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## Camp and Character: An Interview with Paul Tough

*Paul Tough, author of How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character, delivered a keynote speech on Thursday, February 14th, at the 2013 ACA National Conference. He is a contributing writer to the New York Times Magazine and has been featured on television and radio stations like PBS, MSNBC, and NPR, and in TIME Magazine, USA Today, and the New York Times. ACA recently spoke with Tough about why character strengths are critical to success, the importance of connection, and what camps offer kids in the way of role models, community, and unique learning environments.*

### Can you tell us a little bit about your background? What makes you interested in education and youth development?

I think I have education in my genes. A lot of people in my family were educators, including my parents and both of my grandfathers. I went into journalism and eventually found my way into reporting about education. I've been writing about education for about a decade.

My first book (*Whatever It Takes*, 2008) was about the Harlem Children's Zone and its CEO and founder, Geoffrey Canada. And when I got to the end of that book, while I'd learned a lot from my reporting, I still had some big questions about what was happening in childhood — not just in a high-poverty neighborhood like central Harlem, but also in neighborhoods all over the country.

I set out to write this new book (*How Children Succeed*, 2012) to look more broadly at what was going on in the development of children and, in particular, to take on the question of why some kids succeed while other kids fail.

The one other thing that focused my mind on this question when I started researching this book a few years ago was that my wife and I had our first child. Our son, Ellington, just turned three. His birth just made all of these questions that much more urgent and personal.

### What are the key ingredients to success — the qualities that a child must have to become a successful adult?

I think kids need many different things. But the basic thesis of my book is that, in this country for the past couple decades, we've been overemphasizing IQ as the one measure of whether a child will succeed or fail. We've been very focused on this narrow set of cognitive skills that get measured on standardized tests.

And while cognitive skills certainly do matter, the scientists and educators who I wrote about in my book have identified a different set of skills that they say matter a whole lot in a child's success. These are skills like grit, curiosity, perseverance, conscientiousness, and optimism.

I'm convinced by the research and by my reporting that these skills really do matter a great deal to a child's success.

### Are people born with these qualities or can they be taught? For example, can grit, perseverance, and resiliency be learned — or are some children just born with these qualities?

Kids are certainly influenced by the home environment in which they grow up, but teachers, youth development professionals, and mentors can do a lot to help them develop these skills. One thing that we've learned, especially from research in neuroscience over the past decade or so, is that when children grow up in environments of intense and chronic stress — what doctors call "toxic stress" — it makes it very difficult for them to develop the kinds of skills that they need to succeed.

One thing that can help children deal with that stress is when they are able to form a close bond with a parent or another caregiver — what psychologists call "secure attachment." That relationship can overcome a lot of those kinds of stresses. But the reality is there are many kids who grow up in very stressful situations without that kind of parental support, and for those kids, it's very difficult for them to develop these skills. But that's not to say that it's impossible — just

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difficult.

**Do you think more people in general are starting to pay attention to noncognitive skills and their connection to success? This has been something that camps have recognized for years.**

I do — very much so. When I started researching this book even just a few years ago, it still felt like a pretty quiet discussion. It felt like a discussion that was going on only in a fragmented way in different fields and in various organizations.

Over the past few years, I've noticed how much this topic has emerged as a central one for educators, pediatricians, people working in government, and people working for youth development organizations.

It may just be that the rest of the world is catching up with the camp community, but I think it's a conversation that's going on in a lot of places now. Many people are coming to understand that these skills are really important for children's success.

**In December of 2012, it was announced that a new grant will expand school hours for ten school districts in five states. Educators are hoping to use the time for more one-on-one connection with students and exploration of interests like music and art, along with other basic learning. Do you think this is moving in the right direction?**

I do. I think that makes a lot of sense, especially for children who are growing up in disadvantaged situations — they need more time in school. Some of the schools I visited while writing my book let out students very early, which often meant they were sending kids into environments that were nowhere near as good as their school environment.

But I also agree absolutely that mostly what kids need in that extra school time is a broader range of activities. They certainly need more physical activity. I think they need more arts education. But what's central is that they find a connection — that they're in some sort of out-of-school program or class where they're getting more one-on-one instruction, and really one-on-one connection, with a great teacher, mentor, counselor, or coach.

Both in my reporting and in the research that I've read, it's clear how much the relationship between a child and some important adult in his or her life can matter to that child. That relationship can truly have a transformative effect on a child.

What's most remarkable to me is that it doesn't seem to matter much who the adult is. It can be a football coach, chess coach, music teacher, geography teacher, or camp counselor. When kids find that one person to connect with, it can really change the path they're on entirely.

