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## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

ESSAY | September 7, 2012, 6:12 p.m. ET

# Opting Out of the 'Rug Rat Race'

*For success in the long run, brain power helps, but what our kids really need to learn is grit*

By PAUL TOUGH

We are living through a particularly anxious moment in the history of American parenting. In the nation's big cities these days, the competition among affluent parents over slots in favored preschools verges on the gladiatorial. A pair of economists from the University of California recently dubbed this contest for early academic achievement the "Rug Rat Race," and each year, the race seems to be starting earlier and growing more intense.

At the root of this parental anxiety is an idea you might call the cognitive hypothesis. It is the belief, rarely spoken aloud but commonly held nonetheless, that success in the U.S. today depends more than anything else on cognitive skill—the kind of intelligence that gets measured on IQ tests—and that the best way to develop those skills is to practice them as much as possible, beginning as early as possible.



Charles Gullung

American children, especially those who grow up in relative comfort, are being shielded from failure as never before.

There is something undeniably compelling about the cognitive hypothesis. The world it describes is so reassuringly linear, such a clear case of inputs here leading to outputs there. Fewer books in the home means less reading ability; fewer words spoken by your parents means a smaller vocabulary; more math work sheets for your 3-year-old means better math scores in elementary school. But in the past decade, and especially in the past few years, a disparate group of economists, educators, psychologists and neuroscientists has

begun to produce evidence that calls into question many of the assumptions behind the cognitive hypothesis.

What matters most in a child's development, they say, is not how much information we can stuff into her brain in the first few years of life. What matters, instead, is whether we are able to help her develop a very different set of qualities, a list that

includes persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit and self-confidence. Economists refer to these as noncognitive skills, psychologists call them personality traits, and the rest of us often think of them as character.

If there is one person at the hub of this new interdisciplinary network, it is James Heckman, an economist at the University of Chicago who in 2000 won the Nobel Prize in economics. In recent years, Mr. Heckman has been convening regular invitation-only conferences of economists and psychologists, all engaged in one form or another with the same questions: Which skills and traits lead to success? How do they develop in childhood? And what kind of interventions might help children do better?

The transformation of Mr. Heckman's career has its roots in a study he undertook in the late 1990s on the General Educational Development program, better known as the GED, which was at the time becoming an increasingly popular way for high-school dropouts to earn the equivalent of high-school diplomas. The GED's growth was founded on a version of the cognitive hypothesis, on the belief that what schools develop, and what a high-school diploma certifies, is cognitive skill. If a teenager already has the knowledge and the smarts to graduate from high school, according to this logic, he doesn't need to waste his time actually finishing high school. He can just take a test that measures that knowledge and those skills, and the state will certify that he is, legally, a high-school graduate, as well-prepared as any other high-school graduate to go on to college or other postsecondary pursuits.

Mr. Heckman wanted to examine this idea more closely, so he analyzed a few large national databases of student performance. He found that in many important ways, the premise behind the GED was entirely valid. According to their scores on achievement tests, GED recipients were every bit as smart as high-school graduates. But when Mr. Heckman looked at their path through higher education, he found that GED recipients weren't anything like high-school graduates. At age 22, Mr. Heckman found, just 3% of GED recipients were either enrolled in a four-year university or had completed some kind of postsecondary degree, compared with 46% of high-school graduates. In fact, Heckman discovered that when you consider all kinds of important future outcomes—annual income, unemployment rate, divorce rate, use of illegal drugs—GED recipients look exactly like high-school dropouts, despite the fact that they have earned this supposedly valuable extra credential, and despite the fact that they are, on average, considerably more intelligent than high-school dropouts.

These results posed, for Mr. Heckman, a confounding intellectual puzzle. Like most economists, he had always believed that cognitive ability was the single most reliable determinant of how a person's life would turn out. Now he had discovered a group—GED holders—whose good test scores didn't seem to have any positive effect on their eventual outcomes. What was missing from the equation, Mr. Heckman concluded, were the psychological traits, or noncognitive skills, that had allowed the high-school graduates to make it through school.

So what can parents do to help their children develop skills like motivation and perseverance? The reality is that when it comes to noncognitive skills, the traditional calculus of the cognitive hypothesis—start earlier and work harder—falls apart. Children can't get better at overcoming disappointment just by working at it for more hours. And they don't lag behind in curiosity simply because they didn't start doing curiosity work sheets at an early enough age.

Instead, it seems, the most valuable thing that parents can do to help their children develop noncognitive skills—which is to say, to develop their character—may be to do nothing. To back off a bit. To let our children face some adversity on their own, to fall down and not be helped back up. When you talk today to teachers and administrators at high-achieving high schools, this is their greatest concern: that their students are so overly protected from adversity, in their homes and at school, that they never develop the crucial ability to overcome real setbacks and in the process to develop strength of character.

American children, especially those who grow up in relative comfort, are, more than ever, shielded from failure as they grow up. They certainly work hard; they often experience a great deal of pressure and stress; but in reality, their path through the education system is easier and smoother than it was for any previous generation. Many of them are able to graduate from college without facing any significant challenges. But if this new research is right, their schools, their families, and their culture may all be doing them a disservice by not giving them more opportunities to struggle. Overcoming adversity is what produces character. And character, even more than IQ, is what leads to real and lasting success.

—Adapted from "How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character" by Paul Tough, which has just been published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

*A version of this article appeared September 8, 2012, on page C3 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Opting Out of the 'Rug Rat Race'.*

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