

Guidelines for Parents of Students Receiving Psychoeducational Tutoring

The psychoeducational philosophy

The philosophy of psychoeducational tutoring is that happiness and success depend in large part on teachable and learnable skills. We call these “psychological skills.” Psychological skills include productivity, joyousness, kindness, honesty, fortitude, good decisions (both individual decisions and “joint decisions” which are sometimes conflict-resolution), nonviolence, respectful talk, friendship-building, self-discipline, loyalty, conservation, self-care, compliance, positive fantasy rehearsal, and courage. We hope that some day, these skills will be taught to all children, since they are important for all people. In the meantime, we teach them to some in the hopes of decreasing a psychological problem of some sort: anxiety, depression, disruptive behavior, and so forth. We teach these skills in other cases where people simply realize how important these skills are, and want to enrich life.

Psychoeducational tutoring is not counseling or therapy

Psychoeducational tutoring is not counseling or psychotherapy. Rather than thinking in terms of a diagnosis of the type used by medical insurance, it is focused on teaching whatever psychological skills are of highest priority. It does not aim to assess anyone’s danger to self or others. It does not even attempt to fully understand any problem that needs to be solved, but rather seeks to build skills that are capable of helping with various sorts of problems. It’s an educational program. We do not form a doctor-patient relationship, or a therapist-client relationship, but rather an educator-student relationship. The student is not expected to talk about intimate life details or to explore embarrassing topics. There are manuals and textbooks and exercises; the student takes a course in psychological skills. The theory is that many or most of the skills of successful living can be taught, by instruction, practice, and feedback, in the context of a positive and encouraging relationship. This is not to say that other methods such as drugs and traditional psychotherapy are not useful. It is to say that traditional educational methods have a place, and have probably not been used nearly as much as they could be.

Why have I never heard of this method before?

To our knowledge, this has not been done in just this way before or elsewhere. This is not surprising, since the writing of manuals optimized for telephone tutoring has taken a sizeable chunk of time over 15 years; since it is not covered by any sort of insurance; since it is a departure from the way things are done in both the mental health/medical system and the educational system; and since the “human resources” work necessary to hire approximately one more tutor for each additional student is formidable. But we have enacted it for 15 years so far, with what appear to be very positive results, on the average (and a continuing net financial loss.) We believe that it represents a new way of accomplishing goals that are very difficult to accomplish in other ways. Because we believe it has a great deal of power to do good, in 2014 we (Joseph, Jillian, and Emily Strayhorn) set up a nonprofit corporation, called the Organization for Psychoeducational Tutoring, Inc., to work toward gradual expansion and continuation of its efforts.

The skills-oriented life view

Almost every life situation provides an opportunity to employ one or more psychological skills. Do you have work to do? Then you have an opportunity for productivity. Are you dealing with other people? If so, you usually have an opportunity for friendship-building, and kindness, and often, for conflict-resolution. Are you doing something potentially enjoyable? It's a chance to practice joyousness skills. Are you in an unpleasant situation? Time to practice fortitude skills. Are you at a choice point? Then you have a chance to practice good decision-making skills.

Furthermore, each time you carry out a positive example of any psychological skill, you have an opportunity to celebrate: to feel good about your own accomplishment. Thus, almost every situation of life provides an opportunity to do something you can feel good about.

Even if you handle a situation completely unskillfully, you have an opportunity to learn from the experience so that in the future, you can handle all similar situations much better. And this process of learning and improving is also something to feel very good about!

Thus work on psychological skills can potentially help someone not only to handle life's choice points better, but also, to feel better about the choices that are made.

How psychoeducational tutoring takes place

The manuals for the program were written by Joseph Strayhorn, M.D., a child and adolescent psychiatrist who has spent most of his professional lifetime so far working on the questions of what skills are most important for children to learn, and how they can be most effectively taught. Some of the manuals were the joint effort of Dr. Strayhorn and his daughter Jillian. The manuals have titles like "A Programmed Course in Self-Discipline," "A Programmed Course in Conflict-Resolution and Anger Control," and so forth.

If the student can not read well yet, or cannot read at all, there are other materials meant to teach the student to read. There is a "reading track" for the program that is meant to help children learn to read well. Many children work on reading and psychological skills at the same time.

