

Children of the Storm: Education and Social Mobility

Helen Epstein | November 14, 2012

Schools are supposed to be America's engine of social mobility, but they are clearly failing in that function. The United States ranks twenty-first of twenty-six Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in high school graduation rates. In New York City, 72 percent of African-American boys fail to graduate. Of those students who make it to college—rich, poor, black and white—40 percent need remedial classes. Teachers, administrators, parents, and state and federal policies have all been blamed for these dismal results. Charles Murray of the conservative American Enterprise Institute has even blamed the children themselves for their lack of aptitude.

In *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*, *New York Times* journalist Paul Tough presents an alternative explanation for why American students do so poorly. Like Murray, he attributes the problem to the children themselves, but he also maintains that most are born with the cognitive abilities to succeed. What they lack is motivation and the related qualities of persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, self-confidence and “grit”—the willingness to sacrifice immediate pleasures for longer-term goals. What holds back many poor children, and some rich ones, are the toxic, brain-distorting effects of stressful childhood experiences. Child abuse, separation from or neglect by parents, exposure to violence, and living with a mentally ill or drug-addicted relative all affect the developing brain and personality. During early childhood, the brain doesn't merely grow bigger, like the other organs; it molds itself to the perceived environment by creating and destroying billions of neurons in different brain regions. The brain of a stressed-out child becomes hyper-alert to threat, and extremely poor at planning and organizing tasks, delaying gratification and controlling emotion—the very abilities needed to spend long hours in a library, pay attention to a boring lecture, plan and carry out complex activities, and believe that hard work will pay off in the future. This may help explain why some children find it difficult to concentrate, are angered easily, become depressed and discouraged over minor failures, and privilege instant gratification over longer-term rewards. Stress may even help to explain why some children are attracted to drug abuse, as if they were medicating themselves to tame the neurochemical storm in their heads.

The science is still fuzzy, but some researchers using brain imaging and hormonal tests have detected the effects of childhood stress on the growth of those brain regions involved in anxiety, concentration and short-term memory. Equally striking are the more easily measured effects of maternal separation and other traumas on the brains of baby mice and monkeys and their subsequent behavior as adult animals. Such animals perform poorly on memory tests, exhibit behaviors suggestive of anxiety and depression, and are frequently rejected by their fellow animals.

A major cause of stress in children appears to be stress in their parents. Beginning in the 1960s, child psychologists such as John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth and Mary Main showed that some mothers—often those who were themselves abused or depressed—fail to behave in warm, sensitive, responsive ways to their small children. In turn, these children develop anxious or irritable social styles. Ordinarily, toddlers will scramble to their mothers after a brief separation, but a child with what psychologists call “insecure attachment” might treat his or her mother with indifference when she returns, or circle around her as if undecided about whether to approach or flee. These behaviors appear to be markers for early childhood stress and predict what that child will be like decades later. In one long-term study of roughly 200 children born into poverty in Minnesota, the quality of the mother-child relationship during the first three and a half years of life strongly predicted whether the child would drop out of high school, abuse drugs, succumb to mental illness or end up behind bars by age 19. Genes have little to do with it. Some children are born fussy and difficult, and this has long been hypothesized to determine their likelihood of success in life; but the Minnesota researchers measured the temperaments of the children right after birth, using standard techniques developed in the 1950s and still in use today. They found that inborn characteristics such as calmness, fearfulness, infantile aggression and so on failed to predict the children's long-term educational or behavioral outcomes. Since then, genes associated with behavior problems have been discovered, but they appear to be expressed only in children who experienced abuse or neglect early on.

Tough's book focuses on programs that can help change self-defeating, stress-related behavior patterns in troubled children by strengthening positive character traits. For example, Riverdale, a fancy New York day school, and the Knowledge Is Power Program, or KIPP, a network of charter schools for poor children, both try to instill attitudes of respect, perseverance and conscientiousness. In some programs, students are even graded on qualities like “optimism” or “zest” and then given exercises if they score poorly.