**Have you come across studies that can easily measure character in quantitative terms?**

That's a real challenge. There are some schools that are doing interesting experiments in trying to measure character strengths and how they change and develop in childhood. But the reality is we're starting from a pretty low knowledge base. I think it's become quite clear over the past couple of decades that these skills matter a whole lot and that they are malleable in kids, but we still don't have a great way to measure them.

There are some character strengths, like conscientiousness and optimism, for which psychologists have come up with reliable assessments. A psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, Angela Duckworth, who I wrote about in *How Children Succeed*, has developed what she calls the "grit test" — a twelve-question test that lets you measure your own grit. I think that people are working on trying to come up with these measures. But we're still in the early days.

**Could this current scarcity of measures for character be why things like IQ take precedence in academia?**

Absolutely. This is a classic problem of bureaucracy or social science: We often make the mistake of thinking that we value whatever is easiest to measure. And especially in this moment when we really care a lot about accountability in schools, there has been an increasing emphasis on finding measures — like a student's standardized test scores — to tell us if a teacher is a good teacher.

I understand that urge. I think there's a lot that is positive about that push toward accountability. But the reality is when you're doing that, you have to overcome the temptation to emphasize those things that are easiest to measure. You have to look really honestly at which skills are important. And if some of those skills happen to be more difficult to measure than others, we need to figure out a way around that obstacle. The answer is not just to ignore those skills — it's to look for better measures; it's to be more flexible in terms of how that accountability works.

But I think that, yes, it's because we do such a good job of measuring IQ and cognitive skills that we emphasize them so much.

**How do you successfully explain to parents and educators the value of character?**

My sense is that parents don't need a lot of convincing on the basic question of whether these character strengths matter. I've spent a lot of time over the past few months talking to parents and teachers in many different settings, and they've been very responsive to the idea that character matters in a child's success.

I think parents can sometimes get frustrated with the fact that we don't yet know what the perfect curriculum is; we don't yet know the perfect way to develop these skills. But still, I think the idea that these skills matter resonates with parents and educators on a deep level. They know it from their own lives. They see it in their own kids. So they're eager to accept this idea and embrace this idea when it's presented to them as something that really matters.

**We often find that exemplary camps work to instill a sense of community in their campers and staff. What do you think is the value of community in encouraging an individual's success?**

I think it's very important. For any child — or any person — community matters. We know that when people are embedded in communities that care about them, it helps them to be happier, more productive, and more successful in lots of ways. And part of the problem for many children these days is that their communities are less stable, coherent, and connected than they used to be — so for them, finding a supportive community at camp could be an important experience.

Much of my research was done in a school setting, and some of the most effective programs that I've seen are the ones that develop community within a classroom or within a whole school. Part of what the successful teachers or principals are doing is developing a strong sense of community, attachment, and connection among the students themselves and between the students and teachers or other educators.

I do think that there are many children who are able to succeed without a strong sense of community, I think it's that one-on-one connection that is most important. Some kids, when they find that right mentor or person to connect to, are able to succeed even when they are not in a well-connected community. But I think when kids can have that experience of feeling like they're part of a team, group, or community — in school or in camp — it is enormously powerful and positive for them.

**What makes a good adult role model, and does that differ from what makes a good parent?**

While there are certainly some similarities, I think there is a difference. I think kids need love, respect, and connection from all sorts of adults in their lives. But I think there's a bit of a difference in terms of the proportion in which they need those things from different people. From parents, they certainly need some firmness and rules, but what they need more than anything else from parents is connection and love and support.

From the other adults in their lives — whether that means a camp counselor, a teacher, or a mentor — children certainly still need love, support, and a sense that the person has their back. But I think it also can mean a lot to them when that person can be firmer with them, when that person can say, "Here's where you're going off track." When a mentor or a counselor can be a little tougher on them than their parents are sometimes willing to be, that can really have a powerful effect on kids.

**Is there any difference in how you would treat a child from a home with supportive parents and one who might not come from such a supportive home?**

This is a good question, and, in some ways, I think it's a complicated one. First, I do think that all children need exactly the same thing, no matter what kind of community or family they come from. But the reality is when kids are starting from different places, they need different sorts of support from the adults in their lives in order to help them get to that place where they all have similar experiences.

When kids grow up with more difficult home lives, they can be more fragile. We know that, neurologically, it's more difficult for them to deal with conflict, to focus, and to calm down after provocations. These are the things they need more help with.