Children as young as five and as old as the teen years have taken part in the tutoring.

The Tutors are Part-time Nonprofessionals

Many of the tutors who carry out the training in this program are young adults who are interested in or beginning a career in psychology, education, or human services of some sort. Many are undergraduate college students. Most of the tutors work with only one or two students.

There is probably a major advantage that comes from the fact that the tutors do not make a full time job of this work. Tutoring is refreshing and rejuvenating if done for a short time, and it can be very draining if it is done for many hours in a row, day after day.

The Logistics of Phone Sessions

How do the logistics of the sessions work? The tutor makes an appointment, and calls by phone at the appointed time. The student is ready with the same books or materials that the tutor has. They “get on the same page” and work together just as they would in person. The materials are crafted so as to permit work by telephone. When the session is over, the tutor usually speaks briefly to the parent and confirms the time for the next day’s session. The sessions typically take place 6 days a week.

Why Phone?

Why are the sessions carried out by phone rather than in person? Phone sessions make it logistically possible for a tutor and a student to connect as frequently as 6 or 7 days a week. There is great efficiency gained by no one’s having to physically go anywhere for the sessions to take place. The phone also makes it possible for tutors and students to be matched with each other even when they are not geographically near each other. We have found that tutors and students can form great relationships with each other despite never having actually been in the same room. Also, if either the student or the tutor moves to a different area (a fairly frequent occurrence), this provides no disruption for telephone tutoring.

It is very common for parents (and others) who have never experienced this program to feel that it is very important for tutors and students to meet face to face. Our experience so far is that this is not the case. We have had very successful tutoring relationships with tutors and children who lived hundreds of miles away from one another and never actually laid eyes on each other.

Although the major reason for doing this by phone is to save the effort transportation would take, we have found that some students actually seem to be able to pay attention better by phone than in person. Here’s one theory of why this is true: often the student is asked to pay visual attention to a book, and when only auditory input comes from the tutor rather than visual input as well, the student is not distracted from the book. Here’s another theory: the only way the student can get the tutor’s attention is by speaking; in person, the student can attract attention by lots of other physical means. Thus having only an audio channel of communication helps some students to channel their energies into verbal output rather than other activities.

Parents whose children don’t like to talk to relatives or other people on the phone, or who seem not to have anything to say by phone, often predict that phone tutoring doesn’t have a chance. It could be that the child isn’t ready for phone tutoring, but on the other hand, phone tutoring is totally different from unstructured conversation. Many of the students we work with don’t engage in social conversation with us for very long at the beginning, but they can engage in the structured alternate reading and exercises, and gradually learn to enjoy social conversation by phone more, over time.

Why six days a week?

Why do we prefer sessions close to every day of the week? People usually do not become expert at skills by working on them once a week or once every two weeks. Those who gain a high degree of competence in any area usually practice and work at that skill nearly daily, if not daily. It

is extremely beneficial for the learning process that forgetting has not proceeded very far before the next review takes place. A very strong relationship with a tutor tends to develop when they spend lots of time together. Frequent sessions allow greater amounts of “time on task” to be accumulated, and success at skill-learning is often proportional to time on task. For all these reasons, frequent sessions are at the heart of what has made this program successful.

Programmed Manuals

Another central part of psychoeducational tutoring is “programmed manuals,” written specially for tutoring. These are divided into sections of about 100 to 200 words. Each section is followed by a comprehension question, with two possible choices. Often the comprehension question asks the reader to select the main idea of the section, or to decide which abstract idea the concrete narrative given in the section was an example of. The manual does not tell what the correct answer is, but it is almost always obvious to a tutor who has read the section carefully.

Alternate Reading

“Alternate reading” is a central activity for telephone tutoring. In this, the tutor and the student take turns reading sections aloud to one another. The student answers the comprehension questions, and the tutor gives feedback on the student’s answers. When one has done this activity long enough, it often comes to feel like a comfortable and pleasant meditation – it has a rhythm, it can be relaxing, and it is hopefully just demanding enough of the student’s resources but not too much so.

A typical session

What are the three activities of a typical psychological skills session? The alternate reading is usually a part of each session. In addition, there is time devoted to one or more psychological skills exercises. There is more about these exercises later. The third activity in the session is less highly structured chatting, social conversation between the tutor and the student.

