

# Grit Guide for Teens Supplement: What Parents and Teachers Can Do to Increase Grit

*It takes a village to raise a child.*

—African proverb, adapted by Hillary Clinton

*It takes a village to raise a teen.*

—Adapted by Caren Baruch-Feldman

Welcome to the online supplement to the *Grit Guide for Teens*, a workbook that teaches teens to grow their grit by changing their mind-set and behavior. From the workbook, teens will learn mind-set and behavioral strategies to help them become grittier (that is, better able to persist in meeting goals that are important to them and to overcome the challenges along the way). As important as it is for teens to examine themselves, it is equally important that they be surrounded by people who support them, because grit is a *team* effort. That's where *you* come in.

In this section, you will learn how to create a culture and community of grit by giving the teens in your life the structured support they need to grow their grit into greatness. In my work as a psychologist and educator, and as the parent of two teenagers, I have learned that what we do has a tremendous impact on those around us. Even the smallest act of kindness creates profound, long-lasting ripple effects. I encourage you to be a part of creating and sustaining a recursive circle of passion, perseverance, and purpose (the key ingredients to grit).

# What Parents Can Do to Increase Grit

*Grit is best learned through personal relationships.*

—Jim Grant

## for you to know

Maybe you were the one who suggested that your teen buy this workbook, or maybe you have no idea what's between the covers of the *Grit Guide for Teens*. To make sure that we are all on the same page, here is a basic definition of grit, developed by Angela Duckworth, the psychologist and researcher who coined the term: Grit is passion and perseverance for long-term and meaningful goals. It is the ability to persist in something you feel passionate about and persevere when you face obstacles. The ability to be gritty—to stick with things that are important to you and bounce back from failure—is an essential component of success independent of and beyond what talent and intelligence contribute (Duckworth, 2016).

You may be wondering: *How can I help foster grit in my children? Why are my kids gritty in some areas and not in others? Is there a way to help them grow their grit if they want to? What if I want them to be gritty, but they don't?*

Here are my *top ten* suggestions for cultivating grit in your teen:

1. *Establish and maintain a positive relationship.* Anyone who has a teenager knows that having a positive relationship with them is not always easy. I sometimes think that the tension that develops between parents and teens allows us to separate more easily when the time comes! Nevertheless, cultivating a positive relationship with your teen is critical to developing grit. But how? One way is to focus on your teen's strengths. It is easy to notice the wet towels she leaves on the floor or the surly tone she takes with you in front of her friends. But try instead to recognize her more positive traits (for instance, being kind to a younger sibling, setting the table, or feeding the dog). Also, take time to engage in positive activities with your teen. When she was little, it was easy to get her to do things with you. This is not always the case with teens. So when your teen asks you to cook something or watch that television show (even if it is *The Bachelorette*), *do it!* These are real ways to build

and grow positive relationships. (See activity 22 in the workbook to learn more about being a cheerleader for your teen.)

2. *Help your teen find his passion.* Teens today feel that they should excel in everything: music, sports, academics, and be popular to boot. However, most of us are not wired to be strong in every area. That's why it is essential for you to help your teen find his strengths and grow his passion in an area that is important to him. It is when we feel passionate about a goal that grit can grow. For example, if your child has a passion for cooking, let him cook dinner for the family; if he loves animals, you can help him find work at an animal shelter. What if your teen does not have a passion? Expose your teen to different activities and see if something sticks. It's also okay if your teen does not have a passion, as we all know every teen is a work in progress. Also, remember this is about growing *your teen's* goals and passions, not yours. (See chapter 1 on understanding grit—and particularly activity 5, on making grit matter—for more information on this topic.)
3. *Make it about growth.* Send the message to your teen that her abilities are changeable and can grow with effort, that with challenge comes growth, and that failure breeds learning. Tell your teen that the neurons in her brain actually grow stronger when she engages in challenging tasks, and watch her become more willing to take on and stick with hard things. For example, if your teen is a swimmer and a certain distance is difficult for her, you can send the message that by swimming more she will build the stamina necessary to go a longer distance. It's the same with "brain" tasks like writing and math: the more your teen works, the more her skill set will grow. Instead of sending the message to your teen that she has a "fixed" level of skill and talent that does not change, let her know that her talent and skills actually grow with experience and when faced with a challenge. To foster a growth mind-set, don't praise mere effort, but rather praise the effective use of strategies and progress. (See activity 9 to learn more about developing a growth mind-set.)
4. *Balance your high expectations with support.* Let your teen know that you have high expectations for him even as you demonstrate your willingness to help him along the way. For example, if you want your teen to be grittier about baseball, let him know what your expectations are ("Even when you don't feel like going, you should show up, because you are part of a team") while also being his biggest cheerleader (for instance, going to his games and telling him you support him whether he wins or loses). (See activity 22 to learn more about finding the right balance between expectations and support.)
5. *Lead by example.* Model gritty behavior by taking on challenges, being persistent and bouncing back from failure. For example, be explicit about your own everyday struggles. Tell your teen about a problem you've faced at work, or the time you and a friend hit a bump in your relationship that you needed grit to work through. Watch those "mirror

neurons”—the brain pathways that connect us to other people. When you are gritty, your grit will rub off on your teen. Conversely, when you are not, your teen will pick up on that behavior. (Learn more about “mirror neurons,” the brain pathways that connect us to other people, in activity 22.)