The long-term effect of these programs hasn't been rigorously measured, but they clearly help some people, including one young woman whom Tough gets to know named Kewauna Lerma. Kewauna grew up shuttling from state to state with her rootless mother, sometimes living in homeless shelters, sometimes landing with her grandmother. In school, she snarled at her teachers, skipped class and was eventually arrested for tussling with a police officer. Then, after a stern lecture from her mother, she decided to change. Her grades improved a bit, and a teacher suggested that she apply to OneGoal, a Chicago mentoring program for struggling but ambitious high school students. At OneGoal, Kewauna learned to study more effectively, set achievable goals, learn from mistakes rather than despair over them and plan for the future. Now she's a sophomore in college with a 3.8 GPA.

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Kewauna's story and those of other young people in Tough's book are inspiring, but missing from the narrative is a discussion of where all this brain-damaging stress came from in the first place. Part of the answer can be found in other books about the long and depressing history of US policies toward families and children, including *The War Against Parents* (1998), by Sylvia Hewlett and Cornel West; *So Rich, So Poor* (2012), by Peter Edelman; and *The Hidden History of Head Start* (2010) and *The Tragedy of Child Care in America* (2009), by Edward Zigler.

The story begins in the 1950s and '60s, when family life vastly improved after the miseries of the Great Depression and World War II. Inequality fell as men's wages rose and generous tax breaks favored families with children. Millions of young people also benefited from the GI Bill, which sent them to college, subsidized their mortgages and paid for their healthcare. These policies enabled most women to stay home and devote themselves to caring for their children, who eventually grew up to become the most productive Americans in history. By 1973, the poverty rate had fallen to a historic low of 11 percent, much lower than what it is today.

Then progress stalled. As the economy faltered in the 1970s, companies blamed workers and wage growth stagnated. Most job growth since then has been in very low-wage categories. Soon men found themselves working an average of twelve extra days per year just to make ends meet. Meanwhile, tax policies became less favorable to families with children, and programs aimed at the poor, such as rent subsidies and public housing, were cut in favor of programs like mortgage tax relief, which benefit wealthier people. Rising incarceration rates, frequently driven by racial bias, further weakened poor black families.

Beginning in the 1970s, many American women began going to work, which helped to stabilize family incomes but often left children in precarious circumstances. By the end of the 1980s, American children had lost more than ten hours a week of parental time compared with the 1960s. Some policy-makers anticipated the growing stress on families. In 1971, Senator Walter Mondale, Representative John Brademas and their allies in the White House Office of Economic Opportunity drafted a bill to guarantee high-quality daycare and preschool for every American child. The program was to be administered through community hubs that could also provide home visiting for new mothers, job counseling, after-school programs and other services. The Comprehensive Child Development Bill had enormous public support and passed both houses of Congress, but President Nixon, bowing to pressure from the emerging "family values" movement, vetoed it.

Since then, the childcare crisis in America has only worsened, and "family values" conservatives and other anti-government groups have bitterly fought efforts to do anything about it. High-quality daycare for several hours a day has been shown to benefit small children, as long as they have a devoted adult in their lives. But the cost of high-quality daycare now exceeds tuition at some state colleges, so millions of parents have to rely instead on the vast informal daycare market, in which children have been found strapped into car seats, and toxic chemicals and machetes have been found in play areas. The Welfare Reform Act of 1996 increased government support for childcare, but it also reduced requirements for states to ensure that these programs were of decent quality. Today, only twelve states require daycare workers to have any training at all, and in California, daycare centers are inspected less often than cemeteries.

Forty years of family-unfriendly policies have perpetuated the cycles of toxic stress in which many American children now grow up. These stressed-out young people become, in turn, the cause of stress in others, including their relatives, their neighbors, their romantic partners and, of course, the victims of their crimes. Needless to say, we must also include their children, who go on to perpetuate the cycle, generation after generation. While there's a great deal to be said for the character remediation programs Tough explores, America clearly needs to do far more about this problem.

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It is true, as Tough maintains, that we "don't know quite what to do" about poverty in America, but we could start by investing in first-rate early childcare, increasing the minimum wage, using economic stimulus to generate jobs with decent wages, giving parents paid time off to care for their children, and reducing the incarceration of nonviolent offenders so that more families can stay together. The United Kingdom enacted many such practices under the Blair administration, and child poverty rates there fell by 50 percent in five years.

