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How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, And The Hidden Power Of Character

how children
succeed

PAUL TOUGH



Synopsis

The story we usually tell about childhood and success is the one about intelligence: Success comes to those who score highest on tests, from preschool admissions to SATs. But in *How Children Succeed*, Paul Tough argues for a very different understanding of what makes a successful child. Drawing on groundbreaking research in neuroscience, economics, and psychology, Tough shows that the qualities that matter most have less to do with IQ and more to do with character: skills like grit, curiosity, conscientiousness, and optimism. *How Children Succeed* introduces us to a new generation of scientists and educators who are radically changing our understanding of how children develop character, how they learn to think, and how they overcome adversity. It tells the personal stories of young people struggling to stay on the right side of the line between success and failure. And it argues for a new way of thinking about how best to steer an individual child - or a whole generation of children - toward a successful future. This provocative and profoundly hopeful book will not only inspire and engage listeners; it will also change our understanding of childhood itself.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Following the footsteps of Jonathan Kozol, Paul Tough employs his significant storytelling abilities to help readers see and feel the plight of children, families and communities trapped in cycles of failure and poverty. *How Children Succeed* challenges some conventional wisdom on causes of failure (poverty, teacher quality) and contends that nurturing character in children and young adults is the

key to success. As a former NYC Teaching Fellow who has lived and worked in multiple communities of cyclical poverty, I'm convinced that Tough has nailed some critical pieces of breaking those cycles. Here is the argument in brief:=====There exists in our society a troubling and growing achievement gap between the have and the have-nots. The cause of that gap is neither merely poverty nor IQ, but a specific set of non-cognitive skills including executive function and conscientiousness, which Tough calls "character." Children who acquire these skills can break historic cyclical patterns of failure. Malleability of Character and Intelligence=====Whereas IQ is hardly malleable, executive function and character strengths - specifically grit, self-control, zest, social intelligence, gratitude, optimism, curiosity and conscientiousness - are far more malleable. These skills are better predictors of academic performance and educational achievement than IQ and therefore ought to be the direct target of interventions.

Attachment and Lifelong Health=====Tough sees two key areas of influence for those who care for those trapped in cycles of poverty. The first is secure early attachment to parents. "The effect of good parenting is not just emotional or psychological, the neuroscientists say; it is biochemical" (28). Specifically, children who experience high levels of stress but NOT responsive and nurturing parents suffer from a range of lifelong health and mental health issues. However, "When mothers scored high on measures of responsiveness, the impact of those environmental factors on their children seemed to almost disappear" (32). Tough cites one study in which "early parental care predicted which students would graduate even more reliably than IQ or achievement test scores" (36). Importantly, interventions that focus on promoting stronger parent-child relationships in high risk groups (including one in which just 1 of 137 infants studied demonstrated secure attachment at the outset) have shown promising impact. Of the 137 children in the study, 61% of those in the treatment group formed secure attachment by age 2, compared with only 2% of the control group.

Adolescent Character Formation=====Paul Tough highlights the work of school and support programs that intentionally focus on forming the character strength habits that enable children to learn well in schools, form healthy relationships, and avoid the destructive decisions and behavior patterns modeled in their communities. Here, too, Tough sees a ray of hope. Just as early intervention with parents and young children yields wide ranging benefits for families in poverty, so character interventions in adolescence can and do enable young adults surrounded by cycles of poverty to learn self-control, perseverance and focus that are critical for escaping the gravitational pull of their communities.

Why You Should Read This Book=====Paul Tough is tackling one of the most challenging - and

contentious - issues of our time. His analysis will offend those who tend to blame poverty predominantly on the irresponsible choices of the poor by showing just how powerful the cyclical, environmental pressures are on children raised in these communities. His work is just as challenging to those who think that those trapped in cycles of poverty are mere victims of their environment who bear no responsibility for their decisions. Tough shows compellingly that parents and children in poverty can and do overcome the powerful environmental forces of their communities - and that this is a beautiful and essential component of breaking cyclical poverty. His call is for those with education and influence - the kinds of people who read books like his - to demonstrate motivation and volition (two components of character formation he extols) to recognize, celebrate, and nurture the character of children and families in poverty. Graham Scharf Author, *The Apprenticeship of Being Human: Why Early Childhood Parenting Matters to Everyone* [...]

When listening to news coverage of education reform and talking to parents and teachers one hears a variety of views about what "The Best" approach to education is. Reading *How Children Succeed* led me to reconsider many of my preconceptions about what's best for kids, and along the way I learned a few things that I can use to help the people I work with succeed. The argument is that these "non-cognitive" or "character skills" -- things like grit, resilience, and resourcefulness, are often a better predictor of eventual success than mastery of academic skills. These non-cognitive skills are not all one needs, but they seem to be the least discussed ones. This is a great book for parents to read, in particular if you are inclined to get into discussions about education policy with your peers. I won't assert that this book will make you an expert, but it should lead to some interesting dialogs (internal and external) which will help you reconsider any idea you had that what worked for you in school was that right thing for your children.

about this after listening to the author on EconTalk. Tough threads some good modern brain and behavioral psychology research into some narratives that are fairly compelling -- especially related to how kids in poor schools and broken families can succeed. However, he gives us a scientific information excruciatingly slowly. And by the time you get the end of listening to the whole thing you really haven't heard that much. If you're listening to this to educate yourself -- it's pretty darn inefficient. However, if you really like hearing stories and to have those woven into the scientific data so that you can think and feel at the same time and not be rushed -- you might really love this book. For me, I would recommend "Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength by Baumeister, Roy F. and John Tierney (Sep 1, 2011)" a book which covers almost all of

what is in this book, and a whole lot more “ and in my view collates it thematically a lot better in ways that will help you, help you parents, help you manage people and work, and help you understand certain things about public policy. They just don’t cover all the licking and grooming stuff that’s in the beginning of Tough’s book. he also covers most of the meat of this book in the EconTalk podcast- which is easy enough to search for on the Internet.

Loved this book, it was a very manageable read that was written through extensive case studies. Having the information presented in a story-line format allows the historical information to be retained much more easily. I had to read this as part of a UCLA Public Health class curriculum, but I loved reading this. It reminds me of Malcolm Gladwell style of writing in that he presents stories with a background of the featured people, and then goes through their lives. Does a pretty decent job at remaining unbiased and presenting the facts, although some of the information could be repetitive. Many the case stories were interesting because I never would have heard of these events otherwise, so it was nice to learn more about the amazing things that may go unnoticed to the average person. Great and easy read to see the importance of environment on children’s success!

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