

The path to Olympic glory is littered with failure, but research claims life's disappointments are crucial to success

So, imagine you have this choice: if you eat the blue sweetie I'm offering, you will never fail again for the rest of your life.

You're tempted by the blue sweetie, aren't you? I mean, who wants to fail? Loser! It's the insult of our times. A group of eight-year-old girls at a prestigious London girl's school pondered this question when put to them by their headmistress Heather Hanbury earlier this year. To these Wimbledon High students, it seemed a great deal — nearly all of them said yes, gimme the blue sweetie.

“They can be afraid of things going wrong,” Hanbury said. “Their parents are equally affected; they don't want their daughters to suffer.”

Of course! Who wants things to go wrong, or to suffer? So think about what you would choose and then read this. It's a story about grit. Roll that word around in your mouth for a second to feel how scratchy and uncomfortable it is. But it has just been isolated by social scientists as the one character trait that is more predictive than almost any other, including intelligence, for succeeding in life's most difficult challenges.

So how can we get ourselves some of this grit? Well, that's the interesting part, the hard part. The secret to success, it turns out, is failure. Grit is the ability to fail repeatedly, fail hard, and keep on sucking it up. If you're not practised at failing like this then, researchers have found, you're not going to win at the hardest tasks. There's a reason “grit” sounds like something a Victorian drill master would shout — it's a word that comes from a different age, when fortitude and brave Kipling poems were what it was all about.

Now, we reject grit; we'd rather do everything we can to smooth the path. Parents insulate their children from failure. And in doing so, they make sure they are less likely to succeed. The more they want their child to do well, the more they are holding them back.

To find your way out of this modern paradox, let these people be your guide. Each of them, on opposite sides of the Atlantic, was thinking about character-building. Hanbury, the Wimbledon headmistress, we'll return to at the end. Next is Dominic Randolph, the head of one of the most elite private schools in the world, in Manhattan. Riverdale Country School aims to cream off the best of the best with academic entrance tests, but Randolph found that “some of those who had high test-scores were either imploding or not working to their potential, and vice versa”.

Working at the other end of the economic spectrum but just a few hundred metres away in New York was David Levin, the co-founder of the radical KIPP schools programme, an ambitious new network of American schools that aims to transform ghetto children into graduates. He had set lofty targets for his children: that 75 per cent of them should get degrees. The first children attending KIPP got outstanding results and most went to college. So why did only a third of them graduate? And why was it not the brightest of his students that stayed the course?

Randolph and Levin began to ponder. What was this missing ingredient that really made the difference in how a person fared in life? It led them both, by strange coincidence, to come

calling at the office of Angela Duckworth, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

Duckworth herself had spent her twenties teaching in inner-city schools, and had reached the same conclusion as Randolph and Levin.

As she wrote in her PhD application: “After years working in schools I now have a distinctly different view of school reform. The problem is not only the schools but the students themselves. Here’s why: learning is hard. True, learning is fun, exhilarating and gratifying. But it is also often daunting and exhausting ... educators and parents must first recognise that character is at least as important as intellect.”

So which parts of character are as important as smarts? Studies have shown that self-control is a big help to getting things done. It helps kids finish their homework, and adults with more self-control are better at things like dieting, unsurprisingly. But when Duckworth analysed the really successful, often they didn’t have much self-control (you don’t have to look at Oprah to know there are quite a few chubby successful people out there).

“Truly great accomplishment is not just about resisting temptations like TV,” Duckworth told me. “It’s about coping with things that actively make you want to give up. It’s the capacity for sustained effort in the face of setbacks.”

She decided to call this quality “grit” — committing to struggle rather than hoping for an easy win on *The X Factor*. She devised a simple test, the Grit Scale, of 12 questions that takes a minute to answer. You can rate yourself (*see questionnaire at end of story*). She tested students entering her university and it proved amazingly effective at predicting which would perform well. She then tested children competing in the National Spelling Bee on IQ and grit, and compared it with who won. IQ helped of course, but not nearly as much as scoring high on grit. In fact, bright kids may be the most fragile, because they are not used to things being hard.

Duckworth took her Grit Scale to the West Point military academy, where the first year is rightly called “Beast Barracks” for its high drop-out rate. The military wished it could predict better who drops out, so it gives each entrant a battery of tests, lasting for hours. At the end of Beast Barracks, the most accurate predictor of which soldiers stayed the course was Duckworth’s one-minute Grit Scale. “Suddenly, a lot of military people and policymakers started calling me,” said Duckworth.

