

Pre-K Prep: How Young Is Too Young for Tutoring? --- Fast-Growing Service Drills Tots in Math and Reading

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HER TINKERBELL SNEAKERS dangling from her chair, Alyssa Lee is bent so far over her work that her forehead almost reaches the desktop. "That's an eight, silly," she gently teases her instructor, who is correcting the child's painstaking effort to write the number two.

This isn't first grade. It isn't even kindergarten. This is Junior Kumon, a nationwide tutoring program created specifically for children as young as 2 years old. Like thousands of other tiny students, Alyssa, who turned four yesterday, attends preschool but also comes to a Kumon center in San Francisco, where she lives, twice a week. "I want to prepare her for kindergarten," explains Lily Lee, Alyssa's mother.

Tutoring for children is soaring in popularity right now, driven partly by legislative changes and by a generation of hyperanxious parents. While most of these services still are aimed at older kids of middle- or high-school age, one of the most active segments of the market is at the young end of the scale. Score!, a program for students through the 10th grade offered by Washington Post Co.'s Kaplan Inc., say the ranks of clients aged four to six have swelled during the past few years, now comprising 15% to 20% of Score!'s total enrollment. Industrywide, Boston education-consulting firm Eduventures forecasts that the estimated \$4 billion market will grow an average 12% to 15% a year through 2007.

So far, however, Kumon is the only major firm to target the Sesame Street set. The strategy is stirring controversy among educators who say Kumon's structured academic drills defy years of research on how young children learn best. "There's a mistaken notion that education is a race," says David Elkind, professor of child development at Tufts University.

In a typical tutoring arrangement, Junior Kumon students come in twice a week for 15-minute sessions covering math or reading. The children sit down at horseshoe-shaped tables and do worksheets and exercises, sometimes with the direct help of an instructor. The youngsters come in whenever they want, so there is no preset class time. Prices range from \$80 to \$110 a month, depending on the region, and the children gradually progress through levels that Kumon says gives them the skills needed to read and do basic math, such as understanding the phonetics of the alphabet.

Kumon says its youngest students gain a big head start over their peers, a gap that widens as they graduate into Kumon offerings for older kids. Each quarter, Kumon issues a list of its top 20 students in the U.S. at every age group, including two-year-olds (a clientele that may not even be potty-trained). Currently, Kumon boasts that its top two-year-old is doing multiplication and division. Another two-year-old is doing first-grade grammar.

"Our focus is instilling within them the pre-reading and numeracy skills they need before they go to school," says Andrea Pastorok, the education specialist for Kumon who helped to develop the Junior Kumon program.

Launched last year, Junior Kumon has been a big hit for Kumon North America, the U.S. unit of Japan's KIE Corp., a closely held education empire with 22,000 centers around the world. Known in Japan as a juku, or cram school, the company is one of the many providers of afterschool programs there to help prepare students for that nation's rigorous entrance exams.

Traditionally, Kumon franchises in the U.S. focused on tutoring children who already were in school (though

some centers would sometimes informally tutor younger children, too). Last year, however, the company formally launched Junior Kumon. Despite no advertising -- it isn't even mentioned on the company's Web site, www.kumon.com -- Junior Kumon says its franchisees are having little difficulty persuading parents to sign up their preschoolers.

While toddler tutors remain a rarity, the practice is catching on in Manhattan, where competition to get into a handful of prestigious kindergartens is fierce. Preschool directors and admissions officers there say despite their repeated and strong objections, a few parents are surreptitiously hiring tutors to teach toddlers how to ace a standardized test used by many private schools.

Economists attribute the increased interest in tutoring of all stripes to declines in family size and growing wealth, leading parents to pour resources and hopes into fewer children.

Some specialists in early-childhood education criticize some of the techniques used in Junior Kumon, particularly its reliance on worksheets and on having young children sitting at a classroom table. They say its methods fly in the face of evidence that very young children learn best when lessons are embedded in rich play environments. Some worry that programs such as this could turn kids off school by turning academic subjects into narrow, less-interesting skill sets.

"People set up a false dichotomy between academics and play," says Steve Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University. He notes that playing with blocks, for example, teaches children not only math principles but also spatial relationships. "It's far from ideal," adds Sally Shaywitz, a Yale pediatrics professor whose extensive work on reading education is cited by Kumon executives as being influential in shaping Junior Kumon's prereading materials. "I'd prefer children to be in an environment that respects their developmental level more."

Kumon's executives and instructors staunchly defend Junior Kumon, saying the program is low-pressure, includes hands-on materials such as magnetic number boards and asks its young students to work only in short, 15-minute sessions. They note that parents are heavily involved, helping the students with their work and reading books to them every day. They say its organized system also hews to Kumon's greater principle of allowing each child to work at his or her own pace -- and that students gain in self-esteem as their skills rapidly grow. "We are blind to age. We only see ability," says Anita Tom, an instructor at Kumon's San Francisco franchise.

Although its demographic base is widening, many of Kumon's parents are Asian immigrants, who Kumon says bring with them the realization that small children are more capable than Americans might give them credit for. Kumon boasts that 40% of its 150,000 students (a number that includes tots all the way up to high-school students) are performing at an accelerated rate to their grade level.

As a rule, researchers agree that the abilities of young children often go underestimated, and that the great majority of preschools fail to offer the kind of enriched play activities long regarded as ideal. They say one-on-one instruction also is helpful.

However, some child-development researchers question Kumon's efforts to accelerate skill acquisition. For instance, Mr. Elkind, the Tufts professor, points out that in Scandinavian countries, where children don't get any formal training in reading until around age 7, literacy rates are nearly 100% and reports of reading problems are lower than in the U.S.

Junior Kumon teachers don't shrink from offering their students a challenge. "Go do the number board for me," the San Francisco teacher instructs. "What number will go you up to?"

"Thirty?" offers the little girl.

The instructor encourages her to go all the way to 70, and the little girl dutifully turns to the bigger board, which she eventually completes.