Got Grit?  
Why It Matters  
BY DIANA SIMEON  |  PHOTO BY BETH SEGAL

What does the checklist for your teenager’s next few years of high school look like? Chances are, it includes:

✓ Good grades  
✓ Solid SAT or ACT scores  
✓ Positive social experiences  
✓ Rewarding extracurriculars

But what if that checklist didn’t much guarantee your teenager’s success, beyond perhaps getting into college? In fact, what if the checklist that perhaps most guaranteed your teenager would grow into a thriving adult looked more like this:

✓ Get some grit.

Yes, grit. For most parents, grit is not what leaps to mind when we think about what we want for our teenagers. But it should. That’s because researchers are finding that when it comes to success, grit is an important piece of the equation. This issue, Your Teen looks up close at grit: what it is, why everyone is talking about it and how to develop more of it in our teenagers.

NOT JUST FOR COWBOYS
So, what is grit? “It’s perseverance in pursuit of a passion,” explains Paul Tough, author of the New York Times bestseller, How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character, and speaker at the 2012 Education Innovation Summit at Hathaway Brown School in Cleveland, Ohio. “It’s those people who have a big goal or dream and don’t let anything interrupt them in pursuit of that.”

Perhaps this idea doesn’t surprise you. We’ve all seen perseverance make the difference between success and failure, right? Think Oprah, J.K. Rowling and Steve Jobs. (See Top 10 Why the big deal? Tough suggests that our schools—and perhaps we parents—have been too focused on our teenager’s cognitive abilities, that IQ, the narrow band of skills that get measured on standardized tests, is the one quality that matters most in a child’s success.

“But scientists and educators have identified a very different set of skills that are at least as important as IQ and arguably more important,” he adds. These skills includes traits like curiosity, conscientiousness, self-control, optimism and, you guessed it, grit. “Grit gets most of the attention,” says Tough.

The credit for that goes to University of Pennsylvania psychologist, Angela Duckworth. A couple of years ago, Duckworth developed a way to measure grit, via a questionnaire she calls the “grit scale.” (See sidebar: “Testing for Grit”) She found that how well an individual scores on this grit scale is a better predictor of success than his or her IQ, test scores, grades, and even other talents.

For example, Duckworth found that the most successful freshmen at Penn
were not those at the top of their high school class (as measured by grade point average and test scores), but rather the students with the highest grit scores. She found the same thing with contestants at the National Spelling Bee. Those with the most grit beat those with higher verbal IQ scores.

And her test was a great predictor of success at West Point; the cadets with the highest grit score were most likely to finish Beast Barracks, the grueling basic-training course.

It’s not that our cognitive abilities—and other talents—aren’t important. They are. In fact, most of us, no matter how much grit we have, will never write a Pulitzer Prize winning novel or win a marathon or make a major scientific breakthrough.

Rather, what Duckworth has shown is that these abilities, on their own, are not a guarantee. Grit matters too. | continued on p.25
TOP 10
STORIES OF GRIT

Listen to the most successful among us—in industry, the arts, sports, whatever—reflect on the experiences that led to their achievements and you can’t help but think about Angela Duckworth’s grit questionnaire. Read on to find out why.

1. I grew up in a house where my father encouraged my brother and me to fail. I specifically remember coming home and saying, Dad, Dad, I tried out for this or that and I was horrible, and he would high-five me and say, Way to go. He reframed my definition of failure from an early age. Failure to me became not trying, instead of the outcome. —**Spanx founder Sara Blakely**

2. I have missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I have lost almost 300 games. On 26 occasions I have been trusted to take the game winning shot, and I missed. I have failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed. —**Basketball superstar Michael Jordan**

3. A mere seven years after my graduation day, I had failed on an epic scale. An exceptionally short-lived marriage had imploded, and I was jobless, a lone parent, and as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain, without being homeless...I was set free, because my greatest fear had been realized. —**J.K. Rowling, author of the mega-popular Harry Potter series**

4. I didn’t see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. —**Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple, who was fired from Apple in 1985 before rejoining the company in 1997**