Psychological Skills Exercises

What is meant by psychological skills exercises? Just as push-ups and running are exercises to build up your physical strength and health, exercises such as the celebrations exercise, the psychological skills meditation, the four-thought or 12-thought exercise, the option-generating exercise, the reflections exercise, listening with four responses, the conflict-resolution role-play, and others are meant to build up your psychological strength. There’s a whole book of these. But let’s quickly say what a few of them are, just to communicate what is meant by psychological skills exercises.

In the celebrations exercise, the tutor and student take turns telling real-life things they have done that are positive examples of psychological skills, and they identify which skills these are examples of. In the psychological skills meditation, tutor and student take turns making up examples of the sixteen (really seventeen, counting individual decision-making and joint decision-making separately) psychological skills and principles. In the four-thought exercise, the student takes a hypothetical situation and runs through thoughts about that situation that would exemplify thoughts known as not awfulizing, goal-setting, listing options and choosing, and celebrating your own choice. In the twelve thought exercise, the tutor and student take turns making up examples of twelve different types of thoughts about a given situation (the four thoughts I just mentioned are a subset of these twelve). In the option-generating exercise, the tutor and

student take turns thinking of options for response to a hypothetical situation. In the reflections exercise, one person talks, and the other listens using reflections of the form, “So what I hear you saying is _____.” In listening with four responses, one person talks, and the other listens using not only reflections, but also facilitations such as “yes,” “I see,” “Uh huh,” “Oh,” and so forth, follow-up questions, and positive feedback. In the conflict resolution role-play, tutor and student role-play a very polite and rational conversation which resolves a hypothetical disagreement, attempting to meet seven criteria for conflict-resolution conversations.

How is psychoeducational tutoring supposed to help the student?

There are many ways that these sessions are thought to help. Let’s list just a few of them here.

1. The books the students read teach them very important ideas about how to do psychological skills well, through both instructions and models.
2. The exercises allow them to practice these skills repeatedly.
3. The conversation with the tutor allows lots of practice in the very important psychological skill of social conversation.
4. The positive relationship with the tutor provides a climate for growth.
5. The approving tones of voice of the tutor serve as a model for the student in how to give approval to oneself for bits of progress; this habit fosters achievement and opposes depression.
6. The large amount of practice the student gets in reading aloud helps in the very important skills of reading fluency and fluency of speech.
7. The habit of regular keeping of appointments gives the students practice in one of the most important success skills.
8. The student hopefully gets used to doing more and more work over time; work capacity is an extremely important skill.

What if the child can’t read well enough to read the manuals?

One of the major developmental tasks for people in this society is learning to read well. We are very proud of our techniques of teaching students to read well, by telephone. There are several books and materials that are aimed at reading instruction; the central one is *Manual for Tutors and Teachers of Reading*. Most students in the early elementary grades, and some of them in later grades, can benefit very much from taking part in explicit reading instruction as well as the psychological skills instruction. Even those who don’t take part in formal reading instruction get a very large amount of practice in reading, because the “alternate reading” that takes place in nearly every session gives practice in both word recognition and comprehension. For all students, we like to measure reading skill periodically, both to gauge what level of reading difficulty in the manuals the child can handle, and to monitor the effect of all the reading that is done in the tutoring.

Other than reading, several other academic skills

We have worked successfully with students on mathematics and keyboarding skills. The book, *Reading About Math*, is written in the same format as the other psychological skills books,

only it deals with math skills. The *Manual on Task-Switching or Set-Shifting* is designed to attempt to teach a type of “executive functioning,” but it does so in the context of work on math facts.

For students who want to learn or improve Spanish, one book of illustrated stories (so far) is available in a Spanish and an English version. Reading it aloud in both languages is a simple way to become familiar with Spanish.

Almost all the academic work we do has been mixed with work on our primary mission, the teaching of psychological skills.

Not homework help

One strategy that we almost never use is to help the student with school homework. One of the problems with schoolwork is that it is often either too hard or too easy for the student in question. One of our major advantages as tutors is being able to attempt to find the level of difficulty that is just right for the student, and work at the correct level. In math, for example, it is extremely more productive to drop back to the correct “challenge zone,” the correct level on the “hierarchy of difficulty,” and work there, than to try to help the student do work that the student lacks the foundation skills to carry out.

