



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN AP
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How the rich home-school their kids

Parents are ditching top private schools in favour of wall-to-wall private tutors. Sally Williams reports on the rise of bespoke education

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Alfie Friedman, 13, with Liane Grant, who teaches him English and business studies at his home in east London

TOM JACKSON



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Elliott Rickwood sits in an executive chair in the glass and chrome offices of a private equity company in Woking, Surrey. There is the click-clack of high heels. Surfaces are decorated with ornamental herbs in aluminium pots. There is a company gym. And yet Elliott's work isn't about wealthy investors but A-level practice papers. Elliott, 18, dropped out of his school some

Elliott is one of a growing number of children being home-educated. Nothing new in that - almost 37,000 children are schooled at home according to Freedom of Information requests to local councils; a rise of 65 per cent over the past 6 years. What's unusual about Elliott's brand of home education is the cost - up to £37,000 a year.

The right to educate your child at home gained momentum in the early Seventies as a consequence of Sixties progressive thinking and a growing interest in "alternative" education. The late Dick Kitto, for example - a founding member in 1976 of Education Otherwise, the charity that supports home educators - had worked at Dartington Hall, the experimental, coeducational boarding school in Devon. Famous - or, rather, infamous - for educating the offspring of freethinkers, bohemians or those of an educationally opinionated bent, Dartington Hall believed education should follow a child's interests rather than shape them. Uniforms were spurned, teachers called by their first names, class attendance was optional. Expecting pupils to memorise facts or learn anything by rote was regarded as oppressive.

But home education has changed. "It used to be a philosophical ethos. Now it's about children having some sort of difficulty at school," says Edwina Theunissen, spokesperson for Education Otherwise. Problems include bullying (real and virtual: cyberbullying is a growing problem), exam pressure, stress. But what's really striking is the impact of another development. Home tutoring means that (wealthy) parents now more than ever enjoy the ability to have their children educated quickly and easily at home. Wall-to-wall tutoring or tutored home schooling does not come cheap ("It's more than Eton," according to one parent), but it is increasingly an option. Emma Thompson and her husband, Greg Wise, for example, last year withdrew Gaia, their 16-year-old daughter, from her private school in north London in the run-up to her GCSEs. "She loves

tutors in a shed in their garden. Theunissen is seeing more parents taking children out of elite private schools. “It never used to happen,” she says. Home schooling hasn’t only become more respectable and mainstream; it’s become a commodity, something to be bought.

Emma Rickwood and her husband, Ian, do not see themselves as being remotely alternative. She studied hotel management and catering at City of Westminster College, and then worked in sales and marketing for a consumer goods company. He studied economics at the University of East Anglia and then worked for Procter & Gamble and PepsiCo, where he was European sales and marketing director. In 2006 he set up Henley Investments, a private equity and property firm, where she heads up residential developments. They live in a village just outside Guildford in Surrey and, as well as Elliott, they have a daughter, Charlie, 16.

Elliott was educated at Ripley Court School, a small private prep in Surrey. Then, aged 13, he went to Cranleigh, the independent day and boarding school in Surrey where he boarded from the age of 15. Elliott says that he enjoyed himself at Cranleigh. According to the Good Schools Guide, Cranleigh is “ideal for the sporty, energetic, sociable, independent and lovely child”, and Elliott identified with these qualities. He did well in his GCSEs and was studying biology, maths, French and economics at A level, but things began to unravel at the end of lower sixth.

“It started with my AS results,” he says. He didn’t do as well as he’d hoped. “I realised that what I had in mind for myself wasn’t going to happen.” He’d planned to go to America and study at

and decided that this was not what I wanted to do. I didn't feel motivated. I thought, 'This isn't making me happy; this is just draining. I am not enjoying it at all.'

He decided to leave and get a job on the basis that having no A levels was preferable to having three U grades. It was a housemaster who suggested he finish his A levels with the help of tutors.

Elliott left Cranleigh last November, and his home-schooling programme began in January. He has two tutors who teach him for a total of 12 hours over three days. On the two other days he works for his parents. "Mostly admin, some accounting, some spreadsheets," he says. This, too, he explains, will look good on his CV.

Elliott is tutored in the office rather than at home because his parents wanted him to have structure and company. He can also use the gym. Elliott, as it turns out, doesn't even see himself as a home schooler. "That refers to someone who hasn't gone to school and doesn't have friends. It's not like that. It's almost part of a routine as opposed to solely what I do."

Meanwhile, his mother, imbued with corporate values, is happy to see it in business terms. "It's almost as if we had a business need, and we had to find a resource," she says. "It's almost like buying consultancy." Even her transactions with the tutoring agency have been reassuringly corporate. "Steve [Spriggs, of William Clarence Education] is very clever, so I can speak to him on a business level and say, actually, I have this situation, this opportunity - how can you help? And the way he was able to fulfil that with his resources was tremendously reassuring, because the education world is always a bit of a mystery to people in business and he could talk my language."

