

## *How Children Succeed*

### **Paul Tough**

- Subtitle of the book reads Grit, Curiosity, and the hidden power of Character
- Tough recounts a successful early childhood program entitled Tools of the Mind, which focuses its interventions on “controlling their impulses, staying focused on the task at hand, avoiding distractions and mental traps, managing their emotions, and organizing thoughts.” He describes it as “self-regulation.”
- After much research and interactions with a wide variety of professionals, he asserts that what matters is whether we can help toddlers/young children with the following set of qualities: **persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit, and self-confidence**, or as economists refer to as *non-cognitive skills*.
- If we want to improve the odds for children in general, and for poor children in particular, we need to approach childhood anew, to start over with some fundamental questions about how parents affect their children; how human skills develop; how character is formed.
- Most of the book deals with specific cases of high school students and their travails and struggles in traditional high school settings and how many of the “theories” of producing better results have failed. Selected students from Fenger High in the south side of Chicago are referenced throughout.
- Traditional thinking was that if a school was underperforming that it was due to a bad principal or bad teachers. But the reality is most schools are “neighborhood schools,” so they are a reflection of the community. You can’t solve the problems in a school without taking into account what’s happening in the community.
- There is an extensive discussion of the ACE study (Kaiser Permanente) and the work of Nadine Burke Harris (Palo Alto pediatrician). The synopsis of the study is that the higher the ACE score, the worse the outcome on almost every measure from addictive behavior to chronic disease.
- The research clearly shows that traumatic events in childhood produce feelings of low self-esteem or worthlessness and those feelings lead to

addiction, depression, and even suicide. Essentially, the adversity many of these children experienced was making them sick “through a pathway that had nothing to do with the behavior.”

- Harris’s research (700 patients at her clinic) found a disturbingly powerful correlation between ACE scores and problems in school. Among her patients with an ACE score of 0-3, just three percent had been identified having learning or behavioral problems. However, in patients with ACE scores of four or higher, the figure was 51%.
- In essence, children who grow up in stressful environments generally find it harder to concentrate, harder to sit still, harder to rebound from disappointments, and harder to follow directions. And that has a direct effect on their performance at school.
- A survey of kindergarten teachers revealed a supportive set of findings. They say the biggest problem they face is not children who don’t know their letters and numbers, “it is kids who don’t know how to manage their tempers and calm themselves down after a provocation.”
- Recent research has also uncovered the importance of “executive functions” as it relates to narrowing the achievement gap between low-income and middle-class kids. Executive functions refer to the ability to deal with confusing and unpredictable situations and information, which are skills that are especially valuable in school.
- The research showed that children who had spent ten years in poverty on the working memory research test did worse than children that spent just five years in poverty.
- It is in early childhood that our brains and bodies are most sensitive to the effects of stress and trauma. Family disruptions like being abandoned by your mother, separated from a father, in and out of foster care are “unrelentingly stressful.”
- There is an effective antidote to the ill-effects of early stress . . . parents. Parents who are able to form close, nurturing relationships with their children can foster resilience in them. The effect of good parenting is not just emotional and psychological, say the neuroscience, but it also biochemical.

- When you are bombarded by poverty, uncertainty, and fear, it takes a superhuman quality to provide the conditions for a secure attachment. And if a new mother experienced an insecure attachment with her parents as a child, “then it will be exponentially more difficult for her to provide a secure, nurturing environment for her own children.”
- Vocabulary deficits are often handed down from one generation to the next. That cycle can be interrupted with a great preschool and kindergarten, but is hard to break with a parent-based intervention alone.
- “The most effective vehicle for improving children’s outcomes is not the school or church or even the job center; it is the family.”
- One of the most promising facts about programs that target emotional, psychological, and neurological pathways is that they can be quite effective later on in childhood, much more so than cognitive interventions (pure IQ).
- The *How To Build Character* chapter focuses on research done by Seligman and Peterson; they defined character as a set of abilities or strengths that are very changeable, entirely malleable. They are skills you can learn; you can practice; and you can teach.
- When studying very successful students, personality psychologists attributed much of their success to five dimensions: agreeableness, extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience, and **conscientiousness**. Of those five, most believed that the latter made the most significant contribution to success. They found consistently that “Big Five conscientiousness was the trait that best predicted workplace success.”
- The research found strong correlations between this trait and: better grades in high school and college, fewer crimes, and staying married longer. Additionally, they lived longer: fewer strokes, lower blood pressure, and lower incidence of Alzheimer’s disease.
- Students/people with this trait exhibit the following characteristics: orderly, hard-working, reliable, respectful of social norms, and strong self-control.
- The chapter on *How To Think* used chess and competitive chess tournaments to focus on two of the more important executive functions: Cognitive Flexibility and Cognitive Self-Control. The former “is the ability to see alternative solutions to problems, to think outside the box, to negotiate

unfamiliar situations.” The latter “is the ability to inhibit an instinctive or habitual response and substitute a more effective, less obvious one.”

Through focus on these and other skills, IS 318, a low-income public school in Ohio, was able to compete with and in many cases win chess tournaments, where the primary competitors were students from private or exam schools from across the country.

- The chapter on *How To Succeed* discussed the steep decline the US has witnessed in the number of college graduates from four year colleges in the age group 25-35; we have dropped from 1<sup>st</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> in one decade! The author then shares that the US does not have a problem of limited and unequal college ACCESS, but of limited and unequal college COMPLETION.
- Among the 34 OECD nations, the US ranks 8<sup>th</sup> in college-enrollment rate, but 33<sup>rd</sup> in college completion, topping only Italy. He spends the remainder of the chapter answering the following question: Why are so many Americans dropping out of college just as a college degree has become so valuable and just as young people in the rest of the world have begun to graduate in such remarkable numbers?
- Among the many answers, the author focuses on a program called OneGoal, and its application to south side Chicago public high schools.
- There are three main elements to the OneGoal curriculum: (1) an intensive unit of ACT prep in the junior year; (2) “the road map to college,” with intensive college counseling; and (3) the focus on “noncognitive academic skills, like study skills, work habits, time management, help-seeking behavior, and social/academic problem-solving skills. According to Dr. James Heckman, “these skills were at the center of an increasingly dire mismatch between American high schools and American colleges and universities.”
- The OneGoal teachers were also able to emphasize five leadership principles: resourcefulness, resilience, ambition, professionalism, and integrity.
- The conclusion: OneGoal and the theories that underlie it seem like a valuable intervention, a program that, for about fourteen hundred dollars per year per student, regularly turn underperforming, undermotivated, low-income teenagers into successful college students.

- He summarizes the overall findings of this and so much research: (1) scores on achievement tests in school correlate strongly with life outcomes; (2) children in low-income homes did much worse on achievement tests than children in middle-income and high-income homes; and (3) certain schools, using a very different model than traditional public schools, were able to substantially raise the achievement test scores of low income children.
- In his final chapter, Tough reminds us that neuroscientists have demonstrated that the most reliable way to produce an adult who is brave, curious, kind, and prudent is to ensure that when he is an infant, his hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis functions well.
- In other words, protect him from serious trauma and chronic stress AND provide him with a secure, nurturing relationship with at least one parent and ideally two.
- On a lighter note, he opines the struggle we still face, in spite the science: “Any time you need to use the term hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis in order to make your point, you’ve got trouble.”
- In closing, the science says that character strengths matter so much to young people’s success. “They are rooted in brain chemistry, they are molded, in measurable and predictable ways, by the environment in which children grow up.” Supporting a system that promotes executive-function skills and self-regulation in young children will strengthen the character of ALL children, regardless of income.