6. *Understand the teenage brain.* You know how it feels to be bombarded by information and stimuli: the ding of a text message, the lure of social media, an abundance of entertainment options. For our teens, these distractions are even more intense because of how the teenage brain develops. Teens are more inclined to take risks because the part of the brain responsible for self-control is not fully developed, which makes it harder for them to resist temptation. By understanding the teenage brain, you will be in a better position to support your teen. (See activity 21 to learn more about the teenage brain. For more information, read *Age of Opportunity* by Laurence Steinberg 2015.)
7. *Establish goals and habits.* Help your teen establish goals that are specific and measurable. It is best to make gritty behavior a habit as opposed to using self-control or willpower. Because goal setting is such an important part of developing grit, and because teens sometimes need help following through on their goals, it would be great for you to collaborate with your teen to turn her gritty beliefs into action. (See chapter 3 on promoting gritty behavior, in particular the activities on goal setting, deliberate practice, self-control, and developing habits.)
8. *Cultivate gratitude.* Being grateful helps develop a positive and optimistic mind-set, which makes it easier to be gritty when you encounter the less than positive. An easy way to encourage gratitude is to ask your teen at breakfast or dinner time, “What are three things you are grateful for?” Tell him things that you feel grateful for, and model behavior that expresses humility, thankfulness, and positivity. Your teen may roll his eyes when you have a conversation about gratitude, but never fear: the message is sinking in. (See activity 20 to learn more about encouraging gratitude.)
9. *Be a buffer for stress, but let your teen skin her knees.* It is natural for us to want to protect our children so that they never have to face the sting of failure or disappointment. However, never experiencing or dealing with the consequences of failure can make it more challenging when it does occur. Support your teen during stressful times, but give her a chance to fail, especially during these years when she has a safety net. Soon enough she will be living independently, and wouldn’t it be best if she learned how to deal with challenges and setbacks while still under your wing? (There is a lot of great literature on this topic. Two books I particularly recommend are Ken Ginsburg’s *Raising Kids to Thrive* and Jessica Lahey’s *The Gift of Failure*.)

10. *Find purpose and community.* Help your teen find purpose for his gritty behavior by showing how it can benefit others. See if he can find a way to use his strengths, passion, and personal skills to address problems in the world. Help your teen establish a community and/or a culture of grit. When teens surround themselves with people who are interested in helping others, the passion they see can rub off and inspire them as well (remember those mirror neurons). Creating a family culture of service is an excellent way to gain a sense of purpose by working toward something that benefits others, not just ourselves. (See activity 19 to learn more about purpose, and activity 22 on creating a community of grit.)

## for you to do

Throughout this workbook, I have asked your teen to participate in reflective activities that put the ideas I have discussed into action. Now I will ask the same of you!

Check off the ways in which you are already engaging in strategies that foster gritty behavior in your teen. Have you...

- 1. Established and cultivated a positive relationship with your teen?
- 2. Helped your teen find his/her passion?
- 3. Sent a message of growth?
- 4. Set high expectations while offering support?
- 5. Led by example?
- 6. Learned about the teenage brain?
- 7. Helped your teen create goals and habits?
- 8. Cultivated gratitude in your family?
- 9. Been a buffer for stress, not bubble wrap?
- 10. Helped your teen find purpose and community?

Next, write down three ideas or strategies from this list that you are not currently using that you plan to incorporate into your life:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

What are some of the obstacles you see for putting these ideas and strategies into place?

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What is your plan to overcome these obstacles?

1. If this is the obstacle: \_\_\_\_\_

Then I will try: \_\_\_\_\_

2. If this is the obstacle: \_\_\_\_\_

Then I will try: \_\_\_\_\_

3. If this is the obstacle: \_\_\_\_\_

Then I will try: \_\_\_\_\_

## let's dig deeper

It is a known psychological phenomenon that when we make our goals visible (put them in the forefront of our mind) and are accountable for our actions, we will be more successful. Here are some ways you might do this as you work on growing grit in your teen:

### *Make an Advantage Card*

On an index card, write down the advantages of engaging in the strategies you listed above. You are *not* explaining the advantages of your teen's being gritty but rather the advantages of *your* engaging in these strategies. Make a commitment to read this card every day. (To learn more about Advantage Cards, see activity 15.)

I will read this card at [time] \_\_\_\_\_

I will read this card [where] \_\_\_\_\_

### *Be Accountable*

Share your goal of supporting your teen in growing his or her grit by sharing it with a friend or partner, or posting it on social media. When we share with others what we are doing, we feel accountable and are more likely to stick with it—and meet our goals.

I will share how I am fostering grit in my teen by...

