes discussing your kids or your lessons. Just having someone with whom to share a cup of tea and a biscuit or exchange some words of encouragement can give you the courage and the confidence to keep going.

What I craved was professional dialogue. With no staffroom, no colleagues down the hall and no leader to lean on, I had no one with whom I could 'talk tutoring'. With no one to give me a nod or a thumbs up, the self-doubt became crippling. If you know the Dick King-Smith book *The Sheep-Pig* – or its delightful movie adaptation, *Babe* – you will remember the moment right at the end when the farmer looks down at Babe and says, in his gruff voice full of love and pride, 'That'll do, Pig.' At the end of a great tutoring session, *that* was the feeling I craved: a pat on the head or a nod of approval. But none came.

I am not proud of this feeling. I don't believe that the approval of others is the correct measure of my worth, but I was accustomed to positive feedback and I felt lost without it. This goes right to the heart of our modern education system, which uses reward and punishment for crowd control and micro-management. We have been trained to respond to our master's voice ('Good girl', 'Great job') and to praise and certificates. Then, as we grow older, promotions and bonuses become the currency by which we learn to measure our success.

In most sectors, the customer is always right. Happy testimonials are the best way to evaluate a service. We receive verbal and non-verbal feedback from our students and clients; a groan or a cheer, a thank you or a cold shoulder; a referral or a rotten testimonial. But even though I received only great feedback, I felt terribly uncomfortable. Was I a good tutor or just a likeable tutor? Did my clients know the difference? Were they happy because they were making progress, or was it just the cookies and juice that made them smile? Surely, there was more to tutoring than keeping people happy? In professions like medicine, law and education, the client doesn't always have all the facts. When parents aren't educators and don't know their children as learners, are they the best arbiters of my practice?

What I needed in those early days was a solid idea of what 'good' looks like in tutoring. I needed a meaningful and objective way to measure my impact and understand how I needed to improve. I felt that I didn't know how to tutor, that I was making it up as I went along, extrapolating from the teaching and parenting skills I had developed in my other roles. That isn't to say that I was doing it wrong, I just didn't know whether I was doing it right. I also needed peers and mentors to help me stay on the right path and push through when I felt like giving up. I needed support and guidance. I needed a community of practice.

Looking back more than a decade to that young teacher tutoring from her kitchen table, what felt at the time like personal insecurity, I now recognise as professional integrity. I wanted to be the best tutor I could be. I wanted to feel a sense of progress, both for my students

and for myself. I wanted to be proud of what I had achieved and excited to keep going.

## Find Your Element as a Tutor and Fly

That feeling I craved, of loving tutoring, was what educationalist Sir Ken Robinson called being in your Element, with a capital 'E' (which is why I have capitalised the term in this book). In his extensive work on the subject, he told story after story of people who had struggled to walk a mainstream path and then soared once they had tapped into their innate abilities and aligned with the world around them. He said that 'finding your Element is essential to your well-being and ultimate success'.<sup>2</sup> Sir Ken said that when we find our Element we can achieve far more than we might imagine.

Tutoring can be flexible and fulfilling. As we will see in the following chapters, there are many more types of tutor than ever before. That is why I believe it is a space that lends itself to finding your Element. If you have a passion for maths, or reading, or young people with autism, you can build a niche for yourself.

In this book, I will show you how and why tutoring might be a brilliant path for you. I will show you many examples of people who found that they were able to develop their true talents through tutoring. These are individuals I know well and who are inspiring and authentic humans. Some work three hours a day whilst they raise their young families. Some have more than matched their teaching salary with online group tuition or international tutoring. Some have developed alternative provision to support disadvantaged young people or built tutoring franchises of every size and specialism. In every case, the common thread is that they each started out like you and me: intrigued by the promise of tutoring but not quite sure what was possible.

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2 K. Robinson and L. Aronica, *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything* (New York: Penguin, 2009), p. 8.

