

Education

Failure Is Not a Bad Option. Resilience helps kids more than high SATs do

By Belinda Luscombe

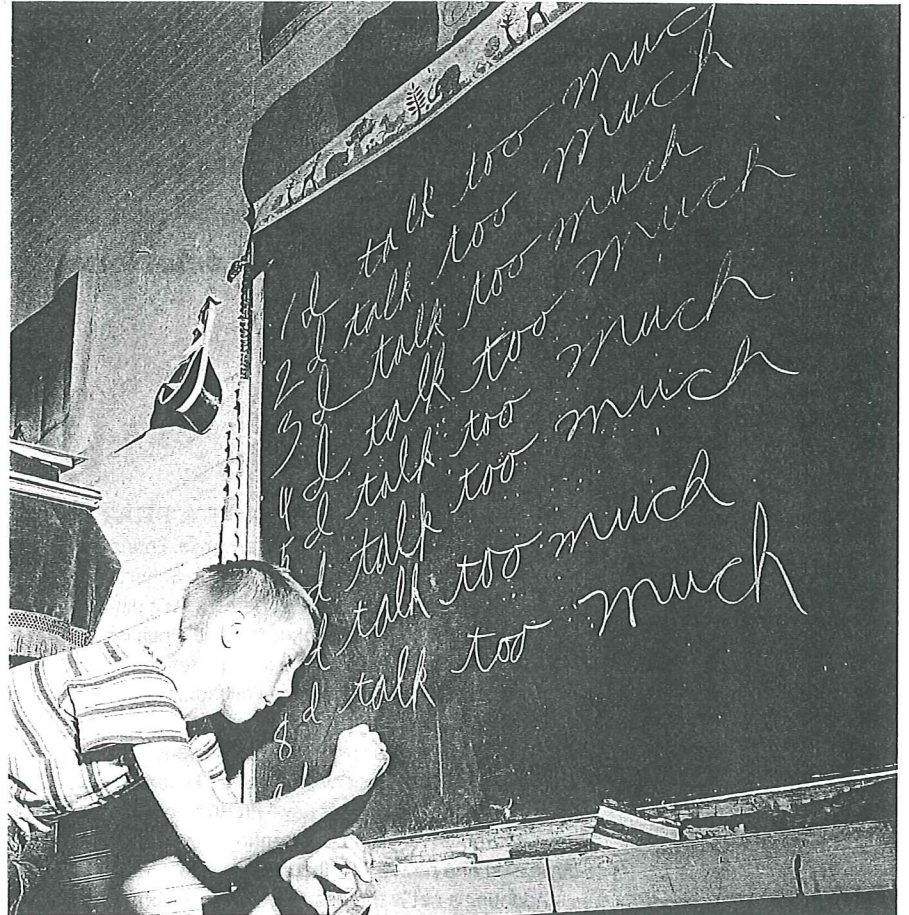
PEOPLE HAVE BEEN RAISING CHILDREN for about 2 million years now. You'd think the enterprise would have lost its novelty. Yet so much drama surrounds the contemporary act of bringing up offspring, with tiger moms squaring off against free-range parents, that it's a wonder we don't all remain childless merely to avoid wading into the fray.

One of the lodestars that parents have followed through all weather is educational achievement. Children who get good grades tend to do well at university and well at life. There's a huge chasm, for example, between the lifetime earnings of college graduates and high school graduates. So, by all means, let's focus on making kids as brainy as possible.

But now there's a trickle of thought that says academic ability may not be all it's cracked up to be. Rather than so much focus on cognitive skills, some heretics suggest, a little more grit is what kids really need.

In Paul Tough's new book, *How Children Succeed*, he suggests that grit is the cornerstone of educational reform, especially in the poor communities he's used to covering as a journalist. His research-laden book argues that while IQ is stubborn to change after age 8, the ability to persist, focus and adapt is more malleable, even into early adulthood. And while IQ may be what gets kids into college, they need a whole other set of skills to graduate. "Not long ago, the United States led the world in producing college graduates," he writes. "Now it leads the world in producing college dropouts."

Tough, himself a college dropout, points to studies that show that a good GPA, even from a lousy high school, is a far better predictor of whether a student will finish college than a high mark on the SATs. Not coincidentally, GPAs reward perseverance, character, time-management skills and



the ability to work well with others.

Although Madeline Levine's recent *Teach Your Children Well* targets the other end of the socioeconomic and child-rearing spectrum, she reaches some of the same conclusions. A family therapist to wealthy Californians, Levine spent years counseling youngsters whose high academic performance had left them mentally, emotionally and sometimes physically frail. Hers is a manual to restore family sanity: less emphasis on grades, more on values, less homework, more sleep, less

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fretting by parents, more encouraging.

And what if families can't manage? Can schools teach grit? Tough visits schools for the elite and schools for the impoverished. Both, it turns out, have a problem with failure: the wealthy kids don't see enough of it to learn resilience, and the poor kids see too much of it to learn persistence.

He finds some oases of hope, including a fancy school that's taken its foot off the grades-and-homework gas pedal and teachers in low-income schools who have had success using discipline, habituation and a careful reframing of the way students think and react. He characterizes one extremely successful chess teacher's method as "calibrated meanness." Good marks on tests may be an accurate bellwether of how well a child's life will turn out. But, Tough suggests, an easy A will help kids less than a hard-won B. ■