They also need more support and connection. It's often difficult for them to trust adults. And so the adults in their lives need to do more work to show they're trustworthy and earn the respect and trust of that child. That's why it can be harder when you're working in schools or camps where kids are growing up in disadvantaged environments than when you're working in places where kids have lots of advantages. It's harder to make those connections with kids.

But I think it's extremely important — as a camp counselor, for example — to make those connections with children who are growing up in difficult circumstances. Those are the kids whose lives you can really change. Many of them are completely off track, and the connection they can have with an adult in their lives can put them completely back on track. But it's definitely harder

work. It takes more sensitivity, more effort, and sometimes more ingenuity to make that connection with kids who have grown up in difficult circumstances, but when it happens, I think the payoff is huge.

**Camp provides the opportunity for both autonomy and support, which is often not provided at home. What are your thoughts on the need for both as crucial in building character?**

I think this is exactly what makes the camp experience so positive for so many kids. Kids need a combination of autonomy and support, and it's often difficult for them to get this at home or at school. It's a hard balance to strike for any parent or any teacher. Parents are sometimes so wrapped up in the emotional lives of our kids that it's hard for us to pull back and let them have the autonomy they need. Or we go too far in the other direction and don't give them the kind of love and support they need.

I think when camps are able to get it right and convey to kids that they're supported and they're safe, but also that they can do things they never dreamed they could do, it becomes a transformative experience. Camp is a place where kids can finally get that important message.

**At camp, children can take risks, make mistakes, learn about community, fail, and succeed in a nurturing environment. What do you think about children making their own mistakes?**

Making mistakes is precisely how we develop character strengths. As one educator put it to me (and I quote him in the book), character strengths like grit and self-control are born out of failure. And in so many American schools and homes these days, kids don't get a chance to fail anything.

But when we are honest with children about failure, they are able to better understand their potential and their abilities. They need to learn how to fail in a productive way — that failures are real and we don't all win every game, but that failures are not a disaster. Instead, they are often important stepping stones on the path to success.

I think when kids experience failure in a manageable way when they're young, it helps make future setbacks much more bearable. They need that opportunity to "practice" failing and learn failure is not the end of the world. Only after knowing this will they go out into the world — whether that's college or beyond — and not be completely derailed by setbacks. They learn how to bounce back and see that there's a way to do better next time.

#### **Additional Resources**

##### **Measuring Outcomes**

ACA's Youth Outcomes Battery provides camps with tools to measure and analyze camp outcomes such as affinity for nature, teamwork, independence, and interest in exploration. The tools were constructed to help camp professionals evaluate their program goals and document the changes in campers for key stakeholders like parents, funders, and staff. [www.ACAcamps.org/research/youth-outcomes-battery](http://www.ACAcamps.org/research/youth-outcomes-battery)

##### **Grit**

Find more about University of Pennsylvania psychologist Angela Duckworth, and even take the "Grit Test," at [www.sas.upenn.edu/~duckwort/](http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~duckwort/).

##### **Mentoring**

- "Letters From My Campers: A Director's Guide to Mentoring Youth," by Stephen Wallace, in the January/February 2008 Camping Magazine. [www.ACAcamps.org/campmag/0801wallace](http://www.ACAcamps.org/campmag/0801wallace)
- "Letters From My Campers: A Counselor's Guide to Mentoring Youth," by Stephen Wallace, in the May/June 2008 Camping Magazine. [www.ACAcamps.org/campmag/0805wallace](http://www.ACAcamps.org/campmag/0805wallace)
- "Under the Influence: Respect, Responsibility, and the Conduct of Camp Counselors," by Stephen Wallace, in the May/June 2007 Camping Magazine. [www.ACAcamps.org/members/knowledge/human/cm/0705wallace](http://www.ACAcamps.org/members/knowledge/human/cm/0705wallace)
- "Putting Camp in the Childhood Equation: An Interview with Rachel Simmons and Michael Thompson," in the May/June 2010 Camping Magazine. [www.ACAcamps.org/campmag/1005/putting-camp-childhood-equation](http://www.ACAcamps.org/campmag/1005/putting-camp-childhood-equation)
- "Mentoring 101: Building Your Youth Development Skill Set," hosted by Stephen Wallace, recorded webinar. [www.ACAcamps.org/einstitute/mentoring-101](http://www.ACAcamps.org/einstitute/mentoring-101)

For more information on Paul Tough, visit [www.paultough.com](http://www.paultough.com).

Originally published in the 2013 March/April Camping Magazine.