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Why kids need to fail to succeed in school

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How much influence do parents really have on their children's success in life? My own view has always been: far less than they think, and far less than the experts tell them. I've always thought that how your kids turn out depends a lot more on their genes and their IQ than whether you played them Baby Beethoven or sent them to all-day kindergarten.

Various experiments with education reform tend to confirm my fatalistic view. Every so often, some shiny new idea comes along – self-esteem! prizes for all! multiple learning styles! – that is supposed to turn every failing kid into a winner. None of these fads appears to have the least effect on student achievement.

At the same time, the problem of failing kids is one of the most pressing issues of our time. Children from stable higher-income families have a huge advantage over children from unstable, lower-income families. After 40 years of trying, we know how hard it is to narrow that gap. But we owe it to those kids to keep trying – and to ourselves as well.

Paul Tough is a realist about all this. But he is also an optimist. He has spent more time with disadvantaged kids than any journalist I know, and he has learned a lot about the factors of success. He has learned how two kids of equal abilities can have wildly different outcomes, and how kids with certain character traits can narrow the achievement gap.

His findings offer some surprising answers to the questions every parent asks: How much do test scores really matter? What's the real difference between students who graduate from university and students who drop out? What role does parental encouragement play in children's achievement, and what kind of encouragement do they need?

Mr. Tough's new book, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character*, combines compelling findings in brain research with his own first-hand observations on the front lines of school reform. He argues that the qualities that matter most to children's success have more to do with character – and that parents and schools can play a powerful role in nurturing the character traits that foster success. His book is an inspiration. It has made me less of a determinist, and more of an optimist.

You argue, quite convincingly, I think, that IQ is not destiny, far from it. For kids to succeed in life, they need certain character traits – and one of them is what you call "grit."

Yes, it's a psychological category discovered by Angela Duckworth at the University of Pennsylvania. She actually started out studying self-control and demonstrated that it has a huge impact on kids' grade point average. But she came to think that there was some other skill out there that she hadn't quite put her finger on – not just self-control but having a passion for something and a determination to stick with it, despite setbacks.

She named that grit, and she invented this thing called the "grit scale." It's a short little questionnaire about how likely you are to stick with projects. And she found that it's incredibly predictive, that people are pretty honest about their grit levels and that those who say, "Yes, I really stick with tasks," are much more likely to succeed, even in tasks that involve a lot of what we think of as IQ: She gave the test to students who were in the National Spelling Bee and the kids with the highest grit scores were more likely to persist to the later rounds; she gave it to freshmen at the University of Pennsylvania and grit helped them persist in college; she even gave it to cadets at West Point and it predicted who was going to survive this initiation called "Beast Barracks."

So, in some ways, grit just means what we think it means – what John Wayne said that it meant – but it has something to do with academic persistence as well. It's not just smarts, it's the ability to stick with a task that makes a difference.

Resistance, persistence, perseverance, stick-to-itiveness ...

Yes, and I would add passion. It's not just dutiful stick-to-itiveness. It's people who really want to finish – not because someone has told them to, but because they're dedicated to it.

That's very new in a world where we've raised kids based on the self-esteem movement. So how do you teach grit? Can you?

I think you can. There's not yet a clear path, but it seems like there are a few things that help. The main one is helping kids learn how to manage failure and adversity. That involves two things: One is just making sure they actually have some failure and adversity in their lives. Especially for high-achieving, high-income kids, that's often what's missing.

These kids are so overly protected that they don't have the opportunity to overcome setbacks. It's also giving them that experience in a setting that lets them not just be disappointed and hurt by failure, but learn from it.

I also spent a lot of time in some really poor neighbourhoods in American cities. In those neighbourhoods, there's no absence of failure or adversity. These kids confront it all the time. But some of them are just beaten down by it. So it's not simply the volume of failure in your life – it's giving kids an opportunity to fail productively, to grow and learn from it.

