

GRIT

An Important Determinant of Academic
and Professional Success

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In 1997, Angela Lee Duckworth, a 27-year-old management consultant and graduate of Harvard College, quit her job to teach math to seventh graders in the New York City public school system. She soon observed that her best performing students were not necessarily her students with the highest IQs, and that her students with the highest IQs were not the best performers.

This fascinating observation grew to become her passion and led her to study the motivational and psychological aspects of learners. Her journey took her first to graduate school at Harvard and Oxford, as she and her teams observed people in all kinds of challenging situations, always asking the same question: “Who is successful here and why?” (Duckworth, 2013). Time and time again, the correlative factor predicting success wasn’t IQ, attractiveness, or social intelligence, but rather passionate perseverance maintained over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in practice (Duckworth, 2007). Quite simply, these individuals were gritty. From that, Duckworth derived the term that has now become an international buzzword in almost every arena of academic and professional endeavor.

While grit has many connotations in the English language, as we refer to it here, it is comprised of a combination of resilience, stamina, positive thinking, effort, and perseverance. It is something that we can’t have too much of and

something that we surely hope will be present in our children throughout their lives as students and leaders. Grit, however, is not mindless persistence along a given path. In fact, that’s not grit at all. Grit entails requisite self-monitoring and emotional intelligence to achieve planned for and hard won success, with all the inherent ups and downs, sideways and byways one may need to traverse along the way. Long mindless pursuits usually lead to wasted time, effort, funds, and energy, resulting in feelings of depletion and frustration. Grit, on the other hand, has a clear end goal or purpose that requires constant attention and an awareness of where things are headed. According to Duckworth (2007),

The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina. Whereas disappointment or boredom signals to others that it is time to change trajectory and cut losses, the gritty individual stays the course (p. 1087-1088).

If we think back on our greatest achievements and points of pride, it was grit that likely got us there. If your children have succeeded academically, artistically, or athletically, they probably have some grit to thank. While other highly regarded personal attributes and character traits such as intelligence, creativity, and compassion certainly portend positively for success, research has shown that grit is the glue that holds these qualities together long

enough to amount to long-term and meaningful achievements. When we think of grit as an applied trait, we should think marathon as opposed to sprint. Stamina, we have learned, is a critical ingredient of grit.

We often hear teachers speak about the frustration that they feel with naturally bright students who “don’t apply themselves” as opposed to those students who may be less gifted but who never give up or give in. Teachers usually want more of the latter – the gritty individual – and, so it seems, do employers and college admission officers. In fact, this significant research finding – that students with lower intelligence could outperform their smarter peers – was how Angela Duckworth first discovered the value of grit. It then became her life’s work to better understand its applications in the classroom and also in the workplace.

It is somewhat ironic, however, that our love affair with grit is unfolding during a time when technology and social media are increasing our dependence and need for immediate gratification, thereby working in direct opposition to the cultivation of the patience, stamina, and stick-to-it-iveness that defines grit. A recent study by Wilmer and Chein (2016) revealed a correlation between frequency of mobile device use and a greater inability to both delay gratification and to curb impulse decisions. Technology, then, works in contrast to the development of grit in our younger generation because the actual life experiences that require stamina are fewer and farther between.

We are becoming a culture that places less value on the long-term and greater emphasis on the here and now, which impairs our ability and our opportunities for developing grit. It also negatively impacts our capacity to self-regulate during times of adversity, unpleasantness, and during those aptly described “plateau” periods in our lives. Our challenge as parents and educators then, is to determine how we develop grit while better understanding its relevance in all aspects of life.

DEFINING GRIT

Although wildly popular now, grit is not a new idea but rather a new way of conceptualizing and defining a combination of already well-known concepts such as resilience, positive thinking, tenacity and perseverance. Much of Martin Seligman’s research on resilience and positive psychology forms the underpinnings of grit in that people must first be able to view long-term goals as attainable and achievable. In 1995, Seligman wrote *The Optimistic Child*, in which he suggested that “the basis of optimism does not lie in positive phrases or images of victory, but in the way you think about causes” (p. 52) and potentially our own role in this process. This is an important aspect of positive thinking: the belief that we can do something, that we can see the finish line, and that we, ourselves, have the ability to make this happen.

Basically, people have demonstrated grit

since the dawn of time. However, Angela Duckworth's research has highlighted the ways in which the capacity for grit matters more than natural talent or intellect as a predictor of success and achievement. In fact, de-emphasizing the importance of being "smart" or "talented" and instead stressing effort and perseverance is more likely to result in the growth of grit than praising our children for their many natural gifts. Grit, then, can be best defined as "the tendency to pursue long-term goals with sustained zeal and hard work" (Von Culin, Tsukamaya, & Duckworth, 2014, p. 306). In this context, "sustained zeal" describes the attitude, enthusiasm, and positive thinking that we bring with us along the way.

