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Letting kids fail in order to succeed

By Sandra Davie Senior Writer

How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, And The Hidden Power Of Character By Paul Tough
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 231 pages

AT THE beginning of the school year last month, KiasuParents.com had an ongoing discussion on which tuition centres and programmes would give children a head start in the new school year.

As usual parents are focused on raising their children's grades, with the aim of getting them into the gifted programme or an integrated programme school.

What they don't think about enough, as Education Minister Heng Swee Keat pointed out on the first day of the school year, is how to stretch their children in the non-academic areas.

In particular, how to help their young ones build their character - to develop skills like perseverance, grit, optimism, conscientiousness and self-control, which emerging research shows do more to determine success than the Primary School Leaving Examination or O-level scores.

American journalist Paul Tough's new book, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character*, presents the compelling findings of researchers which show that qualities that matter most to children's success may have to do with character as much as intelligence or talent. It also makes the argument that parents and schools can play a significant role in nurturing the character traits that foster success.

Among the research that Mr Tough goes into is the famous "marshmallow experiment" of the psychologist Walter Mischel, whose studies, starting in the late 1960s, found that children who mustered the self-control to resist eating a marshmallow right away in return for two marshmallows later on did better in school and were more successful in their adult life.

More recently, there are the studies done by American Angela Duckworth, a school teacher who went on to become a psychology professor.

In her years as a teacher, Professor Duckworth noticed what most of us already know: Students who persevered at a task did the best and those who didn't put in much effort didn't do very well.

She started out studying self-control and demonstrated that it has an effect on a student's grades. But she came to think that there was some other skill - not just self-control but having a passion for something and a determination to stick with it despite setbacks.

She termed it "grit" and went on to invent the "grit scale", a questionnaire that tests how likely a person will stick with projects. And she found that people who say they persevere with tasks are much more likely to succeed, even in tasks that involve a lot of what we think of as IQ.

She gave the test to students who were in the National Spelling Bee, and those with the highest grit scores were more likely to go on to the later rounds. She gave it to first-year students at the University of Pennsylvania and found that smarter students actually had less grit than their peers who scored lower on an intelligence test.

The "grittier" students attained higher grade point averages than the "smarter" students, which showed that those who are not as bright as their peers compensate by working harder. And their effort pays off.

She also gave the test to cadets at the military academy at West Point and it predicted who was going

to survive the school's intense basic training programme known as "Beast Barracks".

All this research then raises the question: Can grit and determination be taught?

Mr Tough's book tracks alternative schools, education programmes and outreach projects that have tried to implement the lessons, as well as the successes and challenges they have experienced.

Some like teacher Elizabeth Spiegel's chess programme at a school in Brooklyn are designed to make youngsters take risks and if they fail, to learn how to manage them in a constructive way.

At the famous Knowledge Is Power Programme charter schools in New York City, which serve a mostly low-income student population, results have also been achieved among some young people simply by immersing them in a culture of character, making them aware of how certain character traits can lead to greater success and allowing their own ambition to take over from there.

But Mr Tough argues that parents too have an important role to play. They have to help their kids learn how to manage failure and adversity.

This means that parents actually have to allow their children to experience failure and adversity. Especially high-achieving youngsters from privileged homes, whose parents are concerned solely with keeping their children's grades up and minimise the challenges their children face in school.

But experiencing failure and adversity, researchers have found, is a critical part of building character. Psychologists like Mark Seery of the University at Buffalo, State University of New York, found that adults who had experienced little or no adversity growing up were actually less happy and confident than those who had faced a few significant setbacks and hurdles in childhood.

Overcoming those obstacles, the researchers say, "could teach effective coping skills, help engage social support networks, create a sense of mastery over past adversity, and foster belief in the ability to cope successfully in the future".

When parents shield their children from every possible adversity - when they call their teachers to get an extension on a project, when they encourage them to choose only those subjects they are good at - they are denying their children these character-building experiences.

As Mr Tough says paradoxically enough, giving our kids room to fail may be one of the best ways to help them succeed.

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