Levin and Randolph were among them. Immediately they moved onto a more important question: could grit be taught? Levin went at it the most aggressively — if his poor students needed grit to survive when the odds were stacked against them, they were damn well going to learn it. As of 2009, teachers in four New York KIPP schools were retrained. The focus shifted: failure was embraced as an opportunity to show how tenaciously you could overcome it. Sport, they realised, was a great subject to teach grit, but talk of character suffused every single class.

“There just is no accomplishment without significant failure,” Levin said. “But these days that lesson has been lost. If a child had a low grade on a test, or didn’t make the team, it’s not permanent. The teacher will remind them of that. Indicate that the important work is to overcome the failure.”

In an even more radical move, Levin introduced the character report card. At the end of every term, the child is rated on seven qualities — chief among them grit and self-control — that scientists have isolated as key to success. This is discussed with parents with the same seriousness as academic grades.

Randolph has adopted the same approach at his elite school. He is the product of the British public school system, before emigrating to America. I tell him the idea of grit would make total sense to the 19th-century British headmasters who considered it their job to toughen up the empire-builders of the future. What are cold showers and cross-country runs other than grit-builders?

“That system was very negative, it was social Darwinism. They did achieve grit, but at too great a cost. They didn’t really care about people,” he said.

“But on the other hand, now we’re so uncomfortable with failure. The grade-inflation means that everyone now gets As or Bs. The feedback children get is that everything is OK about everything they do. It’s not a great learning experience for children. We are making them feel that the only right thing they can do is succeed.

It’s very detrimental to mental health, and detrimental to achievement in the long run.”

Randolph is confident grit can be taught. Most scientists agree that you probably get around a half or two-thirds of your character traits from your parents. The rest is cultivated. For grit, that means dealing with the non-fun stuff our culture — and human nature — naturally resists: rejection, getting badly hurt, rainy camping trips.

How will we tell if their experiment succeeds? For Levin, the proof will be in the college graduations, a decade from now, but he already insists “the difference our emphasis on character makes is transformative”. Duckworth doesn’t yet know how to prove grit can be taught, but like Levin and Randolph she urges parents to let their children fail a bit more. Admire the difficulty of the task undertaken more than the result. Focus on how to turn failure into a setback, rather than that A into an A*. Just the other day, Duckworth resisted her 10-year-old daughter’s pleas to drive her back to school to pick up a forgotten homework project.

“A lot of helicopter parents would have got in the car. Their instinct is to swoop in and save their kid. I said no.”

Which brings us back to Wimbledon, and Hanbury, and the blue sweeties. Of course her girls were high-achieving, but did that actually mean they were deprived of a chance to hone their grit? After all, the longer it is before you experience failure, the more crippling it can be. “Character-building” is such a discredited idea it has now become a euphemism for anything ridiculously unpleasant. But Hanbury is unashamed of her belief that failure is “an important way to build character”.

“I think nowadays parents can get too involved in trying to remove all unhappiness from their children’s lives. And ironically, it can make children too anxious about their abilities, if they’re not good at first ... It’s very hard to give soundbite advice, but if your daughter comes home from school in a tizz about something awful that happened, just pause. Resist the temptation to pick up the phone and fix it for them.”

So earlier this year she decided to host “Failure Week” at her school. She asked the blue-sweetie question at the beginning of the sessions. And then came the crash-course in demystifying defeat. At the end of the week, almost every year group had halved the number choosing the blue sweetie. Think about all the failures in your life, all the defeats and embarrassments and sadnesses, high ambitions that fell short, and then ask yourself whether you want to erase them. Blue sweetie?

The grit scale test

Consider the following questions. Score your answers on a scale of Very much like me / Mostly like me / Somewhat like me / Not much like me / Not like me at all. Be honest, there are no right or wrong answers.

- 1 I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge.
- 2 New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.
- 3 My interests change from year to year.
- 4 Setbacks don't discourage me.
- 5 I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.
- 6 I am a hard worker.

To find out your score, and complete the 12-point Grit Scale in full, go to www.sas.upenn.edu/~duckwort/

DUCKWORTH, A.L., PETERSON, C., MATTHEWS, M.D., & KELLY, D.R. (2007). GRIT: PERSEVERANCE AND PASSION FOR LONG-TERM GOALS. JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, 9, 1087-1101.