DEVELOPING GRIT

The good news is that grit can grow. While we certainly know that some children have more of a natural tendency towards resilience and tenacity than others, grit is not fixed at birth. In fact, Duckworth's research has revealed that as we age, we increase our appreciation of the importance of effort and, in addition, tend to hone areas of specialization as opposed to frequently shifting our pursuits and interests (Duckworth & Eskeis-Winkler, 2013). In this sense, exploration tends to correlate more with youth, while the ability to focus and commit deeply to one endeavor may emerge later in life. Both of these significant findings result in a potential increase in grit as we age. There-

fore, as it pertains to the growth of grit, we need to acknowledge that grit is a quality that we want to develop in our children as early as possible. For this reason, we want to focus on:

(1) Passion – Motivation and endurance increase when we are engaged in activities and projects that we like. While some of us are more aware of and forthright about our passions than others, we can encourage children to find their passion by starting with a strengths-focused approach. Typically, we like what we are good at and we are good at what we like. Passion comes after this realization and grit is needed to take passion to the next level. It is important, however, to highlight the difference between "harmonious passion" – or passion for things that motivate us and bring us pleasure – and "obsessive passion," which is the type that results in conflicting and negative outcomes. Research in this area has revealed that when we are engaged in a harmonious passion, we are in control of our experience; when we are engaged in an obsessive passion, we are controlled by our experience (Vallerand, Blanchard, Mageau, Koestner, Ratelle, et al., 2003). Therefore harmonious passion helps to develop grit in that it is in sync with activities or endeavors that we are good at and can achieve. Obsessive passion, on the other hand, renders us stuck in repetitive patterns of failure.

(2) Practice – Bloom's (1985) research on the correlation between practice and high performance in

myriad areas reveals the importance of performing the same activity again and again. Bloom studied 120 master performers within a broad spectrum of talent fields including athletic, intellectual, musical, artistic, and interpersonal areas. The long-term and now well-known takeaway from Bloom's seminal study is one that has been corroborated repeatedly since then: experts are not born; they are made (Ericsson, Charness, Feltovich, & Hoffman, 2006). As we know, practice can be pleasurable or painful, but according to the research, it is undeniably necessary for developing grit.

(3) Patience – Stamina and patience work hand in hand to sustain us for the long haul. If we think

back to the marathon versus sprint metaphor, patience enables us to hang on for the time it takes to achieve the end goal. While the sprint may provide immediate gratification and some needed exercise, the marathon offers life-long conditioning and mental toughness.

In addition to focusing on passion, practice, and patience, it is important to understand the character traits that form the underpinnings of grit development. Duckworth created the Short Grit Scale (Grit-S) as a way of measuring traits that are predictive of possessing grit. The (Grit-S), outlined below, is a self-report questionnaire that measures long-term passion and perseverance within a two-factor structure (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009):

SHORT GRIT SCALE (GRIT-S)*

Consistency of Interest:

1. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.
2. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.
3. I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.
4. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.

Perseverance of Effort:

5. I finish whatever I begin.
6. Setbacks don't discourage me.
7. I am a hard worker.
8. I am diligent.

* The Grit-S is a modified and shorter version of the original Grit Scale which was developed by Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly in 2007.

The items in the Grit-S indicate the ways in which each of us can reflect on our own capacity for developing grit as it pertains to specific areas of perseverance and ongoing interests. This can be helpful in our effort to better understand where we fall along the spectrum of grit development in relation to both past experiences and future achievements.

As parents and educators, we should be mindful of how we model grit in our own lives. As the saying goes, your child will follow your example more than your advice, and grit is no exception to this. Share your own experiences of failure and perseverance with your children, as this conveys to them that pushing on despite hard times or circumstances is a value that you admire and embrace. Likewise, when they experience frustration in their own lives, focus less on how to mitigate the causes and more on how to conquer them.

Also consider the importance of praising effort and attitude more than outcome. Carol Dweck's (2008) inspiring research on the growth mindset reveals that effort is a more accurate indication of school success than natural intelligence, and this applies to developing grit as well. Interestingly and perhaps unknowingly, we tend to glorify a lack of effort when we tout achievements or experiences as being "effortless." This actually has a negative correlation with grit. As it relates to effort, Dweck's research draws a sharp contrast between what she terms a fixed mindset versus a growth mindset. People with a fixed mindset overvalue

intelligence, personalize criticism, avoid failure, limit challenges, and believe that effort is indicative of deficiencies. Alternatively, those who possess a growth mindset strive to continue learning, perceive criticism as a potential growth area, bounce back from failure, believe that "abilities can be cultivated" and think that effort is essential (Dweck, 2008, p. 50). In this regard, those with a growth mindset are more likely to be gritty and those who possess grit will be better equipped to develop a growth mindset.

