

How Children Succeed

Many of you are already aware of Paul Tough's latest book, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*, published last summer to a great deal of favorable press. If you missed it, though, you might be interested in what the [New York Times](#) had to say about it.

Tough asserts that we are raising our children today in a culture saturated with an idea that he calls the cognitive hypothesis: "the belief, rarely expressed aloud but commonly held nonetheless, that success today depends primarily on cognitive skills—the kind of intelligence that gets measured in IQ tests—and that the best way to develop these skills is to practice them as much as possible, beginning as early as possible." Drawing upon the huge body of research in the past few years—from economists, educators, psychologists and neuroscientists—he calls into question this assumption. Instead, as he points out, we are finding that "what matters... is whether we are able to help [our children] develop a very different set of qualities, a list that includes persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit, and self-confidence. Economists refer to these as non-cognitive skills, psychologists call them personality traits, and the rest of us sometimes think of them as character." Tough—along with the psychologists and educators he bases his work on (including Carol Dweck and Martin Seligman, whom we've mentioned in earlier emails)—believes that these traits are entirely malleable: they are skills you can learn, practice and teach.

Tough is engaging, thorough and self-deprecating. A two-time college drop-out himself (from both Columbia, in favor of a cross-country cycling trip, and McGill, in order to take an internship at Harper's Magazine), he admits that "it hasn't escaped my attention that many of the researchers I've written about in this book... have identified dropping out of high school or college as a symptom of substandard non-cognitive ability: low grit, low perseverance, bad planning skills." But the lesson he takes away from his own experience—and a common theme for most of these same researchers—is the importance of learning to deal with failure (in his case, his failure to earn a degree). He points to the very real concern that children are so overly protected from adversity that they aren't developing the ability to overcome failure and learn from it. Even our exceptionally high achieving students, who have "worked very hard but never had to make a difficult decision or confront a real challenge... [are entering] the adult world competent but lost."

When we shield our children from failure—and, granted, this tends to come from the best of intentions—we unwittingly rob them of the opportunity to learn resilience. Down the line, when life inevitably throws them a curveball, our adult children may not have the skills to cope. These tools are best acquired while our teenagers still have the safety net of home.

The Staples Resilience Project is an ongoing endeavor by the Staples Guidance Department aimed to promote the well-being of our students and foster a positive, inclusive school community.

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