

## The Main Idea's Discussion Questions to use with *How Children Succeed* by Paul Tough

### Discussion Questions to Use with Parents/Caregivers

#### Introduction

1. Most of us think that success in school, college, and life depends on having strong cognitive skills. The author, Paul Tough, in *How Children Succeed*, says we have been misguided. He presents recent research that shows us rather than cognitive skills, it's traits like persistence, perseverance, grit, and curiosity that are more likely to help children succeed. What do you think of this idea – as parents, is it just as important for us to help our children to develop *character skills* as *academic skills*?

2. When you saw the word “grit” on the cover, what did it make you think about? What first came to your mind?

#### Chapter 1: How to Fail (And How Not To)

1. In this chapter, Tough discusses the impact of how both poor and wealthy children *process* stressful events when they are young. Every family experiences stressful events. However, Tough makes it clear that the way in which children *respond to* or *bounce back from* these events affects the likelihood of their future success. In what ways do we currently help our children deal with or respond to stressful events at home? Now that we understand the impact of kids' inability to handle stressful events, can we brainstorm some additional ways to help them deal with the stresses of life at home? (For example, turning off the TV or phone and listening to them)

2. What are some signs that our children might be having trouble coping with stress? (sleep problems, refusing to go to school, etc.)

3. What resources are available at the school (or the community if you have a list) to help with stress?

4. Tough reports that when parents and other caregivers foster close, caring relationships with their children, this provides the resilience needed to protect children from the traumatic effects of a harsh environment. “This message can sound a bit warm and fuzzy, but it is rooted in cold, hard science. The effect of good parenting is not just emotional or psychological, the neuroscientists say; it is biochemical.” (p.28) Tough makes it clear that “good parenting” doesn't necessarily mean a lot of time or a lot of money. In one study, children performed better when parents simply paid more attention to them while they played a simple board game. What do you think of the quote from Tough above and can you think of times when you were busier/more distracted and other times when you gave your children more attention and how they responded?

#### Chapter 2: How to Build Character

1. What do you think about the different reasons Tough gives for why wealthier students and poorer students both need to develop character strengths? Do you relate to either of these reasons for your own child or children? Discuss the two quotations below. The first is from the head of inner city KIPP charter schools and second is the head of an exclusive private school.

**From David Levin**, “The students who persisted in college were not necessarily the ones who had excelled academically at KIPP. Instead, they seemed to be the ones who possessed certain other gifts, skills like optimism and resilience and social agility. They were the students who were able to recover from bad grades and resolve to do better next time; who could bounce back from unhappy breakups or fights with their parents; who could persuade professors to give them extra help after class; who could resist the urge to go out to the movies and instead stay home and study.” (p.52)

**From Dominic Randolph**, “People who have an easy time of things, who get eight hundreds on their SATs, I worry that those people get feedback that everything they're doing is great. And I think as a result, we are actually setting them up for long-term failure. When that person suddenly has to face up to a difficult moment, then I think they're screwed, to be honest. I don't think they've grown the capacities to be able to handle that.” (p.56)

2. In the book Tough mentions the idea, originally from psychologist Martin Seligman, that character traits can be *learned*. Do you agree with this? Do you have any examples from your own lives? (e.g. I used to give up easily, now I persist when I...)

3. One observation, made by a disciple of Martin Seligman is, “To help chronically low-performing but intelligent students, educators and parents must first recognize that character is at least as important as intellect.” (p.61) Do you agree? Why or why not? If you do agree, what do you think parents can do about this?

4. In chapter 2, we learn that David Levin, head of the KIPP charter schools, decides to institute report cards for seven character traits. However, Dominic Randolph, the head of the private school, Riverdale, decides *not* to use a report card but rather to talk about character at parent nights and in staff meetings, and to encourage staff to come up with new programs

about character. What are some of the benefits and drawbacks of each approach? Would you want your child's school to give grades for character skills?

