

# Snowflake or GRIT

What's the secret to success?

BY MARIA BEIDER, MSW



**AS WE START THE NEW YEAR AFTER THE LONG** summer break, it may be helpful to brace ourselves and prepare our children for the school year with stamina and endurance as they set out on the long journey ahead.

How should we do that? We could instill in them some grit and we should probably demonstrate it ourselves if we want our children to acquire it. But it may be, however, that we have lost the ability to 'stick it out' as well as our predecessors did, and that we are raising children who are overly sensitive and entitled, aka *snowflakes*. Moreover, we live in a disposable society where everything can be fixed or replaced so easily and it is so tempting to pander to our kids' physical and emotional needs and to make sure that their daily existence will be picture perfect and trouble free.

I recently had a friend whose daughter was on a school trip abroad, when

she dropped her phone and the screen broke. The phone was not turning on. This was too much for her to bear. She was beside herself and begged to come home. Her mother, unruffled, reminded her that in her day there were no mobile phones and yet they managed. She told her that she could get through this trial, while they try to fix the phone. The next day she was happy, carefree, and enjoying her trip without her phone! Two days later, her phone had been repaired. Tragedy had been averted. She had managed to persevere for three whole days without her 'transitional object!' You may laugh and mock at this little snowflake, but this is actually the beginning of grittiness. She stuck with the programme when the going got tough and she coped.

Are we afraid of allowing our children to suffer at all?

We need to remind ourselves and

our children that it is ok to struggle. Challenges are inevitable in life. It is how we manage them that counts. According to Angela Duckworth, author of *Grit*, this skill is acquired with a combination of passion and perseverance. Those who achieve do so because they exhibit both resilience and hard work. Her research shows that gritty individuals are those who have a 'never give up' attitude. They see things through to the end, even when there are unexpected hurdles to jump. Duckworth underlines the fact that effort is twice as important as talent. Natural talent alone is not sufficient. Successful people are those who take raw talent and invest it with hours and hours of effort and practice. As they exert effort, they develop skill. With skill and more effort applied, the result is achievement.

Here are Duckworth's formulae:

Talent x Effort = Skill

Skill x Effort = Achievement

She also explores four qualities that she believes make up grit: interest, practice, hope, and purpose.

**Interest:** While following your passion in life is important, it is not enough on its own. On the other hand, an interest can take time to develop and requires patience.

**Practice:** Committed, gritty people practise hard. This shows there is a desire to want to grow and improve. They also work on their areas of weakness and set goals. It is the opposite of complacency. Duckworth recommends making practice a part of one's daily routine, so it becomes habitual.



**“WE MUST NOT BE AFRAID TO EXPECT, PUSH, AND DEMAND FROM OUR CHILDREN. BUT OUR PARENTAL AUTHORITY SHOULD BE BASED ON KNOWLEDGE, WISDOM, AND LOVE.”**

**Hope:** A person who perseveres tends to have an optimistic outlook.

**Purpose:** Is this just a job, a career, or your calling? A calling usually refers to work that connects the individual to something far greater than the self. It is about making a difference in the world and a belief that one’s efforts will not be in vain. To illustrate this idea consider the following parable. A bricklayer can view his task in three different ways when questioned about his purpose.

One bricklayer says, “I am laying bricks.”

The second says, “I am building a shul.”

The third says, “I am building a house of G-d.”

The third has found a calling. Many of us may identify more with the first or second bricklayer.

The good news is that you can grow your grittiness with life experience, as you develop resilience, dealing with inevitable rejection and disappointment along the way. But how can we help our children become grittier?

Duckworth’s own grittiness has led to extensive research which shows that we should be endeavouring to parent ‘wisely’. This means being both supportive and demanding. We must not be afraid to expect, push, and demand from our children. But our parental authority should be based on knowledge, wisdom, and love. According to a longitudinal study on parenting styles by Laurence Steinberg, teens with warm, respectful, and demanding parents were more self-reliant, had less anxiety and depression, exhibited less delinquent behaviour, and achieved better grades.

While I was in the process of writing this article, I was sitting by the side of the swimming pool watching my daughter swim. As I looked up to watch her, I was encouraged to see how her

style had progressed hugely in a matter of weeks. It dawned on me that this was the perfect illustration of grit!

.....  
(Spoiler alert: proud Jewish mother story to follow.)

My eight year old, who knows how to swim, begged me not to enrol her for another season of swimming lessons. She did not enjoy getting into the water on a cold spring afternoon. While I empathised greatly, I knew this was a non-negotiable for me because she had come so far in her skill and I knew she needed one more season to be an excellent swimmer. So we set some goals. We counted how many lessons it would be and factored in the December holiday break too. We also agreed on prizes at the end of lessons. I needed to practise ‘Wise Parenting’ which translated as being demanding, supportive, but also kind and nurturing. Within a few weeks she started telling me that rather than dread those swimming drives twice a week, she was looking forward to them and was actually beginning to love her lessons. When I asked her why, she told me it was because she was becoming good at it and it was fun too. She had risen to the challenge and through consistent practice and effort, or ‘showing up’, she was developing skill and interest.

Do not fret if you feel you have not instilled grittiness into your kids yet. Sometimes it is lying dormant and will

only be revealed as a matter of sheer necessity. I know many teens who struggle to get out of bed every day. However, when they are faced with an incentive like a well-paid holiday job, miraculously, they get up on time, consistently. They rise to the challenge and surprise us. They are not to be underestimated. Furthermore, there is a universal feeling of satisfaction in achieving something which was earned by hard work. The view from the top of the mountain is far more spectacular after the arduous climb, than when one is merely dropped off on the summit by a helicopter! “According to the effort is the reward” (Pirkei Avos, 6:26).

Having said all this, as brilliant as Duckworth’s grit theory is, in my opinion, there is one crucial piece missing – faith. For a believer, it is faith in something far greater than humanity that he relies on in order to persevere against all odds and to succeed. This is the Jewish secret of survival and inner strength. Jewish endurance is so well known that there is even a culture of Jewish humour around it:

*A Russian, named Mendel, dreams of travelling to America. He goes to get a Visa. The official tells him, “There is a long line for Visas. You’d best come back in another ten years.”*

*“Fine,” says Mendel, “in the morning or the afternoon?”* (from The Jewish Joke by Devorah Baum).

Therefore, I have come up with my own formula or ‘kosher’ recipe for achievement:

Grit + Faith = Success

Faith in both oneself and in G-d is a quintessential ingredient in enabling a person to endure setbacks, not to be disheartened, and to ultimately succeed. ■

