

True Grit

Helps kids succeed

Developing character strengths is just as important to your child's future success as building academic skills.

WORDS Michael Grose

'Talent or persistence. Which would you choose for your child?'

I often ask this question at my parenting seminars and the responses are fascinating. Parents naturally want both. Sorry, but that's not an option. When pushed most parents choose talent over persistence, which in many ways reflects the current thinking around achievement. However, intelligence, sporting prowess and ability in whatever it is we value will only get a child or young person so far. Talent is purely potential. They need more than this to achieve sustained excellence in anything they do. It is the character traits of hard work and the ability to stick at a task and see it through that make all the difference.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Outliers*, describes twenty-something American student Renee, who took 22 minutes to work out a complicated math question. The average student gives up after THREE minutes, preferring to ask for help than work through the problem. Renee was unusual in persisting for so long until she got the solution. The funny thing is, she doesn't describe herself as a good math student, yet she is highly successful at maths. Grit rather than pure math talent are her forte.

CHARACTER MATTERS

Cognitive (thinking and reasoning) skills by themselves aren't enough for children to succeed over the long journey. Many recent studies (most notably the work of US-based Angela Duckworth) have found that character, not cognitive ability, is the single most

reliable determinant of how a person's life will turn out. The traits associated with success include the inclination to persist at a boring task (grit), the ability to delay gratification (self-control) and the tendency to follow through with a plan (conscientiousness). These are invaluable traits at school, in the workplace and in life in general. Character works as an indicator of success when it's seen as set of strengths and personality traits rather than personal values such as loyalty, tolerance or forgiveness.

CHARACTER IS FORGED UNDER DIFFICULTY

The key character traits of grit, self-control and conscientiousness are forged under hardship and duress. This makes our current propensity to over protect and over indulge kids problematic. When kids continually experience easy success we set them up for failure because when they finally face up to difficult situations many lack the capacity to push through the tough times. Encouraging kids to step out of their comfort zones and take learning and social risks is one of the great challenges for modern parents. It's critical that we challenge children and young people to attempt activities where failure is a real option. Overcoming setbacks and pushing through difficulties is how character is formed.

CHARACTER IS MALLEABLE

The good news is that character, like intelligence, is malleable. It's not fixed. It's important to establish in your own mind as a parent, and also in your children's minds, that character traits such as grit, self-control and conscientiousness can be developed. To this end it's important that parents steer clear of using absolute language to label behaviour and express views that traits and abilities are fixed. Comments such as 'You're no good at math' become a rule that young people learn to live by, and become default thinking that's hard to budge.

MAKE GRIT PART OF A FAMILY'S BRAND

In my book *Thriving!* I wrote about how every family has it's own distinctive brand, which is a reflection of the strengths and traits that all members share. For instance, if high work ethic is a common trait then it's a fair bet that hard work is something parents focus on in their family. Parents can actively promote

grit and persistence in kids by making character part of their family's brand. They can focus on character in conversations. They can share experiences where character paid off for them in their lives. They can discuss how character contributes to excellence and success in everyday life including at work, at school and in the sporting field. Character and its many components can become part the family narrative regardless of the age of the children.

BUILD PROPRIETARY LANGUAGE AROUND CHARACTER

Families develop their own language around what's important to them and that needs to include the language of character if parents want to foster excellence. Continuous messaging of terms and phrases such as 'hang tough' and 'hard yakka' help weave character traits into the family DNA. Parents should reflect on the language and terms they already use and build key phrases and terms around the following key character strengths: grit, self-control, conscientiousness, enthusiasm, social intelligence, gratitude, optimism, and curiosity.

CHARACTER BECOMES THE DEFAULT MECHANISM

Habit and character go hand in hand. Conscientious young people don't go around consciously deciding that they've got to delay the fun stuff until they've done their work. They've just made it their default mechanism to stick at their task, or delay gratification or jump into a task with enthusiasm. Conscientiousness doesn't always serve a young person well. They can sometimes place full focus on menial or unimportant tasks when a smarter option may be to cruise and save energy for the important times such as exams. That's where parental guidance plays a part. However, in the long run conscientiousness serves a young person well when it's their default because when the stakes are high and they really need to work hard, they will automatically make the right choice. In fact, it will be the only option they see when excellence really matters.

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