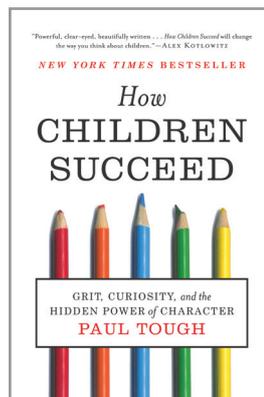




**HOW CHILDREN SUCCEED**  
BY PAUL TOUGH



## THE BOOK



### How Children Succeed

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## INTRODUCTION

In his book *How Children Succeed*, journalist Paul Tough breaks down long-established beliefs and introduces new concepts to help children get ahead in life.

Paul writes that standardised testing doesn't always serve our children well, and the poverty gap is leaving much of today's youth in the dust. Meanwhile, if you can't teach IQ, how do you help children of all skill levels to thrive?

The answer, according to Tough, starts at home and continues through to the education system. But rather than the three R's, it is developing good character that young people need to learn more about.

Exhaustively researched and bridging the political gap between right and left, *How Children Succeed* is an eye-opening look at why the older generation is failing the young and how we can fix it. Whether you agree with Tough's arguments or not, the book is a must-read for any modern parent, teacher, or caring adult.



## 5 BEST QUOTES

"What matters most in a child's development, is not how much information we can stuff into her brain in the first few years."

"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 in school."

"The key channel through which early adversity causes damage to developing bodies and brains is stress."

"What matters, is whether we are able to help her 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 noncognitive skills, psychologists call them personality traits, and the rest of us sometimes think of them as character."

"Pure IQ is stubbornly resistant to improvement after about age eight. But executive functions and the ability to handle stress and manage strong emotions can be improved, sometimes dramatically, well into adolescence and even adulthood."



8 BIG IDEAS

### 1. EARLY ADVERSITY

One of the most influential factors when it comes to achieving positive life outcomes in adulthood is childhood adversity. Sadly, the more adverse childhood experiences (ACE) a child faces in early life, the less likely they will enjoy positive outcomes in adulthood. Tough's book shares that according to studies, people with higher ACE scores are twice as likely to smoke and seven times more likely to be alcoholics.

ACEs likely cause issues with self-esteem and self-worth. It is no surprise that people who struggle with these issues are more likely to be depressed and seek self-harming outlets.

It all comes down to stress. The higher the ACEs for a child, the higher the stress levels that their brain and body endure. Tough explains the neuroscience; in short, overloads to the brain's stress response systems at an early age lead to permanent damage.

### 2. LG PARENTING

The abbreviation LG stands for Licking and Grooming. While it sounds odd at first, a short explanation puts it all in perspective.

Scientists found that baby rats whose mothers gave more licking and grooming after a stressful situation had more resilience and confidence. This translates to humans. It means that when a baby or small child is distressed, picking her up and comforting her is beneficial to her development. Far from making children weak, giving them attention and love when they need it builds strength.

### 3. ATTACHMENT THEORY

The idea of LG parenting is given further credit through research into human attachment theory. Attachment theory is well established in child psychology. By observing children's behaviour when they were reunited with their mothers, researchers confirmed different attachment styles. Children who ran and embraced their mothers were considered securely attached. The children who showed no enthusiasm at their mother's return, either ignoring her or lashing out angrily, were anxiously attached.

Continuing research has shown young children who are securely attached grow up to be happier, more well-balanced adults. And the key to raising securely attached children? High LG parenting. Far from raising stronger children, neglecting them when they need comfort results in anxious attachment and ultimately less successful and well-adjusted adults.



8 BIG IDEAS

#### 4. CONSCIENTIOUSNESS

Of the big five personality traits, (openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) conscientiousness is most pertinent to *How Children Succeed*. Conscientiousness includes self-discipline and perseverance. This makes the trait the most important of the big five traits for success in the workplace, with agreeableness a close second.

Those with high levels of conscientiousness have greater impulse control and are generally better able to knuckle down and get tasks done. People with high conscientiousness even tend to live longer (partly due to drinking and smoking less) and even have fewer occurrences of Alzheimer's disease. On the other hand, people with high conscientiousness have to be careful that they don't struggle to make decisions. They may also find they have to work on flexibility.