The first thing to realise is that tutoring is incredibly adaptable. Not only does it allow you to personalise learning to the needs of the student, but it also allows you to personalise the way you work to suit your own needs. If you have mobility or health issues that require you to work from home and rest regularly, that is possible. If you want to travel the world whilst you tutor, or help ambitious but disadvantaged students get into top universities, or build a business you could one day sell for millions, all that is possible too. There are so many right ways to be a tutor, and I hope that by the time you finish reading this book, you will have found one that will work for you.

You might be thinking, but who are we, who were born and raised within systems that teach us to conform and comply, to have the guts and the gumption to find our Element and chart our own course? Actually, I think the real question is: who are we not to?

Our world has a greater need for thriving and successful people than ever. As G. Michael Hopf observes, 'Hard times create strong men, strong men create good times, good times create weak men, and weak men create hard times.' We are living in hard times right now, and we need strong people to make things good again.

We need to make things good for our young people, and we need to make things good for ourselves. This is not a time to put our own needs to one side. Rather, it is a time to wholeheartedly align our unique abilities with the needs of the next generation. As Sir Ken says, finding your Element 'offers us our best, and perhaps our only promise for genuine and sustainable success in a very uncertain future'.

# The Birth of Qualified Tutor

I found my Element in tutoring in the autumn of 2019. I had just finished my National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), and my wonderful father had recently passed away. I was ready to take on a bigger challenge in my career, but I felt sure that a head teacher role in a large school would crush me. I was never a 'career teacher'. All those maternity leaves meant that I had never become institutionalised; I was perfectly happy to disrupt the status quo in service of finding a better way. This worked well in my small community school, but I knew I would never be able to lead change from inside a larger setting.

During my NPQH, I had noticed that all the coaches and facilitators on the course were former school leaders. I realised that there are ways to contribute to education other than working in a school. And I really wanted to contribute.

I had been working away at this problem for months, trying to find a niche in education where I could bring my whole self. I reflected on my strengths, on what I had achieved so far and on what made me feel excited and inspired to go to work.

As a school leader, I had always focused on developing the adults to improve outcomes for the students. I would do everything I could to advocate for my staff, from ensuring we had a world-class crèche to enabling training routes for non-qualified teachers. I was able to establish a culture of professional development in that school that made lasting change.

At that time, my eldest child, Michael, was in a failing high school and desperately in need of tuition. He wanted to study science at university, but was beginning to worry that he wouldn't get the chance because of the disruptive behaviour in his class. Of course, I needed to help him, so I started the search for a tutor.

I quickly discovered that finding a tutor isn't difficult at all. In fact, it is all too easy. It is possible for anyone to set themselves up as a tutor in minutes. Registering with some online platforms is as easy as

ordering takeout. The entry points to tutoring are so poorly guarded that it is hard for a parent to know what to expect.

It occurred to me that the insecurity I had felt as a tutor was matched by the parents' insecurity in choosing a tutor. That is when it landed.

Tutors, as a demographic within the education population, are underdeveloped, underrepresented and underestimated. This makes them insecure and makes parents unsure, all of which undermines the teaching and learning process – and, ultimately, outcomes for students. I would take what I had learned on the NPQH and develop a qualification for tutors.

I began to research social enterprises and community-based businesses. In Qualified Tutor's first manifesto from December 2019, I wrote:

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*The Qualified Tutor vision is that all students will have regular opportunities to benefit from direct instruction delivered by trained tutors.*

- *By making teacher-training accessible for tutors we will enable more, and more able, tutors to enter the market.*
  - *By providing a community platform we will invite tutors to see themselves as professionals, as educators, as change-makers.*
- 

I had found my Element in tutoring. I found a niche that lent itself to my passions and talents, and that aligned with what the world needed and what I felt I could bring. The grassroots, community-based approach to professional development is where I thrive. I love to bring people together. I love to raise them up to feel their own worth.

