

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

"Attention is finally turning to the psychic and emotional qualities our students bring to the classroom. No one is better at chronicling this shift than Paul Tough."

—DAVID BROOKS, *New York Times*

# HELPING CHILDREN SUCCEED

What Works and Why

# PAUL TOUGH

Author of the *New York Times* bestseller HOW CHILDREN SUCCEED



## ABOUT THE BOOK

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.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Tough argues that “the challenge of teaching low-income children can no longer be considered a side issue in American education.” “Helping poor kids succeed is now,” he writes, “the central mission of American public schools and, by extension, a central responsibility of the American public” (1). Do you agree with Tough? How many students in your school fall below the federal government's low income threshold? To what extent does your school make the effort to help low income students succeed?
2. Tough contends that noncognitive or “soft skills,” such as perseverance, conscientiousness, self-control, and optimism “are critical tools for improving outcomes for low-income children” (4). Based on your own experience as an educator, do you agree with Tough? What other character strengths can you identify? In what ways does your school help cultivate these character traits in and out of the curriculum?
3. Tough notes the difficulty of trying to teach noncognitive qualities as skills. He notes: “Many of the educators I encountered who seemed best able to engender noncognitive abilities in their students never said a word about these skills in the classroom” (9). In what ways do you already do this in your own teaching? What more could you do to further incorporate it?
4. Tough asserts that it is more accurate and useful to consider noncognitive capacities as products of a child's environment rather than as skills to be taught (12). How would this perspective shape the way you approach helping children to develop these abilities?
5. According to Tough, “researchers have concluded that the primary mechanism through which children's environments affect their development is *stress*” (14). What can teachers do to mitigate the environmental stresses that students bring with them to the classroom? What can schools do to help parents learn how to teach their children how to effectively handle stressful situations?
6. Approaching from the premise that childhood is a continuum, Tough argues that educators must look for opportunities for positive intervention at different points along that continuum. Tough notes a particular weakness in early childhood intervention and cites examples of effective programs in home visiting and parent coaching. Discuss what, if any, similar services presently exist in your community. What would it take to create

such a program in your community? How would such intervention services mitigate the disadvantages of lower income children when they begin formal schooling?

7. What do you think of Tough's critical stance toward behaviorist approaches to discipline and incentives? How entrenched is your school system to a behaviorist paradigm? What steps would have to be taken to shift to an intrinsic motivation approach?
8. Discuss the research findings by economist Kirabo Jackson that Tough cites in the chapter on assessment (68–71). Tough writes, "What Jackson's study suggests is that what is going on in the classrooms may not really be about students acquiring skills, at least not in the traditional sense" (72). Would the assessment paradigm shift Tough proposes be a more accurate and effective method of teacher evaluation?
9. Discuss the research findings by Camille Farrington on academic mindset and academic perseverance that Tough reports in the chapter on messages (74–81). Farrington distills her research into "four key beliefs that contribute most significantly to students' tendency to persevere in the classroom" (78). What challenges would there be, and which strategies could you use to help instill these mindsets into students?
10. To what extent, if any, does your school district implement any of the intervention strategies used by the programs *Becoming a Man* and *Turnaround for Children*? How could your school community benefit from using similar intervention approaches?
11. What do you consider to be the pros and cons of the approaches in schools like Expedition Learning, Polaris, and WHEELS?
12. Tough cites research suggesting that dominant American instructional strategies deny students important character-building opportunities that would develop from more engagement with critical thinking, deep reading, and complex problem solving (101–103). How demanding is your curriculum in these respects? What changes would have to be implemented to place greater emphasis upon them?
13. Tough notes "that perhaps the most significant shortcoming of the deeper-learning movement today is that you are much more likely to find these ideas in use if you visit a school in a well-off neighborhood than if you visit a school in a poor one" (106). Tough cites the article "Deeper Learning Has a Race Problem," published online in *Education Week*. Read the article and discuss how your school and district as whole fits in with the issues raised by the author.
14. What are five strategies your school could immediately adopt to help develop persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit, and self-confidence in your school?
15. In order to effectively intervene in the lives of disadvantaged children, fundamental changes are essential in three areas: policies, practices, and thinking (112–113). Discuss strategies for how to begin bringing about these changes.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Tough is the author, most recently, of *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*, which has been translated into 25 languages and has spent more than a year on the *New York Times* hardcover and paperback bestseller lists. His first book, *Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America*, was published in 2008. He is a contributing writer to the *New York Times Magazine*, where he has written cover stories 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 *Slate*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, and *The New Yorker*, and on the op-ed page of the *New York Times*. He lives with his wife and son in New York. For more information, please visit [www.paultough.com](http://www.paultough.com). You can also find Paul on Twitter @PaulTough.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Kohn, Alfie. *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes*. Mariner, 1993.

Kotlowitz, Alex. *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America*. Anchor, 1992.

Kozol, Jonathan. *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*. Crown, 1995.

Kozol, Jonathan. *Fire in the Ashes: Twenty-Five Years Among the Poorest Children in America*. Crown, 2012.

Kozol, Jonathan. *Ordinary Resurrections: Children in the Years of Hope*. Crown, 2000.

Ravitch, Diane. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. Basic, 2010.

Tough, Paul. *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.

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

© 2022 HarperCollins Publishers

For more resources, please visit [HarperAcademic.com](http://HarperAcademic.com) and click the Teaching Guides tab at the top of our homepage.

 HarperCollins Publishers