The cost, she says, is roughly the same as Cranleigh - about £34,000 a year. "We obviously pay for fewer hours, but I think

element.” The “engagement element” of tutored home schooling, on the other hand, incorporates walks with Cookie. “We have a dog, and Elliott and his tutors take her by the canal. They bring a book and chat and chat and chat. That constant backwards and forwards is clearly resonating.”

Tutored home schooling is a logical conclusion to the recent boom in the use of private tutors. “I wanted to provide a great product and that included home schooling,” says Stephen Spriggs, who worked as a hedge-fund manager before setting up William Clarence Education, a private tuition firm, three years ago. “I was made redundant after five long years in the City and came across an advertisement for a part-time maths and economics tutor. I went along and it opened my eyes to an industry I didn’t even know existed,” he says.

Spriggs says that wealthy London-based foreigners account for 65 per cent of his business. “They want to go to the schools, but might not be able to go straightaway.” Other clients include child actors and professional athletes, as well as children turned off school by bullying or excessive pressure.

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It’s almost as if we had a business need and we had to find a resource

“I’ve had some who find boarding stressful,” says Rebecca Lawrence, a home-education consultant and herself an emblem of a growing market – she’s employed by numerous tutoring agencies and has clients in London, Manchester and Newcastle. She’s also noticed an increase in older students from private schools. “I think students probably feel more pressure at private school because the parents are paying for the education.” Prices range from £60-£100 an hour.

go to the best university or to be happy in the job of their choice. If you are paying for a top private school and you are not getting what you want - you are buying a service from them, after all - why not change it to something you are happy with?"

Freya Wilkinson, 17, feels grateful almost daily to be taught at home rather than school. A self-confessed "homebird", unlike her outgoing older sister, Olivia, 19, Freya lives in an elegant house in southwest London with her mother, Nadya, a former PA, and her father, Tim, who works for a large communications company and is mostly based in Dubai.

At 13, Freya went to a girls' boarding school in Ascot, which was quite a shift because she'd spent the previous two years at a day school in Kuwait, where her father had been posted. Olivia, who'd opted to stay and board rather than go to Kuwait, was already at the school having a riotous time.

"I was quite excited, because I'd seen Olivia when we came back for school visits and it all looked so much fun," Freya recalls. "But I was nervous about boarding, because I never really liked being away from home for longer than a day." At that time her father was working in Dubai, and the plan was to have a London base and for her parents to live mostly in Dubai.

She started in September 2012 to find a particularly high-performing year. "There were two Russian girls, one Spanish girl, five Chinese and Japanese girls, plus three other English girls and every single one of them was so clever," says Freya. "They would all be doing work after prep hours, because we had exams and then more exams. And they were all A* students and I am just not." Freya is dyslexic - not severely so, but enough to experience the misery of failure when compared with her more academic peers.

"She came home one weekend in her second term and said, 'I'm not going back,'" says her mother. "She was going to lessons in

one.” It was a dismal spiral.

Freya left in January 2013 and a series of day schools followed. First, a Catholic girls’ school in London with a caring ethos. But unfortunately the nurturing air was underpinned by Catholic dogma. While not exactly confrontational, Freya “does like a good debate”, says her mother. “I wanted to argue with them. I wanted to be like, ‘No, that’s not how it is.’ But obviously I didn’t,” says Freya. The caring started to feel a lot like suffocation. So Freya left. In September 2014, she went to an expensive crammer with a broad age range (15 to 20) and a hands-off philosophy. “Obviously you had to come in for registration, but how you worked and what you did within your free periods was down to you,” says Freya.

Freya Wilkinson, 17, with tutor Omari Eccleston-Brown (English literature and classics)
TOM JACKSON

Freya cut back on GCSEs. Her contemporaries were sitting 11. She was sitting 6. But when she sat her mocks, “Everything set off again,” she says. Panic attacks, insomnia, shutting herself in the bathroom. “The trigger is exams,” says her mother.

do well, my life would be over. I would be homeless. I was actually very scared I was going to end up homeless.

“It’s [the pressure] built into school,” she continues, “especially public schools. It’s like a factory where they get you in, they get you your grades and they push you out.” Success is measured in A*s. “It’s about getting you into one of the best universities.” Freya left at the end of the spring term.

“It was hard,” says Nadya, “because it was a vast expense, hence why Tim is out there earning money to pay for the mortgage and school fees. And when, after all this investment, you are still not getting the end product you would hope to get, you do suddenly question whether you’ve made the right decision, because what suits one child doesn’t necessarily suit another.”

Help arrived when the family decided to try home schooling. Freya’s programme, organised by Simply Learning Tuition, started in September 2015 with two tutors teaching three GCSEs – maths and double English at a cost of £1,500-£2,000 a month. Almost overnight Freya went from dreading lessons to happily sitting down to an hour of maths in a makeshift classroom on the first floor.

“I’ve found out that I am actually much smarter than I thought I was,” she says. “I am easily capable of passing my exams. It’s a simpler way of learning for me. You go slower; you go through everything in a very detailed way.” She’s discovered an interest in acting and goes to drama classes. She is also spared the recurring social death she suffered in class – “The embarrassment of raising my hand and saying the wrong thing,” she explains.