You're really talking about two ends of the socio-economic spectrum. So tell me a little bit more about why failure – productive failure – is so important to character development.

There is this study that came out recently from a few psychologists that talks about the number of adverse experiences kids have growing up. This not really serious adversity, just run-of-the-mill setbacks. What's interesting is that the kids who experience more of those, generally, find that their psychological well-being goes down – but so do kids who experience no adversity.

Where I saw this most clearly, I think, was in a chess class I spent a lot of time following at a fairly low-income school in Brooklyn. The teacher, Elizabeth Spiegel, has figured out that chess is the perfect laboratory for learning how to manage failure, because in chess you fail all the time. No matter how good you are, you lose about half your games. And even when you win, you're making terrible mistakes all the time. So you have to figure out a strategy for dealing with failure.

So there are kids who, when they try to play chess and start to fail, they just decide, "Oh, I don't really care about chess. I'm losing too much." And there are those who beat themselves up about it. Neither group does all that well. But a third group, which Ms. Spiegel tries to develop, is made up of kids who take their failures very seriously but divorce themselves from it a little bit; they say, "Okay, let me actually analyze the mistakes that I made: What can I do differently next time?"

There's something about that process that actually echoes certain types of therapy. Once you start talking about therapy with kids, I think it makes everybody a little bit anxious. But I'm not talking about lying on a couch and talking about your parents. I'm talking about cognitive therapies that let you look at your own processes and say, "Okay, what are the mistakes I keep making and what can I do differently?"

Your writing on these chess kids is absolutely gripping. First of all, this teacher takes kids from low-income, low-achieving environments and turns them into high-performance players who can take on anybody in the United States. But she also doesn't coddle them. She's very, very tough. She bawls the kids out. She'll say, "You played that too fast," or 'You made a stupid mistake. Why are you still making that stupid mistake?" What does that tell us about how we've gone wrong coaching kids to cope with adversity?

I think there is a real difference between developing self-esteem and developing character, and in the past few decades we've become confused about that. Yes, if you want to develop kids' self-esteem, the best way to do it is to praise everything they do and make excuses for their failures.

But if you want to develop their character, you do almost the opposite: You let them fail and don't hide their failures from them or from anybody else – not to make them feel lousy about themselves, but to give them the tools to succeed next time.

I think in some ways we know this, because lots of us have had that experience with a teacher or a coach or a music tutor; the ones that we remember are the ones who were tough on us, not mean or belittling, but the ones who said, "No, this isn't good enough. You can do better." That's an incredibly powerful message for a kid to hear. It's not wounding. Just looking at my own three-year-old and remembering my own experiences, when kids feel like they've got a teacher or a parent really on their side, then I think they're very much willing to hear some very tough messages.

The larger message, then, is how much non-cognitive character traits matter to success in life. For example, making it through university. What's the difference between kids who drop out and kids who finish? You argue that it's not intelligence …

It is something else. There's not a great body of research on persistence and grit and curiosity and optimism as separate categories. I think those are all really important character strengths, but research generally tends to lump them together.

So, at this stage, we have to look at what we know about non-cognitive skills in general. College persistence offers some clear evidence: IQ matters a lot in terms of what your freshman GPA is, but graduating from college has much more to do with character strengths like persistence, perseverance and grit. It's that ability to deal with setbacks, because in college you're always going to have setbacks – whether it's not being able to pay a tuition bill, or not getting along

with your roommate, or failing a class.

There are always moments where kids can drop out, especially kids from low-income neighbourhoods where they're the first person in their family to go to college. The whole system is kind of pushing them to fail, so in order for them to make it through college, they need a huge amount of non-cognitive skill.

It's interesting to think about how kids can be almost pushed to fail, or inherently succeed. You write about fascinating science looking at the connection between infant brain chemistry and adult psychology – at least in rats. Should we look to rats as model parents?