The Qualified Tutor professional development community now provides training and qualifications, community and events, and credentials and certification to the tutoring profession. The workshops you will cover in Part II of this book are based on the Foundations of Effective Tutoring course, which has now been taken

by thousands of tutors from all walks of life. We created World Tutors' Day (2 July) and the Love Tutoring Festivals, which are a series of free events designed to inspire and delight the tutoring profession. Our mission is to 'raise standards in tutoring, together' and, in doing so, to bring clarity to a very complex profession, thereby addressing the systemic lack of confidence in tutoring.

What I have learned since then is that the world is full of lost and lonely tutors and would-be tutors, like I was, working in siloes, unconnected and uninspired. Many of them still don't realise that there is a better way. Through Qualified Tutor membership and the Love Tutoring message, I have been able to gather together these tutors and ensure they have the infrastructure they need to do their best work for all our young people. It is emotionally exhausting but incredibly rewarding work. I hope you will consider joining us.

## Safe, Skilled and Supported

Let's go back again to me as a young mum tutoring in her kitchen – or maybe to a version of you in a similar moment at your laptop in your loft or garden room – gazing out the window, listless and lonely. What did we need to love tutoring?

For me, I didn't need a boss, but I did need guidance. I needed to know what good looks like in tutoring. I needed a definition of excellence that was expansive, not reductive. I needed to see a progression route to inspire me to stick around, to become an expert and to build a lasting, viable career in tutoring. I needed to know how to be the tutor my student needs.

This is hard for me to say – being equal parts nerd and rebel, I am naturally anti-authoritarian, as many of us are in tutoring – but the openness and flexibility of tutoring is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, the fact that tutors aren't hemmed in by external regulations enables us to be agile and responsive to students' changing needs. We can take them outside or off-topic as we see fit. On the other hand, that same openness means that it is terribly hard to know what good looks like, and that is the root of our problem.



Tutors, individually and as a whole profession, need to opt in to a meaningful quality assurance process to enable tutors and clients to choose each other with confidence. This doesn't need to be a top-down movement. I am proposing a grassroots approach to raising standards in tutoring. If we were heart surgeons, bridge builders or train drivers, quality assurance would be baked into everything we do. Is the profession of tutoring any less high stakes? We heal hearts, build bridges and drive learning daily. We are working with vulnerable students, anxious students and determined students at the most critical moments in their academic careers. They, and the people who care for them, reach out to tutors for help. To be worthy of such a privilege, we must approach tutoring responsibly.

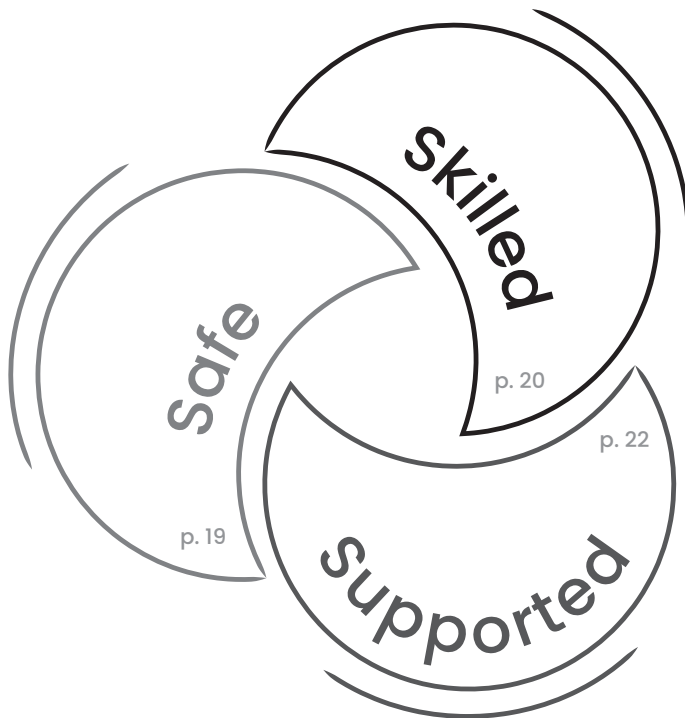
We all need tutoring to be successful and sustainable. Unregulated tutoring isn't right for the tutor or for the student. For tutoring to become a trusted part of the educational landscape, it needs to grow up.

