

How Children Succeed – by Paul Tough

I so enjoyed this book and highly recommend it for all parents and educators. The author is clear about the fact that test scores or even intelligence doesn't predict who is going to be successful in life. In fact several of the top universities are going away from standardize admissions test scores as a factor in admissions because these scores only gives you one slice of the person.

The factors that more carefully predict success for children (and adults) are: curiosity, perseverance, self-control, self-confidence, grit and conscientiousness. The exciting thing is that those are all life skills that can be taught.

Recently our practice collaborated with Cornell Cooperative Extension Parenting Coalition to show a movie on the 'Adverse Childhood Experience' study (ACE) and clearly the amount of negative experiences and the level of stress children endure interferes with their succeeding. That study along with this book, illustrates the need to see the child physically, behaviorally and psychologically and to intervene in each of those areas towards offering skills and behaviors that provide self-regulation towards helping build character towards succeeding.

I particularly like the candor in which this author writes about his own early attempts to have brain building flashcards and Mozart CDs etc. for his children and realizing his own level of being a most anxious parent. When I was teaching full-time in New York City at the graduate school of social work many parents would call about the stresses of trying to get their toddlers into these top preschools and the preparation needed to do that. In some ways, the author suggests that the parental anxiety is absolutely harmful to children. His suggestion on the biggest part of helping all children succeed is "you protect him from serious trauma and chronic stress then even more important you provide him with a secure, nurturing relationship with at least one parent, ideally two'. He later suggests that offering a lot of comforting, hugging, talking and reassuring to children may turn out to be the biggest difference in building a successful person. I agree! – Michele Winchester-Vega, DSW, LCSW-R

I found Tough's message around failure and adversity to be key. He speaks to the importance of teaching children to face failure and grow from it, versus fearing it and running away. He speaks to the importance of adversity and developing a growth mindset early on and how this shows up in the college years and beyond. This book certainly takes the reader in a different direction than the days Baby Einstein and Sesame Street, but it drives home some really important points about the importance of a child's true character. – Mary LeRouge, LMSW, CASAC-T

Paul Tough makes a compelling argument as to what helps children be successful in the world today. He utilizes research and anecdotal evidence to demonstrate the benefit of developing non-cognitive skills, such as grit, resilience, conscientiousness, self-control and resourcefulness. This differs from previous long held beliefs that IQ and academic skill are the best predictors of success. Kids today are facing a world of constant stimulation, both negative and positive, which can overwhelm and stress their still developing brains. Thus, children benefit from learning to manage their stress and regulate their emotions so they can continue to persevere which will eventually help lead to improved development of character. The author highlights the disparity between the stress that lower socioeconomic children face versus children of higher socioeconomic status and how schools of differing socioeconomic statuses implement programs focusing on building character skills in their students. Paul Tough notes a need for early and consistent interventions for children to help build their character. The book calls attention to the many committed teachers, researchers and volunteers who dedicate themselves to helping children succeed. While I found the book informative, the author does not provide many definitive ways to help build the non-cognitive or character skills that he attributes to success and focuses mostly on middle school and high school aged children. As a therapist that works with adolescents and children, I often see the negative impact that stress can have on children. However, I can also attest to how building up self-confidence and resilience can help them mitigate the stress and perhaps even use the stress to improve their character. Overall, I recommend the book to anyone who works with, parents or mentors children. - Katie Helpley, LMFT, RPT

In this book, Mr. Tough challenges the traditional model of determining the potential of children through standardize testing and IQ tests. As a more fair and accurate assessment, Mr. Tough teaches about seven character traits that increase the likelihood of success. He provides evidence claiming good character is developed by encountering and overcoming failures with the help of nurturing parents. He emphasizes the importance of not preventing of all disappointment or rescuing children from trials with over parenting. There is a balance. On the other side, supporting parenting skills for those affected by socioeconomic pressures will create incredible resilience in their families.

As therapists, we have the opportunity to guide children through various trials from traumatic to normal difficulties. We seek to instill into children that their failures that the difficult events do not define them and can be as a driving force for success in their lives. In addition, we provide parenting education and encourage parents to respond within healthy boundaries. As therapists, we join Mr. Tough on his mission to help families' foster resilient homes. – Elena Morales, LMHC