An interesting question. Michael Meaney and a team of neuroscientists at McGill University have discovered some amazing things about mother rats and their kids. When their pups are stressed out, certain mother rats do something very specific – they lick and groom them to calm them down.

Even when these pups are weaned from their mothers and kept separate until adulthood, the ones who have had warm, attached relationships as infants do much better at all sorts of skills: They are better at mazes, they are braver and more curious, less nervous in all sorts of ways. That research parallels a lot of what has been done on the importance of secure (human) attachment between a parent and a child in the first year of life. There are huge correlations between a child's attachment style in that first year and what they'll be like in kindergarten, how well they'll get along at camp with peers, even how likely that child is to graduate or drop out of high school.

So should we be licking and grooming our kids?

I think that we should, in a way. I do think that for infants – and I was reading all this research just as my wife and I had our first child – the most important thing is that warm, stable attachment relationship with a parent. I should say that the word attachment in parenting has become a little confused in the past few years. I don't mean the kind of super-attachment parenting that gets you nursing your child on the cover of Time magazine. This is basic, good parenting, being responsive to an infant's cues, coming when they cry ... but it makes a huge difference early on.

That's very different from the message we were just talking about – about getting tough on your

kids. I don't think that is the right message for parents of infants. One of the conclusions I've reached is that, in the first year or two of life, kids don't need adversity, they need comfort and support. But then part of what makes parenting so complicated is that right at the stage I'm at now, my son is 3, kids' needs shift; now, my son needs to prove his independence and his ability to deal with problems. But when a child has that attachment experience in the first year or so, the research shows they have a lot more confidence to be independent and bold and curious when they get to toddlerhood, and childhood and adolescence.

That's a big issue for people thinking about the equality gap between rich kids and poor kids.

Yes, for kids growing up in low-income neighbourhoods, having a secure attachment relationship can make a huge difference. There's evidence that it serves as a kind of insulation from all of the other problems of poverty. It can't wipe them out altogether – and it doesn't mean we don't have to think about food and shelter and those things – but it's striking how much it matters.Think about Barack Obama. He wasn't super-poor, but he was raised by a single mother and they were on food stamps for a while. But he had this mother who was incredibly devoted to him and worked really hard and pushed him really hard to succeed – so adversity didn't hold him back but, arguably, may have pushed him forward. From a public-policy point of view, this is a challenge, because we don't really know how to get government to help improve attachment relationships in low-income homes. And I think we're also not quite sure whether that's something we should be doing. It makes us nervous to think about that as a public responsibility. But I think it's something that we really need to think about, and there are lots of people finding ways to intervene and help families improve their relationships.

The other huge difficulty has been clearly raising achievement levels of low-income kids. Almost everything that has been tried – more teachers, smaller classes, all that stuff – hasn't worked. But you seem to have found some extraordinary educators turning underperforming, undermotivated, low-income kids into successful university students.

Yes. The one young woman I write about at most length is named Kewauna Lerma from the South Side of Chicago. She had a really rough life growing up. Raised by a single mother without a lot of money, she moved around a lot, spent some time homeless and got into lots of trouble as a kid – you know, acted out, got put in the "slow" class in sixth grade. She was heading on a

downward trajectory. But then, partly because of a conversation she had with her mother and great-grandmother, but also because of a program she enrolled in called OneGoal, she is now about to start her sophomore year in college at Western Illinois University.

I met Kewauna when she was a junior in high school in Chicago and she had just started working with this program. She described this huge transition – transformation – she had made. Some of it, I think, was her innate character strength. But OneGoal is also specifically designed to help kids in high-poverty neighbourhoods leverage their non-cognitive strengths to overcome their disadvantages. Like Ms. Spiegel's chess players, they learn to really focus on their shortcomings, to think about what skills they have and what they're missing and how they are going to overcome that gap. In this case, they're specifically applying that thinking to college: where am I going to go, what am I going to need when I'm there, how am I going to graduate.