5. I worked jobs I didn’t like. I worked jobs I loved, but had no chance of being a career. I worked jobs that barely paid the rent...In every job, I would justify it in my mind, whether I loved it or hated it, that I was getting paid to learn and every experience would be of value when I figured out what I wanted to do when I grew up. —**Mark Cuban, owner of the Dallas Mavericks, Landmark Theaters, and Magnolia Pictures**

6. Luck has nothing to do with it, because I have spent many, many hours, countless hours on the court working for my one moment in time, not knowing when it would come. —**Tennis star Serena Williams**

7. My parents were working class people. My father was a city worker. We didn’t have a lot of money. I grew up on the South Side of Chicago...If I were to point to anything that was different, it was the fact that I had somebody around me who helped me understand early on that hard work, discipline and the choices I made in life were really what defined me. —**First lady Michelle Obama**

8. I always did something I was a little not ready to do. I think that’s how you grow. When there’s that moment of ‘Wow, I’m not really sure I can do this,’ and you push through those moments, that’s when you have a breakthrough. —**Marissa Mayer, Chief Executive Officer of Yahoo**

9. I actually ended up going to auditions in New York for Broadway stuff. I didn’t make it there...So I started singing at karaoke contests and singing every single weekend at something, trying out singing the national anthem here or there. When I was 12, I started playing guitar and writing my own songs, and that’s when it became something I could never stop thinking about. —**Music star Taylor Swift**

10. I’ve never really viewed myself as particularly talented. Where I excel is ridiculous, sickening work ethic. You know, while the other guy’s sleeping, I’m working. While the other guy’s eating, I’m working. —**Actor Will Smith**
GET GRIT

So, how do teens build grit? Researchers are still investigating why some of us have lots of grit and others not so much—and, as Tough jokes, there are no grit camps or classes...yet. This issue, Your Teen explores three ways that experts say you can help your teenager get more grit.

1. Allow Setbacks
Take a look at Duckworth’s questionnaire (Sidebar: “Testing for Grit”), and you’ll see that how we respond to setbacks—i.e. how we manage failure—is a key to grit. “A lot of how parents protect their kids is by intervening,” Tough told Your Teen. “It’s born out of thinking we’re helping our kids, but it can be counter productive.” Indeed, when teenagers experience setbacks—and overcome them—they learn that if they try again (and try harder) they can succeed.

Sounds a bit like grit, right? But, the only (only) way for teenagers to learn this is to let them be set back. “Let them face the consequence,” stresses Marcia Hanlon, a licensed social worker in Chicago. Take, for example, being late for school or forgetting homework. Experts say that teenagers can handle it. “You could say, ‘Do we need to change your alarm?’ Or, ‘Do you need two alarms?’ But, don’t go back to, ‘Oh, I’ll get you up,'” Hanlon recommends.

As for the homework, leave it alone. “Don’t bring it to them,” says Madeline Levine, psychologist and author of Teach Your Children Well. “That’s a really valuable lesson to figure out: How your teenager can come up with a better strategy.” (See our Q&A for more advice from Levine.) While it’s difficult to watch our teenagers stumble, think of it as chalking one up for grit.

“At some point, no matter how smart you are, you will hit a wall,” notes Brent Bussboom, an English teacher at Reno High School, which last year was ranked No. 1 in Nevada. “The teenagers whose parents let them struggle appropriately are the kids who know that if they work at it, they are going to get it.”

2. Embrace Challenge
While writing How Children Succeed, Tough spent many hours with Dominic Randolph, headmaster of the Riverdale Country School in New York City. “His school was doing fantastically in lots of ways,” explains Tough. “But, he was worried about his students. He felt they were overly protected from real challenges: by their parents, by the school itself and really, by their whole culture.”

In other words, the students at Riverdale worked hard, but this kind of academic stress is not necessarily grit-building challenge. “For me,” says Tough, “it’s like the difference between exercising on a treadmill and climbing a mountain. Running on a treadmill is really hard. But when you punch in those numbers at the beginning of your workout, you pretty much know that you are going to make it through the end. But, when you climb a mountain, you actually don’t know what’s going to happen. You are taking a risk and you might actually fail.”

