

[washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)

Homework Problems? Help Is a Click Away.

By Pamela Gerhardt
Special to The Washington Post
Tuesday, September 7, 2004; Page C08

If you are like many parents, there's a good chance you can't remember the last time you solved for X, were never really confident about the rules for when to use a comma, and find that the hourly rate for private tutors can be a bit daunting.

Yes, summer has had its last hurrah, and that means the homework season has begun in earnest.

In the age of the Internet, however, online tutoring has become a viable option. The Prince George's County Memorial Library System, for example, offers an online, live tutoring service for students in grades 4 through 12. Tutors from across the country are online seven days a week, from 2 p.m. to midnight, for one-on-one help in math, science, social studies and English. They correspond with students by typing, using a virtual "chalkboard" and, sometimes, a microphone. The correspondence is anonymous and random -- though you can make an appointment for a specific tutor.

"We've basically broadened kids' interest in instant messaging," says George Cigale, CEO of Tutor.com, which offers the tutoring service, called Live Homework Help, to subscribing libraries. "Rather than chat about Britney Spears they can ask a tutor about their homework."

In Prince George's, students can go to the library's Web site (www.pgcmls.info), click on the icon "Got Homework?," enter their library card number, grade level and subject they need help in. They will then instantly be connected with a tutor.

"It's a really good system," says Christopher Ramsey, a 14-year-old freshman at St. Mary's Ryken who lives in Clinton. "Last year [while using the system] I started getting A's, where I had been getting C's and D's."

Ramsey and schoolmates were using accelerated math, a computer program, in class and came home each afternoon with assignments in their math textbooks. "There wasn't always time to go over the book in class," says Ramsey. "I'd get home and look at the assignment and realize I didn't understand the problem."

A few clicks later, he'd have his answer.

Tutor.com selects and trains the tutors, who include current and retired teachers, graduate students and college professors. Prospective tutors submit résumés and teaching samples that display how they would help a child solve a particular problem. Once they pass a security check, they receive technology training, participate in mock sample sessions, undergo a 30-day probation period and work with a mentor.

So is it possible that students could use the system to get someone to do their homework for them? Not at all, says Jennifer Kohn, vice president of marketing for Tutor.com. Tutors are trained to prevent such problems, she says.

"Every tutoring session is recorded and monitored," she adds. "If we see a tutor inadvertently giving an answer to a student, that tutor is reprimanded. . . . Our tutor policies and guidelines forbid [completing homework for students]. Even if a student asks a simple question, the tutor is trained to ask, 'Why do you need to know this?' rather than simply answer it."

Prince George's, the only county library system in the metro area that is offering the service, last school year engaged students in nearly 4,500 tutoring sessions. Nationally and internationally, 600 libraries subscribe to the service. Last academic school year, more than a quarter-million kids across the nation logged on to Live Homework Help, according to the service.

"Kids have always been afraid to ask 'stupid' questions," says Cigale, who before launching Tutor.com was vice president at the Princeton Review. "Here, kids can communicate their special problems and dive right in and focus."

Tutoring can be expensive. Online tutoring services such as eSylvan charge \$37 to \$41 an hour, plus a \$150 assessment fee. Prince George's Library spends \$40,000 a year for its subscription to Tutor.com. "It's not inexpensive, but it's worth it," says Micki Freeny, director of the library system. "It fills the gap for the lower-income student who can't afford a private tutor, but it's absolutely usable for all."

Rather than provide simple answers, "our goal is to help them think and to go away having learned something," says Pennsylvania-based tutor Tonya Allen, who taught for 10 years as a substitute teacher in elementary and middle schools and has a bachelor's degree in English. Tutors refer students with quick research questions ("What's the longest bridge in the world?") to the library's reference desk or other online resources (see sidebar).

"The information my teacher gives me sometimes I don't understand, but the tutor always answers my questions," says 11-year-old Destiny Holmes. A resident of Prince George's enrolled at SouthEast Academy of Scholastic Excellence in the District, she used the program about twice a month last year. Like Ramsey, her grades improved significantly.

"The year before she started using the service she had a lot of academic problems in school," says Destiny's mother, Chaney Holmes. "Last year, she made honor roll all four quarters."

Obstacles exist. Some kids type slowly or don't know how to ask their question.

"It took me a while to get used to typing back and forth," says Virginia-based tutor Susan Khatouri, a certified teacher with a bachelor's degree in microbiology who taught science and math for 13 years in Morocco. "Sometimes I would be sitting there at my computer wondering, 'Are you still there?' But the challenge shifted into a benefit -- students learn better communication skills.

"At the end of the session I make them repeat the answer in their own words. I know they've learned it," says Khatouri.

Adds Allen, "In addition to having learned the material, kids get comfortable with technology and using resources and asking good questions. It's a cliché, but every teacher loves that moment of recognition, that 'Aha!' look on a kid's face. They'll type, 'I get it now!' I answer back, 'I wish I had this when I was a kid.' "

© 2004 The Washington Post Company