Did Nadya ever consider tutoring her daughter? “Gosh, no,” she replies. “That never crossed my mind. Me trying to teach Freya would not work. It’s been a total change of routine as it is.”

When Freya was at school, her mother would run errands, go to

don't say, 'Do your work.' She's got to deal with the tutor."

A characteristic of tutored home schooling, as opposed to the more traditional kind, is its short-term nature. "Generally speaking, because the socialisation aspect of school and interacting with other children is so important, unless there is a very clear reason for it, we don't tend to recommend it as a full-term option," says Anna Keogh, director of a private-tuition company called Enjoy Education. "We always say that once you go down the home-school route, you've got to get back into mainstream at some point," adds Stephen Spriggs.

And yet Alfie Friedman, 13, who has had wall-to-wall home tutoring since last October, plans to continue for the next five years, through GCSEs and beyond. He lives in east London with his mother, the actor, director and singer Maria Friedman, his father, the actor and singer Adrian Der Gregorian, and his brother, Toby, 21. He also has a live-in "manny", Honza, who now has a new role as a sports tutor. They play squash together once a week.

“

It's the pressure in public schools. It's like a factory

Alfie, who has high-functioning autism and a lively, demanding intelligence, went to a private school in south London for children with learning difficulties from the age of 6 to 10, and then, at the advice of the school, to a mainstream private school a 40-minute drive away. "Every single day Alfie would be ready for school, and pretty well three or four times a week I would have to pick him up for one reason or another," his mother recalls.

Autism is associated with hypersensitivity to noise and smells,

Alfie explains. “We hear the same things as anyone else, but are more alert. Like, if a plane went over, Mum wouldn’t think anything of it; she’d just keep learning her lines. But I hear the plane and the car and the gate being opened. I am pretty much alert 24/7. That causes some sleeping problems. But I have an audiobook, so that helps.”

“He had issues with other children, noise, overstimulation and smells - they made him sick with headaches,” says his mother. “The first few days were great,” says Alfie, “but friends became enemies after that.

“At lunchtime I had a packed lunch and wouldn’t sit near anybody, just because they would be talking about something irrelevant. A lot of people thought I was unsociable,” he continues. “But if you don’t want to talk to someone about a subject because it’s boring ... I don’t want to be part of that conversation.”

“He became the saddest child,” says his mother. “If we were driving, he would hide in between the seats on the floor as we drove past boys or the school. And then he would get out and you could see him steeling himself for the day. He was like a grey child, no laughter, no skipping, no nothing.” He’d hiss like an animal. Kick the chairs. Teachers would refuse to teach him.

Maria worked to keep him in mainstream education. “I very much wanted both my children [Toby also has learning difficulties] to be people who could manage in that environment. I’d speak to all those mothers in the playground, watching their children fly and watching my own children drown.” She recruited a tutor so that Alfie could have one-to-one lessons at school. Therapists and psychiatrists all suggested strategies. “I tried to adapt that school, shove it into the shape that he required, but ultimately he was surrounded by people charging up and down corridors.”

Alfie Friedman with Liane Grant
TOM JACKSON

Today, Alfie is thriving at home thanks largely to a team of three tutors (reduced from six) covering such subjects as maths, geography, history, coding, business studies and art.

“We took him out of school in October and I went to Enjoy Education and said, ‘I want a programme,’ ” says Maria. Lessons take place in the sitting room-cum-dining room in the basement, which opens onto the garden, and Alfie plans to sit 11 GCSEs. His day is structured as if he were at school, with a timetable of lessons and a strict schedule with built-in study periods and an hour for lunch. Maria has gone for the formal option. “There should be no part that is pandering,” she says. “The rest of the world is going to school. So should he.” He hangs out with friends once a week at Chickenshed, a theatre company in north London. This will increase to two days from September. “Just to boost his social life,” says his mother. “He needs to keep being made aware of other people and their needs.”

“

I can wear what I want – so long as it’s not

viomas

completely, totally on his terms, so I can always monitor how well he is paying attention and can keep questioning him on different aspects, some of which are very advanced,” he says. “I wouldn’t, in a million years, be able to dedicate that level of attention to someone in a mainstream school.”

“John says I need to be ready when he arrives, but he doesn’t care what I wear as long as it’s not pyjamas,” says Alfie, adding that one of the best things about being home schooled is the clothing. “I don’t need to feel I’m being discriminated against for wearing trousers that are too long, for example, or being constrained by a really cold shirt.”

“It is very, very expensive [about £37,000 a year],” says Maria. “It’s more expensive than Eton, and Alfie doesn’t even do a full day. But it’s worth every single penny. It’s given us a life.”



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Dr John Finlay 7 hours ago

I guess these people will never be scientists, medics or vets due to the impossibility of providing laboratory facilities for any advanced courses in A level sciences and the practical expertise that these courses demand. Home schooling cuts down your options.

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