5. Tough writes about the problem of overprotective parents. One Riverdale teacher says, "We have parents calling in and saying, for their kids, 'Can't you just give them two more days on this paper?' Overindulging kids, with the intention of giving them everything and being loving, but at the expense of their character." (p.84) Do you think this hurts kids' character? Do we really need to, as Dominic Randolph puts it "learn how to fail"? If so, what is our role as parents in teaching our children to fail, or rather, teaching them to learn from failure?

### **Chapter 3: How to Think**

1. In this chapter the chess coach, Elizabeth Siegel says, "I try to teach my students that losing is something you do not something you are." What does this mean and how can we as parents reinforce this lesson at home?

2. What do you think of Elizabeth Siegel's blunt style? What do you imagine might be the benefits and drawbacks of this style in interacting with children?

3. Spiegel never uses the word "character" to describe what she's teaching; she says she's teaching chess. From reading the chapter, which character traits do you think she is unwittingly teaching? Which character traits do you believe you are already unwittingly teaching when you interact with or "parent" your children?

4. The students in this chapter work so hard for the chess team – they study before and after school and give up their weekends to be a part of the team. What activities outside of school in your children's lives ignite this kind of passion for hard work?

### **Chapter 4: How to Succeed**

1. This chapter introduces OneGoal, an organization that helps prepare kids for college. OneGoal also believes in the power of teaching non-cognitive skills and focuses on these five: resourcefulness, resilience, ambition, professionalism, and integrity. Looking at these five, plus the seven character traits KIPP chose for its report card: zest, self control, gratitude, curiosity, optimism, grit, and social intelligence, which character strengths do you think are the most important for your children to learn? Do you think they should learn certain character traits at home and other ones at school?

**(See the next page for DISCUSSION QUESTIONS TO USE WITH TEACHERS)**

## Discussion Questions to Use with Teachers

### Introduction

1. This book shows how the conventional wisdom about the cognitive hypothesis – that success depends on cognitive skills – has been misguided. Paul Tough presents recent research that shows us rather than cognitive skills, it's traits like persistence, perseverance, grit, and curiosity that are more likely to help children succeed. In the introduction, Tough makes the bold statement, "We have been focusing on the wrong skills and abilities in our children, and we have been using the wrong strategies to help nurture and teach those skills." Having just read the introduction – what do you think this premise so far?
2. When you saw the word "grit" on the cover, what did it make you think about? What first came to your mind?

### Chapter 1: How to Fail (And How Not To)

1. In this chapter, Tough discusses the impact of how both poor and wealthy children *process* stressful events when they are young. Every family experiences stressful events. However, Tough makes it clear that the way in which children *respond to* or *bounce back from* these events affects the likelihood of their future success. In what ways do we currently help our students deal with or respond to stressful events in school? Now that we understand the impact of kids' inability to handle stressful events, can we brainstorm some additional ways to help them deal with the stresses of life in school?
2. What are some of the signs we might observe in school that our students might be having trouble coping with stress? (falling asleep in class, spotty attendance, etc.)
3. It may seem strange to consider that there are physiological reasons for students failing in school, but there is more and more evidence surfacing that shows the powerful impact of stress on our bodies. What do you think of this explanation for why some students struggle in school? If you have ever experienced any type of physical consequence as a result of stress (like sleeping problems as a result of an impending deadline) or known anyone else who has, and you feel comfortable sharing it, please do.
4. Tough reports that when parents and other caregivers foster close, caring relationships with their children, this provides the resilience needed to protect children from the traumatic effects of a harsh environment. "This message can sound a bit warm and fuzzy, but it is rooted in cold, hard science. The effect of good parenting is not just emotional or psychological, the neuroscientists say; it is biochemical." (p.28) As educators we are "caregivers" of children for a large part of their days. What implications can we take from this about the importance of classroom culture and teacher-student relationships? What are two things you could do tomorrow to protect your students from an addition harsh environment in school and foster a caring relationship in your class?