What are the responsibilities of the parent in the telephone tutoring process?

Understanding the importance

In the past, we have probably not done an adequate job of communicating to parents what a “big deal” the tutoring can be – how much the trajectory of a student’s life can potentially be altered for the better. Piano teachers and martial arts instructors have probably outdone us in communicating why the enterprise should not be taken for granted, and why the opportunity to benefit from it should not be lost.

But the tutoring is not covering something much more central than a recreational activity or even an academic competence. The subject matter is how to decide how to act and how to think in all of life’s situations. There is no subject matter that compares in importance. Parents should at least thumb through the manuals in order to see that the subject matter could potentially influence the student’s conduct of life, for the duration of it. (And, by the way, you may want to opt out of tutoring if the principles of the manuals conflict with your own. But we try to choose principles – the main ones of which were listed in the first section of this pamphlet – so as to be as universal and non-exclusionary as possible.)

The parent’s attitude toward the tutoring will not be lost upon the student. If the parent feels that it is kind of annoying to keep up with, or a cute but minor activity, or just having someone to talk to, or something the other parent has decided on for some unknown and probably frivolous reason, etc. – then the tutor will have much more to overcome in the job of keeping the child’s morale up.

Shielding your child from saboteurs

In particular, please take seriously your duty to shield the student from family members or guests who would make fun of the student for doing the tutoring. Please do not underestimate

people's tendency to do this, perhaps out of envy, and perhaps out of the sheer impulse to bully.

Appointmentology

A major responsibility of the parent is to make sure that when the appointment time comes up, the phone gets answered and the appointment is kept. Unless at least 80% of scheduled appointments actually result in a phone session, the tutoring can not be continued. "No show" appointments are one of the major threats to the success of the tutoring. If the child can take care of keeping appointments on his or her own, then the parent can delegate this to the child. But most children aren't organized enough for this, and there's a need for the parent to ride herd over the appointment keeping.

If it becomes clear that an appointment cannot be kept, the parent should notify the tutor right away, rather than cancelling when the tutor calls at the appointed time. The tutor often sacrifices to carve out time in the schedule for the session – for example, by passing up social activities. To call at the appointed time only to hear that the session can not be held because of something the family was aware of hours ago is a negative experience for the tutor.

If you forget about an appointment and realize that you were a "no show," please call the tutor and explain, and reschedule, as soon as you become aware that the appointment was missed. Don't just wait for the tutor to call at the same time the next day.

You don't want to lose touch with the tutor. For that reason, you want to give the tutor all your phone numbers, email addresses, and mailing addresses, and get the same from the tutor. If you lose touch, try all the contact methods. If these fail, contact jillianstrayhorn@gmail.com (for Jillian Strayhorn) or jstray@gmail.com (for Joseph Strayhorn).

The Competing Activity problem: make or break decisions

If the child is involved in a very attractive competing activity at the time of the tutoring session, the child will resent having to interrupt this for the tutoring session. Please try to help the child be done with competing activities a little before the appointed time. For example, the child should not start watching a television program or dvd that the child hates to leave when the phone rings. You want the child's play dates to be before or after the phone call, so that the phone session doesn't interrupt the play session. It is much better to attempt to reschedule or to cancel a session for a day than to pull the child away from interaction with a peer under circumstances where the child resents and is embarrassed by the tutoring. How successfully you and the tutor can problem-solve together to try to reduce the "attractive competing activity" problem can make or break the whole enterprise.

Use the chance to relax, and don't be an auxiliary tutor...

During the session itself, the parent should usually not speak to the child, and should enforce the rule that other family members do the same. In particular, the parent should not try to be an auxiliary tutor, prompting the child to respond, correcting the child, urging the child to pay attention, and so forth. The child needs to give undivided attention to the tutor, and get directions and reinforcement from the tutor alone. You don't want the child trying to receive possibly contradictory directions from two people at once – it's very annoying for most children and for most

tutors and a definite negative influence on the tutoring.