We need to adopt the mantra that anything worth doing takes both time and effort and that failures and frustrations along the way are not an "if" but a "when." Thus, we should help our children anticipate failure so that when it does happen – and it will – the focus turns to pushing through rather than moving on. This is particularly true when our children fail at things that they are passionate about or have a natural talent for, as oftentimes these are the failures that are felt most acutely. We need to place greater value on the importance of passion, patience, and practice on the long-term journey to meaningful achievement, and we must remember that, as Theodore Roosevelt once said and Angela Duckworth has since demonstrated, "nothing worth having was ever achieved without effort."

The authors of this paper have developed experimental models for cultivating grit along with other important skills, including executive function and mindfulness, in their two organizations, Peak Year Inc. (www.peakyearexperience.com) and Individual U. LLC (www.individualu.com). They believe that grit can grow within the context of meaningful and long-term relationships between students and mentors. Through their highly individualized mentoring programs, they help students identify and develop areas of passion while strengthening areas of challenge and vulnerability.

Cindy Puccio, Ph.D., M.A., L.C.S.W. is a developmental psychologist and clinical social worker who began her career twenty years ago in New York City. She has a wide range of professional experience and expertise including individual, family and group therapy for children and families, school counseling, child-centered play therapy, and educational remediation. After completing her B.A in Literature from Middlebury College, Cindy earned her Master's degree in Child Development from Sarah Lawrence College and then her M.S.W. from New York University. She recently completed her Ph.D. in Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health and Developmental Disorders, and is currently on the faculty of Sarah Lawrence College. Cindy has worked with Stephen and Matthew for three years, providing mentoring to students and staff. She also leads in-service trainings on relevant research and practice.

Matthew Kelly, Ph.D., M.P.H. is the Executive Vice President and Cofounder of Peak Year Inc., and the Executive Vice President of Individual U. LLC. He earned his Ph.D. from Columbia University in a unique, non-clinical, interdisciplinary program within the Departments of Sociomedical Science and History. He additionally earned his Master's Degree in Public Health (M.P.H.) from Columbia University where, as a Wyman Scholar, he studied the History and Ethics of Public Health and Medicine. Prior to that, he studied Biomedical Ethics and Biology at Brown University, graduating Phi Beta Kappa and magna cum laude. Matthew has served as a member of the Steering Committee for the Joint Atlantic Seminar in the History of Medicine and currently sits on the Advisory Board of Say Ah, a Manhattan based health literacy organization. In addition to his academic work, he enjoys writing works for the stage, and several of his plays have been developed or produced in the NYC area and elsewhere. When he's not collaborating with Stephen on Peak Year Experience programs, writing histories or composing plays, Matthew prepares Gulliver and Orson – his Chocolate Lab and Husky/Terrier puppies – for the GREs.

Stephen Rudin, MD is the Founder, Principal Mentor and President of Peak Year Inc. (established 2016) and Individual U. LLC (established 2003). After graduating from Case Western Reserve School of Medicine where he received his medical degree and after initial residency and research training, Stephen decided not to practice medicine and instead has devoted himself and his career to helping children and young adults unlock their potential. A former Upward Bound Teacher of the Year, for the past thirty years Stephen has mentored individuals from kindergarten through medical school, graduate school and beyond. His work at Peak Year Inc. focuses on helping its participants find and explore their passions and goals and acquire the skills and practices to help them navigate their best and happiest paths forward. Stephen oversees Peak Year Inc.'s overall offerings, mentoring resources, professional relationships, physical resources and organizational growth. He also establishes Peak Year Inc.'s community spirit and standards of respectful comportment to ensure that the Peak Year® experience and community are a uniquely welcoming, safe, and affirming environment for each participant's life-transforming Peak Year experience. A humorist and writer about the human condition, Stephen was also the head writer of best-selling, award winning software and books including A.D.A.M.: The Inside Story, The Nine Month Miracle, and The Human Body: Fandex Family Field Guide. Stephen lives on NYC's Upper West Side in a hobbit-sized

coop with an enchanted garden. His parents, Milton and Jeanette, both wished he had practiced medicine.

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Family Office Association is a global community of ultra-high net worth families and their single family offices. We are committed to creating value for each family that we serve; value that grows wealth, strengthens legacy, and unites multiple generations by speaking to shared interests and passions. FOA has the resources to solve your most difficult challenges and help you achieve your collective goals: to invest intelligently, give strategically, and learn exponentially.

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