

7 traits kids need to succeed

Character traits include grit, self-control and social intelligence

By Janet Thomson and Manmeet Ahluwalia , [CBC News](#) Posted: Nov 23, 2012 5:13 AM ET Last Updated: Nov 23, 2012 1:31 PM ET

What if a child's success in school were measured not in IQ but in strength of character?

That's the question Paul Tough tries to answer in his book *How Children Succeed—Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*.

Education is once again a hot-button issue this fall, as many provincial governments trim their education budgets and labour negotiations between teachers and administrators in Ontario remain acrimonious.

Tough doesn't discount the importance of a solid education, but he says character is as important as academics in helping children become successful adults.

In this case, character is "not about morality," says Tough, a Canadian-born journalist. "It's more about learning a set of skills to help kids achieve their goals."

Tough's book outlines seven character traits that he says are key to success:

- Grit
- Curiosity
- Self-control
- Social intelligence
- Zest
- Optimism
- Gratitude

These traits were compiled by a couple of schools — one public, one private — in the New York City borough of the Bronx. These schools saw huge improvements in their students when they moved the emphasis from IQ and test scores to building character.

Developing character

Tough says that parents can "fall into the trap of thinking that character is somehow fixed—that you've either got a good kid or a bad kid."

But the educators and scientists that Tough interviewed for his book say that character is malleable. Kids can actually develop a set of strengths over time.

In order to do that, they must learn not only to accept but embrace failure.

"Failure can be very scary until you experience it a few times," says Tough.

This university dropout seems an unlikely guru of perseverance and grit. But he says that his own failure in university allowed him to take more chances later on in life. He knew how it felt to fail and disappoint his parents, and it spurred him to find his own way to success.

While he grew up in Toronto, Tough now lives in New York, where he is a contributing writer to the New York Times and a contributor to the National Public Radio program This American Life.

The importance of failure

Tough says that too often, we protect our kids from making mistakes.

"Failure is an important stepping stone on the way to success, because it helps to develop character," he says.

"If you're able to bounce back from failure, it gives you a certain amount of resilience and a confidence that next time you can experience a setback and recover and do better."

In *How Children Succeed*, Tough relates the story of Elizabeth Spiegel, a teacher at Intermediate School 318 in Brooklyn, who teaches chess as a way of showing students the benefits of failure.



As Spiegel pointed out to Tough, in order to improve at chess, you have to focus on "what you're bad at." You have to analyze your games and "figure out what you're doing wrong."

In chess, Tough says, failure is merely a stepping stone to your next victory.

Tough believes that children who are unused to failure are actually at a disadvantage.

"They end up being fragile and brittle, and they'll go out into the world and experience some kind of setback and it will often completely derail them, because they haven't had that experience, that opportunity to learn how to fail," he says.

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