### Chapter 2: How to Build Character

1. What do you think about the different reasons Tough puts forth for why wealthier students and students from lower socioeconomic brackets *both* need to develop character strengths?
2. One observation, made by a disciple of Martin Seligman is, "To help chronically low-performing but intelligent students, educators and parents must first recognize that character is at least as important as intellect." (p.61) Do you agree? Why or why not? If you do agree, what do you think schools can do about this?
3. After reading about "grit" (introduced on p.74) how does it differ from self-control and conscientiousness, introduced just a few pages earlier? How does it differ from your preconceived ideas of what it meant from reading the word on the cover of the book?
4. In chapter 2, we learn that David Levin, head of the KIPP charter schools, decides to institute report cards for seven character traits (see the reference section below to see what it looks like). However, Dominic Randolph, the head of the private school, Riverdale, decides *not* to use a report card but rather to talk about character at parent nights and in staff meetings, and to encourage staff to come up with new programs about character. What are some of the benefits and drawbacks of each approach? Can you think of another way that might be better to instill character? Keep in mind that on p. 60 Tough writes most character programs have been vague, superficial, and have had no significant impact on behavior or academics, so think big!
5. On pages 78-80 the Character Education Partnership makes a distinction between "moral" character skills like ethical values such as fairness, generosity, and fairness versus "performance" character which encompasses skills like effort, diligence, and perseverance. A teacher at Riverdale felt that private school students wouldn't need to develop the performance character skills while inner city students *would* since these are the skills needed to succeed. Do you think wealthier students should learn "moral" character skills while inner city students learn "performance" character skills?

6. Note the idea of “dual-purpose instruction” is mentioned very briefly on p.98. The idea is that in addition to teaching a subject (like math or history) a teacher can *also* weave in instruction about character at the same time. In the book, Tough includes an example of a history teacher introducing a person in history who exemplifies a certain character trait or an English teacher who has students discuss how well a character in a book exemplifies some the character traits. Can you think of an example of how you might integrate “dual-purpose instruction” in your class?

### **Chapter 3: How to Think**

1. In this chapter, chess coach Elizabeth Spiegel creates the routine that students always review their chess games to analyze their strategies and learn from their mistakes. What do you do to insure that students in your class do more than just receive a grade and actually learn from their mistakes? Brainstorm other ways you can help your students learn from their mistakes. For an example, see the Student Reflection Template on pp. 97-98 in the book *Driven by Data* or p.8 of The Main Idea’s summary of this book.

2. What do you think of Elizabeth Siegel’s blunt style? What do you imagine might be the benefits and drawbacks of this style? What does she mean by the statement, “I try to teach my students that losing is something you do not something you are”?

3. Spiegel never uses the word “character” to describe what she’s teaching; she says she’s teaching chess. From reading the chapter, which character traits do you think she is unwittingly teaching? Which character traits do you believe you are already unwittingly teaching in your own class?

### **Chapter 4: How to Succeed**

1. In this chapter, Tough introduces research that says the US used to be one of the top countries when it came to percentages of students who *graduate* from college. Now, although the US still enrolls a respectable number of students, we are *second to last* in college *completion rates* among the 34 member countries of OECD (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development). Why do you think this might be the case?

2. This chapter introduces OneGoal, an organization that helps prepare kids for college. OneGoal also believes in the power of teaching non-cognitive skills and focuses on these five: resourcefulness, resilience, ambition, professionalism, and integrity. Looking at these five, plus the seven character traits KIPP chose for its report card: zest, self control, gratitude, curiosity, optimism, grit, and social intelligence (you can find it online by searching “KIPP character report card”) and perhaps even looking at the 24 character strengths listed in the table of contents on Amazon for Seligman’s book, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, which character strengths do you think are the most important to teach in your class? Might your school come to consensus on a few?