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School of Hard Knocks

By ANNIE MURPHY PAUL

HOW CHILDREN SUCCEED

Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character

By Paul Tough

231 pp. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. \$27.

Most readers of The New York Times probably subscribe to what Paul Tough calls “the cognitive hypothesis”: the belief “that success today depends primarily on cognitive skills — the kind of intelligence that gets measured on I.Q. tests, including the abilities to recognize letters and words, to calculate, to detect patterns — and that the best way to develop these skills is to practice them as much as possible, beginning as early as possible.” In his new book, “How Children Succeed,” Tough sets out to replace this assumption with what might be called the character hypothesis: the notion that noncognitive skills,

like persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit and self-confidence, are more crucial than sheer brainpower to achieving success.

“Psychologists and neuroscientists have learned a lot in the past few decades about where these skills come from and how they are developed,” Tough writes, and what they’ve discovered can be summed up in a sentence: Character is created by encountering and overcoming failure. In this absorbing and important book, Tough explains why American children from both ends of the socioeconomic spectrum are missing out on these essential experiences. The offspring of affluent parents are insulated from adversity, beginning with their baby-proofed nurseries and continuing well into their parentally financed young adulthoods. And while poor children face no end of challenges — from inadequate nutrition and medical care to dysfunctional schools and neighborhoods — there is often little support to help them turn these omnipresent obstacles into character-enhancing triumphs. The book illuminates the extremes of American childhood: for rich kids, a safety net drawn so tight it’s a harness; for poor kids, almost nothing to break their fall.

Though Tough examines at length the travails of both groups, it’s the plight of disadvantaged children that compels his interest and emotions. In his previous book, the well-received “Whatever It Takes,” Tough followed the efforts of the educator Geoffrey Canada to turn his social service organization, the Harlem Children’s Zone, into a “conveyor belt” that would reliably carry the neighborhood’s children from

infancy through primary and secondary school, into college and the middle class. In Canada's story, Tough found a deep and complicated character fighting to accomplish a valiant goal in the face of terrific odds. In "How Children Succeed," Tough is working in miniature, sketching a handful of poor children and their mentors, and these depictions sometimes lack the force and distinctiveness of his portrait of Canada. But they are keenly and sensitively observed, and occasionally even whimsical, as in his captivating account of Kewauna Lerma, a Chicago teenager. Growing up in the erratic care of a feckless single mother, "Kewauna seemed able to ignore the day-to-day indignities of life in poverty on the South Side and instead stay focused on her vision of a more successful future." Kewauna tells Tough, "I always wanted to be one of those business ladies walking downtown with my briefcase, everybody saying, 'Hi, Miss Lerma!'"

Here, as throughout the book, Tough nimbly combines his own reporting with the findings of scientists. He describes, for example, the famous "marshmallow experiment" of the psychologist Walter Mischel, whose studies, starting in the late 1960s, found that children who mustered the self-control to resist eating a marshmallow right away in return for two marshmallows later on did better in school and were more successful as adults.

"What was most remarkable to me about Kewauna was that she was able to marshal her prodigious noncognitive capacity — call it grit, conscientiousness, resilience or the ability to delay gratification — all for a distant prize that was, for her, almost entirely theoretical," Tough observes of his young subject, who gets into college and works hard once she's there. "She didn't actually *know* any business ladies with briefcases downtown; she didn't even know any college graduates except her teachers. It was as if Kewauna were taking part in an extended, high-stakes version of Walter Mischel's marshmallow experiment, except in this case, the choice on offer was that she could have one marshmallow now or she could work really hard for four years, constantly scrimping and saving, staying up all night, struggling, sacrificing — and then get, not two marshmallows, but some kind of elegant French pastry she'd only vaguely heard of, like a napoleon. And Kewauna, miraculously, opted for the napoleon, even though she'd never tasted one before and didn't know anyone who had. She just had faith that it was going to be delicious."

Many poor children don't develop the resilience Kewauna has in such abundance, and the reason, Tough says, can be traced back to their troubled home lives: "The part of the brain most affected by early stress is the prefrontal cortex, which is critical in self-regulatory activities of all kinds, both emotional and cognitive. As a result, 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. When you're overwhelmed by uncontrollable impulses and distracted by negative feelings, it's hard to learn the alphabet."

Children can be buffered from surrounding stresses by attentive, responsive parenting, but the adults in these children's lives are often too burdened by their own problems to offer such care.

Rich kids, Tough adds, may also lack a nurturing connection to their mothers and fathers — not so much in their early years as when they enter adolescence and the push for achievement intensifies. He explores the research of Suniya Luthar, a psychology professor at Teachers College, Columbia University. Luthar "found that parenting mattered at both socioeconomic extremes. For both rich and poor teenagers, certain family characteristics predicted children's maladjustment, including low levels of maternal attachment, high levels of parental criticism and minimal after-school adult supervision. Among the affluent children, Luthar found, the main cause of distress was 'excessive achievement pressures and isolation from parents — both physical and emotional.' "

Though the title "How Children Succeed" makes the book sound like an instruction manual for parents, it's really a guide to the ironies and perversities of income inequality in America. Tough, a contributing writer for The New York Times Magazine, portrays a country of very privileged children and very poor ones, both deprived of the emotional and intellectual experiences that make for sturdy character. The political and economic consequences of our unbalanced society have been brought to the fore by debates about the causes of the Great Recession and the claims of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Paul Tough brings us news of the psychological effects of income inequality, through stories of the people who feel these effects most acutely: our children.

In one of the most affecting parts of his book, he reflects on his decision, 27 years ago, to drop out of college. "It hasn't escaped my attention," Tough notes ruefully, that many of the researchers he writes about "have identified dropping out of high school or college as a symptom of substandard noncognitive ability: low grit, low perseverance, bad planning skills." And yet this same research helped him realize that he was lucky to be allowed to make his own mistakes. After leaving Columbia in the fall of his freshman year, he bicycled alone from Atlanta to Halifax. Following another aborted attempt at college, he took an internship at Harper's Magazine and embarked on a successful career as a writer and editor.

Fewer and fewer young people are getting the character-building combination of

support and autonomy that Tough was fortunate enough to receive. This is a worrying predicament — for who will have the conscientiousness, the persistence and the grit to change it?

Annie Murphy Paul, the author of “Origins: How the Nine Months Before Birth Shape the Rest of Our Lives,” is writing a book about the science of learning.