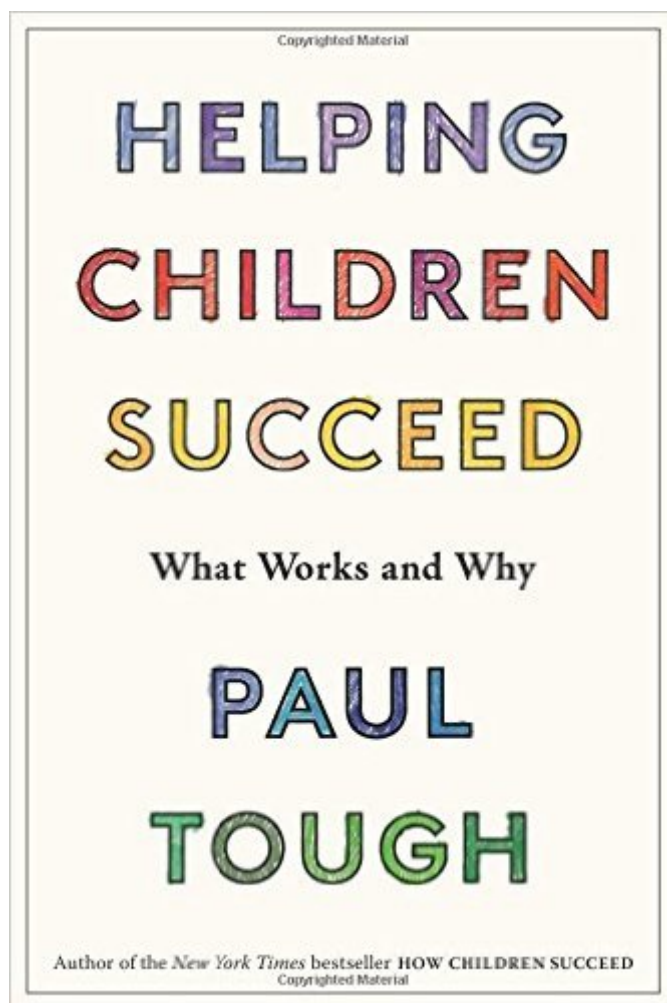


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Helping Children Succeed: What Works And Why



Synopsis

In *How Children Succeed*, Paul Tough introduced us to research showing that personal qualities like perseverance, self-control, and conscientiousness play a critical role in children's success. Now, in *Helping Children Succeed*, Tough takes on a new set of pressing questions: What does growing up in poverty do to children's mental and physical development? How does adversity at home affect their success in the classroom, from preschool to high school? And what practical steps can the adults who are responsible for them—from parents and teachers to policy makers and philanthropists—take to improve their chances for a positive future? Tough once again encourages us to think in a brand new way about the challenges of childhood. Rather than trying to teach skills like grit and self-control, he argues, we should focus instead on creating the kinds of environments, both at home and at school, in which those qualities are most likely to flourish. Mining the latest research in psychology and neuroscience, Tough provides us with insights and strategies for a new approach to childhood adversity, one designed to help many more children succeed.

Book Information

Hardcover: 144 pages

Publisher: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (May 24, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0544935284

ISBN-13: 978-0544935280

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.8 x 8.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars See all reviews (56 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #8,925 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #13 in Books > Education & Teaching > Schools & Teaching > Education Theory > Philosophy & Social Aspects #16 in Books > Education & Teaching > Schools & Teaching > Education Theory > Reform & Policy #16 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Poverty

Customer Reviews

In his second book, *HOW CHILDREN SUCCEED*, Paul Tough wrote a wonderful chapter all about the adverse effects that children living in poverty are subject to: physical, cognitive and emotional deficits as a result of the trauma they are more likely to suffer than children living in comparative affluence. But then, unfortunately, for most of the rest of that book, Tough took a hard right turn into

“character”: what has since become the “Grit Movement” as championed by Angela Duckworth, whom Tough promoted. Thanks to Duckworth, as promoted by Tough, poor children of color, many of whom face more challenges and obstacles in a day than most people face in a year, are routinely told that their problem is that they lack “grit” and if they could only learn to persevere through obstacles, they too could have the “success” that affluent whites assume as their due. In my review of that book, I said that I hoped Tough would circle back around to explore more deeply the connections among trauma, deprivation, attachment and “character”. This book appears to have heeded my call. What seems to have changed Tough’s direction is growing research that shows that “grit” cannot be taught, at least not in terms of direct instruction. Imagine, simply telling kids to “work hard, be nice” doesn’t seem to do much. How odd. But Tough stumbled on the work of Deci and Ryan which seems to show that non-cognitive abilities can be improved, but it involves more than rewarding kids for being grittier or punishing them for not. In fact, rewards and punishments actually do harm because they increase extrinsic motivation (motivation to get the reward or avoid the punishment) at the cost of decreasing intrinsic motivation (motivation for pursuing an activity for its own sake). In other words, Tough is trying to morph into Alfie Kohn. I very much appreciate Tough’s (belated) recognition of research demonstrating the benefits of progressive, whole child, experiential, social-emotional learning. Brain science is showing us that learning is not something that happens in a vacuum, but within the context of human relationships and pursuits based on interest and relevance. Education is not about stuffing random, disconnected facts into kids’ heads and seeing what they can regurgitate on a test, but rather about exciting and channeling (or, at the very least, not squelching) children’s innate drive to explore, experiment and adapt. I am very happy that Tough seems to understand the challenges that poverty presents to that natural process and how understanding, supportive relationships and wraparound services are ways to ameliorate some of the worst effects. But, as always with Tough, there is much to argue with. First, Tough can’t seem to get past the quest for test scores. All of the interventions he supports are because they raise test scores. Standardized tests are a snapshot in time which, at best, measure how well particular students were able, in that particular moment, to take that particular test. They have little bearing on a child’s actual abilities or their likely success in college or the real world, much less their interests or who they are as people. The purpose of education is not to churn out children as widgets that can be plugged into the corporate world. The purpose of education is to develop unique, healthy, well-rounded individuals who are prepared to actively participate in a democratic

