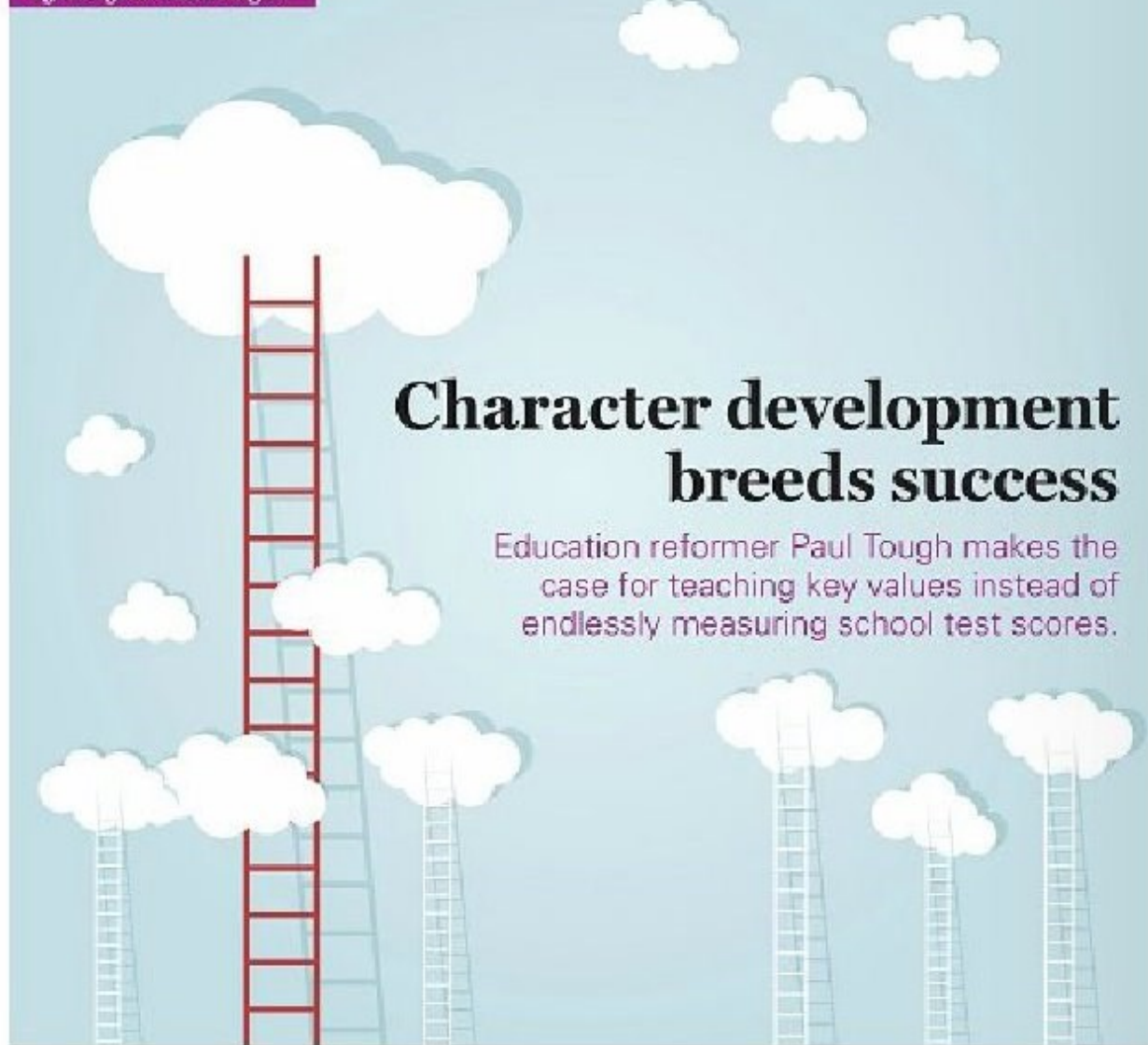


by Kelly St. John Regier



Character development breeds success

Education reformer Paul Tough makes the case for teaching key values instead of endlessly measuring school test scores.

Conventional wisdom holds that brainpower is the key to success. Hoping to develop our children's cognitive skills, we work with them early on to learn to recognize letters and words, calculate, and detect patterns – the kind of intelligence measured in IQ tests. (Remember those Baby Einstein videos?)

But what if the keys to success in life come from somewhere else? What if it is less about cognitive skills and more about character-driven qualities such as persistence, self-control, curiosity, grit and self-confidence?