Whilst there are too few accountability measures in place within tutoring, many educational professionals believe that teaching currently has more than enough. I am not suggesting that we accept the accountability agenda that defines the modern education system. No longer willing to defer to the judgement of teachers, schools are riddled with checks and balances to evaluate and standardise teaching. More data drops and assessment points are introduced each year. To know whether you have taught a subject well you need to be a data analyst. Most tutors resented being made to jump through hoops in schools and workplaces. Many of us left the schools or offices where we worked because we were sick of the bureaucracy.

Tutors don't need more red tape. We need professionalism. A peer-reviewed and approved system that assures quality without reducing individuality. I believe that we simply need to establish a flexible and meaningful set of professional standards that will allow us to do our best work and against which we can hold ourselves accountable.

After years of trying to squeeze tutoring to fit in with teaching standards, I eventually came up with a model that felt flexible and inclusive enough to include all types of tutors and simple enough for the families with whom they work to quickly comprehend. I realised that it came down to just three core principles. In order to be the tutor your student needs, you need to be safe, you need to be skilled and you need to be supported.

It is only when these three principles are in place that we are able to ask questions, do our best work, and grow together. Without them, we are too anxious and too insecure to move ahead and make progress. Throughout this book we will explore how being safe, skilled and supported can transform your tutoring.



In fact, we all need to feel safe, skilled and supported in every role we take on. If we had felt safe, skilled and supported in the classroom, many of us wouldn't have left mainstream education. But that is another conversation for another day.

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# A practical guide for current and aspiring tutors that will give them the skills, knowledge and context to tutor more effectively.

At a time when teacher retention and pupil attendance are at an all-time low, tutoring provides a gentler, more personalised and holistic approach to teaching and learning. Once considered a Plan B option, tutoring is fast becoming a legitimate career choice.

Written by former school leader Julia Silver, *Love Tutoring* is an essential guide to professional development for all tutors. Combining theory and practice, this book provides tutors with a solid grounding in the pedagogy of tutoring. In it Julia offers a broad insight into the tutoring profession and explores the different ways to make tutoring a career that you love, with the assistance of real-life examples and interviews with professional tutors.

*Love Tutoring* is an invitation, a provocation and a call to action. It goes right to the heart of the tutoring relationship and will give every tutor a roadmap for becoming the tutor their student needs.

**Suitable for tutors of all ages, subjects and levels of expertise, as well as interested parents, agencies, schools or other organisations who employ tutors.**

Packed with encouragement, wisdom and practical advice. Highly recommended!  
**Professor Dame Alison Peacock, CEO, Chartered College of Teaching**

Julia is a fantastic guide.

**Hywel Roberts, teacher, writer and speaker**

I feel better informed and more appreciative of tutoring as a result of reading this terrific book.

**Mary Myatt, education writer and speaker**

Julia's passion for tutors and tutoring shines through in her beautifully thought-out handbook for thoughtful tutoring. Superb.

**Dr Fiona Aubrey-Smith, Director of One Life Learning**

*Love Tutoring* is a beacon of insight for both novice and experienced tutors alike.  
**Sue Atkins, parenting broadcaster, speaker and author of *The Can-Do Kid's Journal: Discover Your Confidence Superpower!* [www.thesueatkins.com](http://www.thesueatkins.com)**



**Julia Silver** is the founder of Qualified Tutor, a professional development community that develops and certifies tutors. She lives in North London with her husband Simon, her five children and her Labrador puppy.  
[linkedin.com/in/julia-silver-qualified-tutor](https://www.linkedin.com/in/julia-silver-qualified-tutor)

 [www.crownhouse.co.uk](http://www.crownhouse.co.uk)

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