#### 5. PRACTICE

Character is how you conduct yourself as a person. It is something that is more implicitly than explicitly understood. While most people would agree that it is an essential part of life, it's hard to quantify character. Because the importance of character is central to his thesis, Tough takes the time to quantify the abstract concept. Using scientific research, he breaks it down to the following list:

- GRIT
- SELF-CONTROL
- ZEST
- SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE
- GRATITUDE
- OPTIMISM
- CURIOSITY

These factors all count towards a person's character, although, naturally, you can have more of some factors and less than others. Anyone high in every category is bound to be quite a remarkable person. What's important is that you can develop and teach character.

The author expounds that character should be taught in schools at least as much as regular academic learning. He gives evidence of the success of several schools in the United States that put the time and effort into adding character to their curriculums. In every case, children who went through character education went on to show at least some advantage over similar children who didn't.

#### 6. MINDSET

Another key to success is mindset. Research has concluded that there are two kinds of mindset; growth mindset and fixed mindset. The fixed mindset tends to believe that bad outcomes are inevitable and that



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traits like IQ cannot be altered or improved. On the other hand, the growth mindset tends towards optimism and a belief in personal improvement.

Not surprisingly, the growth mindset is highly correlated with perseverance and conscientiousness. Having a growth mindset means you are more likely to push through adversity and soldier on. Those with a fixed mindset will consider failure inevitable and give up all too easily.

As it happens, research currently falls on the side that IQ is not significantly malleable past a certain age. However, children who believe that IQ is malleable do much better when tested. Therefore, helping to build a growth mindset in children and youth is a vital measure in helping them to succeed.

## 7. DIFFERENT CHALLENGES

Tough makes it clear that different children in different circumstances face very different challenges.

While many highly privileged children still suffer from a mix of pressure and absent parents, the suffering that low privilege children experience tends to have more significant consequences. As Tough says, Undergraduates at Harvard with character struggles might end up at a less prestigious investment banking job. Teenagers on the South Side of Chicago, on the other hand, may end up in jail.

While *How Children Succeed* is centred firmly on the US, it stands to reason that the same logic applies to other western countries like Australia. The underprivileged have a worse start in life and face harsher consequences. This disparity is why highly disadvantaged children and youth need more attention.

## 8. PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

It is integral that society takes a partisan approach if we want to help children succeed. Tough explains how the science has become uncomfortable for the left and the right. It may be difficult for one side of the political spectrum to accept that character does matter and that some intervention is likely beneficial in the homes of low privileged children. On the other hand, some will have to admit that character is not fixed if they want to raise more resilient children.

It is not simply a question of whether people have good character or not. It needs to be taught and fostered in all walks of life.

According to Tough, there is a responsibility to set aside politics and follow the science as a society.

**3 ACTION STEPS**

In *How Children Succeed*, the action steps are more institutional than individual. As a parent or caregiver, though, you can still work with Paul Tough's advice.

**1. START IN THE HOME**

The more stress a child experiences in their early life, the harder it is for them to develop essential character skills. Parents and caregivers need education in effective parenting. Without this education, they will struggle to give children the best start.

**2. EARLY SCHOOLING INTERVENTION**

According to Tough, schools need to focus on character education as much as academic education. It is also vital to encourage teachers to be the best they can be and spread quality teachers widely around the school system. Schools in underprivileged areas also deserve quality teachers.

**3. SECONDARY SCHOOL SUPPORT**

Later in their schooling, children and young people need help to prepare for university and life. This support is more than academic. They need to learn the emotional and character-driven toolkit to see them through their college years and into the future.

**1 KEY TAKEAWAY**

The key takeaway of *How Children Succeed* is that character, more than anything else, leads to success. If you can help them build a well-rounded character, children have a better chance of leading a prosperous life.

If parents understand how to support a child and allow some adversity while maintaining support, a child has a better chance at 'succeeding'. If schools can maintain high standards, teach character and value quality teachers, there is hope for future generations.



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