

Recap of Paul Tough Discussion
Author of *“How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character”*
January 27, 2014 at The Lamplighter School

Several da Vinci parents and teachers attended the talk by Paul Tough at Lamplighter this past Monday. We thought you would like to see a synopsis of his presentation.

Regardless of socio-economics, all kids have too much stress and not enough challenge.

Emphasis has been on a child’s cognitive ability (IQ) to the detriment of encouraging the character needed to succeed. Noncognitive skills like persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit and self-confidence are more crucial than sheer brainpower to achieving success.

There are two times in life when character is easily groomed: Early Childhood and Adolescence.

Character is created by encountering and overcoming failure. Paul Tough explains why American children from both ends of the socioeconomic spectrum are missing out on these essential experiences. Some children are insulated from adversity, beginning with their baby-proofed nurseries and continuing well into their parentally financed young adulthoods. Others face no end of challenges — from inadequate nutrition and medical care to dysfunctional schools and neighborhoods. Both extremes of American childhood are devastating: a safety net drawn so tight it’s a harness; or almost nothing to break their fall.

Stress, trauma, noise, criticism, violence create illness in kids. When it becomes chronic, the response systems become set. This is called “Toxic Stress.” When infants develop secure attachments, they develop insulation against toxic stress.

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. As a 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. And that has a direct effect on their performance in school. When you’re overwhelmed by uncontrollable impulses and distracted by negative feelings, it’s hard to learn the alphabet.”

For both rich and poor teenagers, certain family characteristics predicted children’s maladjustment, including low levels of maternal attachment, high levels of parental criticism and minimal after-school adult supervision.

Among the affluent children, researchers found the main cause of distress was ‘excessive achievement pressures and isolation from parents — both physical and emotional.’

The first few years matter so much for the healthy development of a child's brain; they represent a unique opportunity to make a difference in a child's future. However, while pure IQ is stubbornly resistant to improvement after about age 8, executive functions and the ability to handle stress and manage strong emotions can be improved, sometimes dramatically, well into adolescence and even adulthood.

7 essential character traits (they can be changed and improved):

- Optimism
- Zest
- Grit
- Curiosity
- Social Intelligence
- Gratitude
- Self-Control

We want to foster a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset. After the age of 8, pure IQ doesn't change much. However, if you believe that with hard work and persistence you can succeed, you will.

Affluent kids were being protected from challenge. They aren't being allowed to fail. Stress is sometimes confused with challenge. A certain amount of adversity is beneficial.

An example Paul Tough referenced was a public school chess team that was winning each year over all the other teams including the best private schools. In interviewing the chess coach, this was her strategy for helping the children to develop the ability to stick with a task even in the face of losing. The chess coach would film and replay winning and losing chess matches with her high school team, offering critiques but not belittling anyone. She gave them the skill and confidence to win on their own and the tools to manage failure.

How do you teach character? You can't be too nurturing up to 12 to 18 months. You should come every time a child cries. However, you don't need to be running every time an 8 year old cries. They need to learn to fail and need you to model it, too.

Kids need to learn how to deal with frustration, calm themselves down, and get along with others.