What if the child is walking around, lying on his back with his feet up in the air, looking out the window, fiddling with a toy person, or otherwise looking inattentive during the session? It's usually best not to redirect the child, but to let the incentives of the session itself be sufficient. If the student can read the sections, answer the questions, and do the exercises, a good bit of multitasking can be tolerated.

But please help us not compete with “screens”

However, there's one exception to this. If the parent notices that the child is playing a video game or watching television or playing a hand-held video game or interacting with a screen in any other way, or listening to an ipod, the parent should explain to the tutor that the session needs to be interrupted for a bit while the parent enforces the “no electronic devices” rule. The parent should then let the tutor know when the session should be resumed.

Fine to listen in

It is fine for the parent to listen to the sessions as much as desired; we encourage this as part of the quality control process. If there is anything that is going on that you think is questionable, please feel free to call the tutor's supervisor and talk about it. You do not have to tell the tutor that you are listening. By the same token, if you think the tutor is doing a great job, please feel free to report this to the tutor's supervisor. If you don't know who the supervisor is, you can contact Jillian Strayhorn at jillianstrayhorn@gmail.com or Dr. Strayhorn at jstray@gmail.com.

Milestones and Celebrations

In the course of the tutoring, the tutor and the child will work toward certain milestones. The tutor will keep track of how many “sections” in the programmed manuals the child and the tutor have read, and celebrate round numbers, such as every 500 sections. The tutor will keep track of how many exercises the child has done, and which exercises the child has “mastered.” The tutor should let you know what the next milestone they are working toward. Your job is to celebrate and help to reinforce your child when he or she reaches a milestone. If you want to give your child a present, you might save it and give it at the time that the milestone is reached. If there is a special outing the child wants, you might make it contingent on the next milestone. Or, try just enthusiastically smiling and congratulating and marching and parading around the house, singing out the melody of “The Stars and Stripes Forever” or some such, saying hooray, patting the child on the back, telling other family members so they can join in the celebration, or somehow using your reinforcing skills in your own style to make your child feel good about his or her accomplishment. We will often send a little certificate and prize in the mail, and if you can help the child feel good about this, this too will go a long way toward making the enterprise successful. On the other hand, if you show no interest in the milestones your child passes, the child will find them much less reinforcing.

Questionnaires and reports

Another major responsibility of the parent is to fill out questionnaires that communicate how good the child's psychological functioning is, approximately every three months. This helps us figure out whether we are succeeding in our mission, or whether we need to change something. It is of paramount importance that we try to measure how well the student is doing, over time, so we can see whether the goals of our mission are being achieved. This takes some time. It should be

considered as part of the cost of the tutoring, to weigh before making the decision on whether to go forward with it.

There are some other questionnaires that are meant to remind you of some successful parenting principles, that we would also like you to fill out every three months. There is one questionnaire having to do with maintaining parental authority, and another having to do with maintaining a positive emotional climate in the relationship with the child and other family members. The questionnaires are checklists of ways that parents have used to achieve these goals. Parent training is one of the most effective ways of helping children, and this portion of the program is a “minimalist” approach to parent training. These questionnaires communicate to you techniques that are useful, and ask you the extent to which you are using them.

Reading the tutoring materials yourself

If you can read some of the training manuals for students yourself, and learn to speak the vocabulary of psychological skills, this will also greatly help. You can speak with your child about his courage skill triumphs, fortitude triumphs, productivity celebrations, acts of kindness, and so forth. The principles in the psychological skills manuals are valid at any age. If you have time, we highly recommend reading these manuals and getting as much of the family as possible involved in acting on the principles. Many of the exercises can be done between parent and child, and they can be lots of fun to do. Parents and children can do alternate reading together. Even if the tutor and the student have already read a certain manual, the manuals are meant to be re-read many times.

Reporting celebrations to the tutor

Another way in which you can help greatly is to watch for the “celebration-worthy” actions on the part of the child, the positive examples of the psychological skills, e.g. productivity, joyousness, kindness, honesty, fortitude, and mention them, preferably with a very enthusiastic tone of voice, when the child carries them out, and then report them to the child’s tutor in a brief conversation before or after the tutor’s session. If the tutor can jot these down in a celebrations diary, the child can benefit from an ever-growing bank of positive models drawn from the best examples of his/her own behavior. This is an extremely powerful means of positive influence over time.