Now, before you pick up the phone and call Outward Bound, consider for a moment what Tough means by challenge. “I think there are ways that teenagers want to be challenged—and take some risks—so whether that means riding the subway alone or taking a class that is harder, it’s that kind of push that lots of kids need.”

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3. Develop a “Growth Mindset”
As you know, handling setbacks is critical when it comes to grit. But another major component of grit is sustained effort. You know, plain old hard work. And this is where a growth mindset can be tremendously helpful. So, what’s a growth mindset?

It’s a concept that was developed by Stanford University, Carol Dweck, way back in the 1970s. Dweck identified two basic mindsets. People with a “fixed” mindset believe that their inherent ability is fixed and cannot be improved. Meanwhile, those with a “growth” mindset believe that hard work brings improvement.

“Kids who get praised for just being smart or gifted develop a fixed mindset and then they get afraid of failure and stop working so hard,” Tough says. “While kids who get praised for their effort tend to develop a growth mindset that pushes them to work harder and see failure as a temporary set back rather than a sign that something is terribly wrong.”

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TESTING FOR GRIT

How much grit do you have? It only takes a minute to find out. Go to www.sas.upenn.edu/~duckworth and select “Get Your Grit Score.” This brief assessment, developed by University of Pennsylvania psychologist Angela Duckworth predicts academic and professional success.

“Intelligence is only part of the story, maybe even a small part of the story,” Duckworth told an audience at TEDx in 2009.

To find out the rest of your story, rate yourself on the following non-IQ competencies.

GRIT QUESTIONS

• Setbacks don’t discourage me.
• I am a hard worker.
• I finish whatever I begin.
• I am diligent.

LACK OF GRIT QUESTIONS

• I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.
• I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for short time, but later lost interest.
• New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.
• I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.

Duckworth’s assessment only evaluates grit, without any reference to intelligence. A focus on goals, management of setbacks and work ethic play the star roles.
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No surprise, then, that helping our teenagers develop a growth mindset builds grit—and for parents that starts with focusing on our teenager’s effort.

For example, if your teenager comes home with an A, try not to make the grade the centerpiece of your conversation. “An A, wow, you’re smart!” Rather, praise the effort they made to get that grade. “You could say, ‘It’s fun to get an A. You must feel really good about that. Tell me what you did to get there,’” explains Debbie Silver, a Texas-based educator and author of Fall Down 7 Times, Get Up 8: Teaching Kids to Succeed. “Let them know you are proud of how hard they worked.” And if your teenager comes home with a C or loses the soccer game or bombs the audition? Again, focus on the effort: “That must be disappointing. What can you do differently next time around?”

Silver knows first-hand that a growth mindset can work wonders, while a fixed mindset—no matter how intelligent your teenager is—can do just the opposite. “Two of my sons were labeled as gifted, but I saw them struggle more in later life than the two who had to struggle for everything they got,” she notes. That’s because her “gifted” sons hadn’t learned what her less academically children had learned early on, which was “not to give up. They had learned to keep at it.”

Sums up Sue Sadler, associate head of Hathaway Brown, “It’s so hard to watch kids struggle. But when you solve the problems for them, you send the subtle message that they can’t do it for themselves. When they have that experience of sticking with something and getting to the end, it’s like a spiral, where they want to achieve more and more.”

UPDATING YOUR CHECKLIST
And when grit doesn’t develop? What then?

After an excerpt of How Children Succeed was published in the New York Times last fall, Tough received hundreds of comments from readers. “There was one named Dave,” Tough recalls. “He said I’m left now in my 30s often wondering how much more I could have accomplished if I wasn’t terrified of failure and prone to shying away from ventures where my success wasn’t guaranteed.”

That’s what grit offers our teenagers. The strength to try—and try again—when there is no guarantee. When failure is possible, but so is success beyond their wildest dreams.

So, what does your checklist look like now? ☐

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