republic. Second, after spending his previous books building up the likes of Geoffrey Canada (who twice "fired" an entire cohort of students because they weren't performing well on the standardized tests) and Angela Duckworth (who is profiting from teaching children in poverty "grit" skills, even though she herself denies that "what her work should be used for"), Tough refuses to admit any previous error or fully acknowledge the implications of his new perspective. I never would have thought I would be an admirer of Diane Ravitch after her work as Assistant Secretary of Education under George H.W. Bush and her launching of the "accountability" movement, but she has fully renounced her former positions and openly admitted the error of her thinking. Tough needs to take a similar openly self-reflective course. I could also fault Tough for refusing to follow his own research to its logical conclusion. If a child's environment is so important to his/her development (and it is), then why are we only tinkering around the edges of the environment? If poverty is so devastating to children who grow up in it, why focus on education for children in poverty, rather than the environment of poverty itself? Why not call for solutions to income/wealth inequality? Why not structural social changes to eliminate poverty? An end to "austerity" and "neoliberalism"? A call for good, living wage jobs with good benefits? A call for a strong social safety net, universal healthcare and housing as rights? But Tough doesn't seem to think such grand changes are possible. Neoliberalism is the future, There Is No Alternative. The best we can do is make everyone as comfortable as possible within their allotted station in life. We can improve education for children in poverty, but there's nothing we can do about poverty itself. Finally, one of my biggest peeves with Tough (and many other "reformers", such as KIPP) is their complete failure to acknowledge and credit the huge body of work that has gone before them. After promoting "grit" and "no excuses" and other harmful policies, such as "reformers" are discovering just how harmful they are and quietly revising their stance to become kinder and gentler and focusing more on relationships, less on punishment. But progressive education is no new thing. It's been around since at least John Dewey's day 100 years ago. There is a substantial body of research demonstrating the effectiveness of whole-person, student directed, experiential learning. In fact, the superiority of such education over rote, test-based, direct instruction is so clear that for decades the elite have sent their own kids to schools that use progressive models, such as Sidwell Friends, Lakeside Academy and the University of Chicago Lab School. For decades the powers that be have known what is best for their own children, while foisting "grit" and standardized testing on other people's children. I guess I'm supposed to be grateful that, in the never-ending

quest for “innovation”, the “reformers” are finally stumbling onto what’s been known for 100 years, and maybe now everybody’s children can get an education rooted in whole-child development supported by caring relationships and meeting basic needs. And, if in fact, Tough’s recognition among the “reformers” allows for more progressive education for children in poverty (as well as children not in poverty, but not rich either), then I will be grateful. But please don’t pretend that this is anything new or “innovative”. In fact, Tough and others are quite late to the game.

As a writer, an educator and a parent, I am a big fan of this book. It was a fast read (two late nights and then I was done), it’s organized into small chapters, and it’s less than 200 pages, and yet, when I was finished with the book, I felt smarter and more knowledgeable about what really IS working to help all students succeed. I appreciated the focus on students in adverse situations- in poverty and that had faced or are facing hardships- while at the same time it was very relevant for me as a parent of two young children. Tough was extremely thoughtful both in his research and also in how he communicated it, without the education jargon that makes books about education tough to read and comprehend. I love that he makes the distinction between noncognitive skills and conditions and environments that support their development. And I appreciate the complexities as our country seeks to measure what might end up being intangible. Tough does a great job of summarizing current approaches that are working and is creating a conversation around meaningful learning opportunities, conditions and environments for all students. Wonderful book! Highly recommend for parents, educators and all who care about kids!

In 2013, the United States reached a sad milestone: 51 percent of public school students now live in poverty. That’s right, 51 percent. More than every other child. In public schools. In this country. Live in poverty. Paul Tough’s previous book, *HOW CHILDREN SUCCEED*, provided extensive research about how noncognitive skills support students’ academic success. In his new one, *HELPING CHILDREN SUCCEED: What Works and Why*, he asserts, “Helping poor kids succeed is now, by definition, the central mission of American public schools and, by extension, a central responsibility of the American public.” And in this book, he answers the question: “OK, now that we know this, what do we do?” This slim, lucid volume is packed with practical ideas, tools, and examples that have been proven to work. Some of the solutions require a shift in mindset—such as focusing on the environment we create for students—and some are more modest, such as using Post-it notes in a particular way. In the

former instance, we must to think about how three key human needs drive intrinsic motivation—our needs for autonomy, for competence, and for relatedness/personal connection—and we must ensure that those needs are being met in the classroom environment. In the second case, a simple Post-it that says, “I’m giving you these comments [on this essay] because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them” can have the dramatic effect of disarming students who are predisposed to feel incompetent, motivating them instead to make the effort to revise their work. While many of the examples that Tough cites have been tried on a small scale, my hope is that a vast number of people will read this book and try out these ideas. We can, individually and collectively, make a significant difference in the lives of young people. And I love his conclusion: “The first step is simply to embrace the idea, as those researchers did, that we can do better. Yes, we can.” (This review was originally posted on the Only Good Books Blog by Sarah Tantillo.)

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