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In *Fire in the Ashes*, his memoir about a group of extremely poor South Bronx children, Jonathan Kozol comes to a conclusion very similar to Tough's about the ways in which children overcome adversity. Kozol has been working with disadvantaged American children for nearly fifty years, but the portraits in this book seem especially intimate. He spent long hours hanging out in their houses and talking to their parents and teachers, and he also helped them out with money when they needed it. In return, these children and their parents shared their inner lives with him.

Some of these young people succumbed to drugs, crime and suicide, while others stayed in school, got jobs and established stable families of their own. Like Tough, Kozol attributes the difference between them to a mysterious process of "inward growth—in decency, in character." Kozol doesn't analyze what he means by character, as Tough does, but he doesn't need to: you sense from his descriptions exactly what it is.

During the 1980s, Kozol helped expose the grim conditions in New York City's welfare hotels, where many homeless families then resided, at city expense, in conditions reminiscent of the squalid nineteenth-century tenements described by Jacob Riis in *How the Other Half Lives*: entire families were crowded into tiny rooms with a hot plate and intermittent running water. As one of Kozol's friends remarked, municipal documents used plumbing imagery to describe the homeless problem at this time. There was a "back-up" in the homeless population, and an "over-flow" into the hotels of Times Square. Kozol had to sneak into the hotels to conduct interviews because the city barred journalists and researchers from entering; but somehow, abusive drunks and drug dealers found a way in without much interference. Boys seem to have been especially vulnerable to the effects of these living conditions, and two of those Kozol knew later killed themselves—adding to the body count of the threefold surge in young male suicides

across the nation between 1960 and 1994. One of these children, whom Kozol calls Christopher, begs from passing cars, seldom attends school, and may have been sexually abused by a man who took him to Long Island on weekends. Over the course of roughly a decade, Kozol watches Christopher become increasingly cold and aloof, except when he needs money; he sells heroin, becomes addicted himself, lands in jail and dies of an overdose in his early 20s.

The city eventually closed the welfare hotels and moved the families to apartments in the South Bronx, where Kozol remained in touch with them. Many of these children and others with similarly grim backgrounds are now doing surprisingly well. Most extraordinary is the story of Benjamin, who was raped at age 9 and lost his mother to cancer at 12. His absentee father was often drunk, and his sister and older brothers were either dead or in jail. After his mother died, Benjamin was adopted by Martha Overall, an Episcopal priest at St. Ann's Church in the South Bronx. St. Ann's had an excellent after-school program, where Kozol met many of the subjects in this book. Despite Overall's determination to help Benjamin stay on the straight and narrow, he ran away from school, joined a gang, took drugs, and stole from stores and from Overall herself. Eventually he too ended up in jail. Martha bailed him out and the judge sentenced him to probation.

Then, miraculously, Benjamin decided to join a drug recovery program at Odyssey House. He's now clean and counseling other recovering addicts. (It's worth noting that every one of the success stories in Kozol's book is working to help others, either as a social worker, a volunteer at an after-school or neighborhood program, or as a caring stay-at-home parent.)

Kozol never explains the "Fire in the Ashes" to which his title refers, but Benjamin does. At one point, he and Kozol are reminiscing about the opposition that Overall faced when she first took over St. Ann's Church. Many local people were loyal to her Hispanic predecessor, who had been removed for corruption. One day, when Benjamin was still a small boy, long before Overall adopted him, he was at her side when she arrived at the center to find protesters waving signs saying No White Woman Wanted Here. She went ahead and did her work anyway, and the example of her persistence, conscientiousness, self-confidence and "grit" (as Tough would put it) sent a message to Benjamin. As he explains to Kozol, her determined benevolence and, above all, her fierce faith—in herself, her greater mission and in him, personally—"helped me find the strength inside of me I didn't know I had."

Nation *blogger Dana Goldstein is on the education beat. Our October 15 issue featured her [critique](#) [2] of the anti-teachers union film Won't Back Down.*

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