One of the most powerful interventions covered in “parent management training” is for parents to turn as much attention as possible toward watching for the positive examples of psychological skills that the child does, getting excited about those positive examples, and formulating them in words and narrating them so that the child can hear them. If, each time the tutor calls, you answer the phone and share one celebration-worthy behavior that the child has done while the child is waiting to get on the phone, that in itself is likely to have a very powerful positive effect. It really helps, when doing this, to get very familiar with the names of the psychological skills you are giving examples of.

If you make a point of reporting celebrations to the tutor, and you are expecting the tutor to keep a written diary of the celebrations, make sure that you ask the tutor if the celebrations are being recorded in writing. We don’t want to have you expecting a written diary, while the tutor is expecting just to celebrate the positive actions verbally.

Danger from cell phones?

Please make sure that the child does not hold a cell phone right next to the head during the sessions. At the time this was written, the experts in the field had still not come to a unanimous conclusion about whether cell phone use may cause brain cancer. Until such a causal relationship has been disproved, we recommend, in order of preference, that children use a land line, or use a cell phone with a headphone and microphone plug-in attachment that moves the cell phone a couple of feet at least away from the body, or use a cell phone on speaker.

How long does psychoeducational tutoring go on?

The gains that come from the tutoring gradually cumulate over time. I would recommend going into it with the expectation of continuing for at least a year.

There is a growing number of programmed manuals, at least 6, which are full length books. There are several novels that have been “skill-ized,” or equipped with supplementary questions about the concepts discussed in the manuals. There are somewhere in the region of 60 exercises that can be mastered, and many of them should be repeated many, many times. There is a lot of work that can be done.

How long does it take to learn mathematics, or piano? People spend many years to become a true expert in these pursuits. Psychological skills are extremely important for successful living, and they too can without any waste consume years of study. But when there comes a time when the child and family feel ready to graduate from the program, that's when you stop!

One vision is that after someone has received tutoring for several years, that student would eventually learn to be a tutor for someone else, and continue the work in the tutor role.

How do trial runs work?

We want to work with children who are willing to participate in the tutoring, rather than those who are complaining, resisting, and not wanting to participate. When the program is first described, it is very difficult for the student, and even the parent, to imagine exactly what it will be like. So it is useful for there to be a “trial spin” of two or three weeks, or even more, before the student and the parents decide whether they really want to commit to this or not.

If during this trial period, the student decides that he or she very much dislikes the sessions, we can end the tutoring at any time. If the tutor repeatedly calls at the appointed time but the student is not available, the tutoring can be stopped at that point. If the parent discovers that being tied down to frequent appointment subtracts too much from the quality of life, again, the tutoring can end immediately.

But if everything seems to work out well during the trial period, then the tutor and the family can commit to making it continue to work out for a sustained effort.

Helping the tutor feel appreciated

Finally, in the words of one of the stories in *Programmed Readings for Psychological Skills*, keep in mind that “People can enjoy doing work if there is one person to say, ‘Thank you.’” The tutors in this program are interrupting their afternoon or evening plans, daily, often foregoing invitations, for the grand total remuneration of \$7.50 per day (before taxes). The tutors are largely

giving of their time for a larger purpose than financial reward. If a parent has nothing to say to the tutor, no tones of approval, no communication of gratitude, and acts as if the conversations with the tutor are annoyances that detract from more important activities, there are two negative effects. The first is a missed opportunity to help the tutor feel good about the many hours of labor devoted to the effort. The second is modeling for the child poor gratitude skills, and making it more likely that the child will see the tutoring as an imposition rather than as a very valuable gift. If the parent appreciates the tutor and insists that the child do the same, the tutoring is more likely to be successful.

Some of the parents of children who have made rather momentous gains in the tutoring have seemed to take those gains for granted, missed out on feeling pleasure from them, and moved on to the next imperfection in the child to worry about. One of the major principles we try to teach children is to “celebrate,” i.e. feel good about, the positive things that happen, whether they be due to luck, our own choices, or other people's choices. If you prime yourself to thoroughly celebrate any gains that accrue, there will be positive consequences for your child, the tutor, and last but not least, yourself.