



## Discussion Guide for

# HOW CHILDREN SUCCEED:

Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character

By Paul Tough

Author of *Whatever it Takes*

### About the Book

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. In *How Children Succeed*, Paul Tough argues for a very different understanding of what makes a child successful. 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 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 readers; it will also change our understanding of childhood itself.

## Discussion Questions

- 1) In his introduction, Tough discusses the cognitive hypothesis — the commonly held assumption that success depends primarily on cognitive skills. How is the cognitive hypothesis reflected in the curriculum you teach?
- 2) Tough notes that in the past decade researchers from disparate fields “have begun to produce evidence that calls into question many of the assumptions behind the cognitive hypothesis.” What these researchers claim matters most is to help children develop such qualities as “persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit, and self-confidence” (xv). Based on your own experience as an educator, do you agree with the findings of these researchers? In what ways does your school help cultivate these character traits within and outside the curriculum?
- 3) Elizabeth Dozier, the principal of Fenger High School in Chicago, says she came to the realization that a neighborhood school is a reflection of the community, and that “you can’t expect to solve the problems of a school without taking into account what’s happening in the community” (5). In what ways are challenges in your school a reflection of the problems in the community you serve? In what ways can your school strengthen ties with the community? How would a stronger connection with the community you serve benefit your school?
- 4) Tough writes, “Children who grow up in stressful environments generally find it harder to sit still, harder to rebound from disappointments, and harder to follow directions” (17). What can teachers do to mitigate the stress that students bring with them to the classroom?
- 5) How can the extensive research Tough reports on the impact of poverty on the emotional and physical health of children be addressed in the school environment?
- 6) Citing Keitha’s story as an example, Tough writes that “teenagers . . . have the ability — or at least the potential — to rethink and remake their lives in a way that younger children do not” (48). What are some examples from your own teaching experience of students making this turnaround from a course of near-certain failure to success?
- 7) Tough writes, “For many of us, character refers to something innate and unchanging, a core set of attributes that define one’s very essence. Seligman and Peterson defined character in a different way: a set of abilities or strengths that are very much changeable — entirely malleable, in fact. They are skills you can learn; they are skills you can practice; and they are skills you can teach” (59). Do you agree with Seligman and Peterson’s definition of character? Can the character traits Tough says are essential to success be taught in the existing curriculum? Is it necessary to change the curriculum to accommodate the teaching of these character traits?
- 8) Tough reports that a national evaluation of character education programs by the U.S. Department of Education found that seven popular elementary school programs “had no significant impact at all from the programs — not on student behavior, not on academic achievement, not on school culture” (60). How would you rate the effectiveness of the character education program in your school?
- 9) Although “giving kids material incentives to succeed should make a big difference,” Tough writes, “in practice it often doesn’t work that way” (66). What has been your experience with the successes and /or failures of incentives for both students and teachers?



- 10) Tough writes, “It is a central paradox of contemporary parenting . . . we have an acute, almost biological impulse to protect our children, to give them everything they want and need, to protect them from dangers and discomforts both large and small. And yet we know . . . that what kids need more than anything is a little hardship: some challenge, some deprivation they can overcome, even if to prove to themselves that they can” (84). What more can schools do to convince parents that experience with adversity and even failure is beneficial to a child’s character development?
- 11) What does Tough find particularly notable about the IS 318 chess team? How does the team’s success support Tough’s view that developing children’s character traits will lead them to success?
- 12) In what ways can cognitive flexibility and cognitive self-control that Elizabeth Spiegel teaches to her students in chess be applied to other academic subject areas?
- 13) “Over the past few years,” Tough writes, “it has become clear that the United States does not so much have a problem of limited and unequal college access, it has a problem of limited and unequal college completion” (150). What did the authors of *Crossing the Finish Line* discover is the most accurate predictor of college completion? What more can schools do to help enable students to complete college?
- 14) What do you consider to be the pros and cons of intervention programs like OneGoal and Tools of the Mind?
- 15) What are five strategies your school could implement to help develop persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit, and self-confidence in its students?

### About the Author

Paul Tough is the author of the critically acclaimed *Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada’s Quest to Change Harlem and America* (2008). Paul has written extensively about education, child development, poverty, and politics, including cover stories in the *New York Times Magazine* on character education, the achievement gap, and the Obama administration’s poverty policies. He has worked as an editor at the *New York Times Magazine* and *Harper’s Magazine* and as a reporter and producer for the public-radio program “This American Life.” He was the founding editor of *Open Letters*, an online magazine. His writing has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Slate*, *GQ*, *Esquire*, and *Geist*, and on the op-ed page of the *New York Times*.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

- Bowen, William G., Chingos, Matthew M., McPherson, Michael S.: *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America’s Public Universities*. Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Goldin, Claudia and Katz, Lawrence F. *The Race between Education and Technology*. Belknap Press, 2008.
- Kotlowitz, Alex. *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America*. Anchor, 1992.
- Levine, Madeline. *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids*. Harper Perennial, 2008.
- Mathews, Jay. *Work Hard. Be Nice.: How Two Inspired Teachers Created the Most Promising Schools in America*. Algonquin, 2009.
- Ravitch, Diane. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. Basic, 2010.
- Seligman, Martin E. P. *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*. Vintage, 2006

Guide written by Edward T. Sullivan, a freelance writer and librarian