The four-year graduation rate for kids on the South Side of Chicago is terrible, it's 2 to 3 per cent. But right now, 85 per cent of Kewauna's cohort is entering their sophomore year of college. So they're not graduates yet, they may all drop out this year, but it really seems like that what they learn in their OneGoal classes in high school gives them exactly the skills they need to make it through college. And that's going to change the trajectories of their lives in a huge, huge way.

This suggests that it's possible to help disadvantaged kids make up the achievement gap by developing their non-cognitive skills.

Yes. A lot of these kids are still not testing fantastically in high school. In fact, some of them aren't testing well at all. But they're able to compensate for that with these non-cognitive skills and, as a result, are on track to graduate from college. That challenges my understanding of what you need to graduate from college. It's not just the smartest kids who graduate, it's kids who are able to persist.

So you don't need to be a genius but you do need grit.

Absolutely. And I think that's true in the workplace too. You need a certain amount of intelligence to survive in any workplace. But we all know people who are really smart but don't have a good work ethic, or just can't organize their thoughts, or have terrible social intelligence, and so don't do well. We also know people who aren't necessarily going to score high on IQ tests

but have all of these other skills – and they're not just window dressing, they're important in getting tasks done.

For the kids we've been talking about, the same persistence and character strength that get them through college are going to help them in whatever else they do. Among my peers, graduating from college didn't mean that much. Everyone expected you to and you expected yourself to and you could still graduate and have no idea who you were or where you were supposed to go. But for these kids, what they have to overcome to get to college gives them this huge confidence and drive. It's not empty self-esteem, they've really proved to themselves that they are able to do something that everyone else thought was impossible.

Let's talk about your own education for a minute. At the end of your book, we learn that you actually dropped out of university – twice. You never graduated.

True.

So you could say you were a classic example of character failure – you just couldn't stick with it – except that those experiences also gave you chances to succeed in unexpected ways.

I hadn't spent a lot of time thinking about that period until I started working on this book. And then I started thinking about it a lot. Interestingly enough, the work I was doing gave me two different ways to look at it: one that was harder on me and one that was more positive.

The harder point of view came from sitting in that classroom on the South Side of Chicago with Kewauna and her classmates. They were all applying to colleges and were so focused, so thoughtful about what they wanted to get out of it, and so determined to persist – so much more so than I had been at that stage. I just felt bad about myself. There's all this research about how kids drop out of college because of a lack of non-cognitive skills, and I have to admit I think that that was a big factor for me. I did not have a lot of persistence and grit at that time.

But then, as I thought about it more, I was also influenced by the thinking of Dominic Randolph, the head of Riverdale Country School, a private school in New York. He talks about how character is built through failure, especially for kids who are real successes as adolescents in the narrow realm of academics. If they don't have an opportunity to really push themselves

and struggle and overcome failure, they're going to go through life lost.

I think what happened to me in college, both times, is that I felt, in a way that I wasn't quite able to articulate then, that I was missing that opportunity to really challenge myself. I think if I had had other character strengths, I might have been able to find a way to do that at college. I don't think it was inevitable and necessary for me to drop out. But I do think that what I did instead was, you know, this crazy idea of bicycling alone as an 18-year-old from Atlanta to Halifax …

Right, to prove something.

At the time it sort of seemed like, "Oh, this will be fun." But looking back, I really think I was trying to give myself a challenge. This is the time of life when people join the army, go away to war. … My life wasn't at risk, but it was hard: I didn't know what I was doing and I had to figure things out for myself at every turn.

It didn't change my life and make everything clear thereafter, but I do think it shook me up in an important way and helped push me to make some better decisions about what I wanted to do.

I had the same feeling as those kids from the South Side of Chicago when they graduate from college – that feeling of confidence that comes from really challenging themselves and succeeding.

You got to Halifax.

I got to Halifax. Shangri-la.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

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