That's the hypothesis made by Paul Tough in his book, "How Children Succeed," which was published in

paperback on July 2. An education reformer and former New York Times writer, Tough makes a compelling case that character is created by encountering and overcoming failure, and that our society is letting down children at both ends of the socioeconomic spectrum.

Some privileged children are insulated from adversity, sometimes even from, for example, a well-deserved F, Tough says. Meanwhile, poor children face a variety of difficult challenges – dysfunctional neighborhoods and inadequate healthcare and nutrition – without any support to break their fall.

Tough brought his message to Orange County in June, when he spoke at a forum sponsored by the Children and

Families Commission of Orange County, THINK Together (Teaching, Helping, Inspiring and Nurturing Kids) and Orange County United Way. These groups are working to improve educational outcomes for all children in the county.

Tough advises parents in more affluent suburbs to recognize that children of wealthy parents are often too sheltered from adversity for their own good.

"Challenge is something that a lot of kids, even in affluent schools, are missing out on," Tough says. "We don't want them to fail, because we're worried it will wound them permanently. It feels lousy when it's happening, but when kids get to practice at failing, they develop a tool kit to help them deal with it later on."

Developing that character tool kit is what helps children become happy and successful adults. For example, Tough cites the famous "marshmallow experiment," conducted by psychologist Walter Mischel in the 1960s. His study showed that the 30 percent of preschoolers who could show enough self-control to resist eating a marshmallow right away, in exchange for getting two later on, did better in school and were more successful as adults.

Tough contends that many privileged children may lack a nurturing connection to their parents while adolescents, when they feel pushed too hard to achieve academically.

But his heart also seems to lie with the travails of disadvantaged children, whose troubled home lives can chip away at their ability to develop resilience.

"The part of the brain most affected by early stress is the prefrontal cortex, which is critical in self-regulatory activities of all kinds, both emotional and cognitive," Tough writes. "As a

Kids and families come first
 The Children & Families Commission of Orange County, which co-sponsored a forum last June that included a talk by education reformer Paul Tough, is an Irvine-based nonprofit rooted in four goals:

- **Healthy children** – Ensure the physical, emotional and intellectual health of kids from prenatal through age 5
- **Early learning** – Furnish a variety of educational opportunities for young children, to maximize their scholastic potential
- **Support families** – Engage in efforts that promote good parenting for the optimal development of young kids
- **Top-notch service** – Stress quality staff, efficient operations and ongoing performance measurement and reviews to create an organization continually dedicated to children and families occhildrenandfamilies.com

result, children who grow up in stressful environments generally find it harder to concentrate, harder to sit still, harder to rebound from disappointments and harder to follow directions. When you're overwhelmed by uncontrollable impulses and distracted by negative feelings, it's hard to learn the alphabet."

Tough advocates interventions to help disadvantaged families provide the security and stability children need to grow up healthy.

"The biological effects of stress are going to affect them for the rest of their lives," he says. "We really need to think about how to help kids who

are growing up in adversity."



As for the education system, Tough believes that it has overemphasized cognitive skills to the detriment of character education. However, teaching conscientiousness and self-control is not as straightforward as memorizing multiplication tables or learning grammar rules.

"There are no worksheets for curiosity. You can't have a tutor for self-control," he says. "But character can be nurtured through social and personal support."

Tough says that his favorite piece of research cited in his book is one that studied how mother rats care for their young.

Neuroscientists at McGill University found that adult rats who had, as pups, received licking and grooming from their mothers recovered much faster from stressful events than those who hadn't been nurtured in this manner.


"The rats who had been licked by their mothers did better in life," Tough says. "They were braver, more curious,


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– Paul Tough

healthier and better at mazes. As the parent of a 6-month-old, I didn't start licking him when I read that. But I did start thinking about how a parent can help a child deal with stress."

"I definitely tend to err on the side of parents being responsive to the needs and cries of their babies, being there for them and responding to their cues," Tough adds.

"That stuff matters. When you are playing and cooing, you're performing some of the most important brain building you can do." 

Kelly St. John Regier
An award-winning journalist who lives in Foothill Ranch, Kelly St. John Regier has a master's degree in journalism from UC Berkeley. As a staff writer at the San Francisco Chronicle, she covered a wide range of stories, including Oakland's homicide epidemic and Scott Peterson's murder trial. In 2002, Kelly won an Emmy for her short documentary film, "Forever Fourteen," which aired nationally on PBS.