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### *Bonus Activity*

It may be easy for our children to look at us and not see all the hard work that we needed to do to get to where we are today. It can be a real gift for you to share with your teen a challenge that you have overcome.

Tell your teen about a time you had a challenge in *your* life.

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Did you ever think of quitting? If so, how did you overcome this feeling?

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What steps did you take to overcome your challenge? If you did not succeed at first, how did you get back on track?

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How did you have to *think* and *act* in order to overcome your challenge and be successful?

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What is your life like now that you have overcome your challenge?

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What did you learn and how did you grow?

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Raising a teen requires grit. It takes passion—because there is no job we are as dedicated to or find as important as being a parent; perseverance—because being a parent is a job you can't quit, no matter how tough things get; and purpose—because at the very heart of being a parent is caring about something and someone beyond yourself. Keep this in mind as you help your teen grow his or her grit.

And, remember, while you can't change others, by changing your mind-set and behavior and giving your teen support along the way, you will lead by example.

To learn more about grit and how you can help foster it in your teenager, check out the following books:

Brooks, R. B., and S. Goldstein. *Raising Resilient Children: Fostering Strength, Hope, and Optimism in Your Child*. Lincolnwood, IL: Contemporary Books, 2001.

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Duckworth, A. *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. New York: Scribner, 2016.

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# What Teachers Can Do to Increase Grit

*Try to be a rainbow in someone's cloud.*

—Maya Angelou

## for you to know

As a teacher you may be wondering, *How can I best prepare my students to be successful in the twenty-first century?* In 2013, the U.S. Department of Education released a position paper that indicated that *grit, tenacity, and perseverance* are critical factors for student success (Shechtman et al., 2013). Many schools have since begun to introduce the concept of grit into the classroom. Maybe your school has already started this process. Or maybe you are a pioneer in your school, interested in sharing the benefits of grit with your students and colleagues. Either way, this resource will give you the tools to help you grow your students' gritty behavior.

Angela Duckworth, a 2013 MacArthur Fellow and professor of psychology, defines grit as passion and perseverance for long-term and meaningful goals. Why is grit important in a school setting? Because it is a key driver of achievement and success, independent of and beyond what talent and intelligence contribute (Duckworth, 2016). Being naturally smart and talented are great, but to truly do well and thrive, teens need the ability to persevere. Without grit, talent may be nothing more than unmet potential. It is only with *effort* that talent becomes a skill that leads to success (Duckworth, 2016).

So how can we (I include myself here as an educator) help our students become grittier? Not by demanding that they pull themselves up by their bootstraps or by setting unreasonable expectations and assuming teens can meet them all on their own. For teens to grow their grit, they need teachers and the other adults in their lives to help them get there.

Here are my *top ten* suggestions for cultivating gritty behavior in your students.

1. *Build a positive relationship with your students.* When I ask teens, "What is most helpful when you are feeling stuck and want to give up?" they reply, "Having a teacher, parent,

or coach who believes in me and gives me a helping hand when I feel overwhelmed.” Their answers are consistent with research on the value and power of charismatic adults in building resilience and grit (Segal, 1988; Brooks and Goldstein, 2001; Tough, 2016). See the relationship with your students like a bank account: when you are kind, caring, and supportive, you are putting money into the account. When you redirect, give negative feedback, or frustrate your students, you are taking money out. Try to keep your bank account full so that when you need to make a withdrawal—and we all make withdrawals sometimes—there is enough money in the account to do so. Your students will act grittier when they feel you are on their side and when you have a history of warm, supportive interactions. Attention and a positive attitude go a long way in increasing your students’ grit. (See activity 22 in the workbook to learn more about building a positive relationship with your students.)

2. *Help students find value and connection at school.* Many teens in middle and high school say they feel disconnected and bored at school, which leads them to tune out or give up on difficult tasks. It is not always easy, but try to find creative ways for your students to connect to and find value in tasks and activities to build their *intrinsic motivation* instead of relying on extrinsic motivation or punishment. When students find that tasks are aligned with their interests, they will be more invested and motivated. Maybe some of your students are not passionate about learning math, but they are excited by the ups and downs of the stock market; use this area of interest to build their math skills. Admittedly, not all tasks lend themselves to this easy fix. However, when you encourage student input, connect school work to real-life, and allow for group discussions, your students can feel more connected to the material. Another suggestion is to try connecting the subject to a value important to the student. (See activities 5 and 19 to learn more about the power of values and purpose.) For example, maybe your students value being a good student, or giving everything a shot, no matter how boring. If you can get your students to focus on their values or a bigger purpose, they may be able to find grit and motivation for a task that does not initially grab them.
3. *Use empathy before problem solving.* Educators often switch into problem-solving mode when they see their students struggling. However, before you jump in to offer advice, take a moment to put yourself in your students’ shoes. Let them know you recognize and understand their struggle before suggesting how to solve it. When you’re ready for problem solving, first try to elicit what your students know before sharing what you know. Ask “What part of this problem do you understand?” Then ask what you can do to help. This approach allows your students to persist and persevere when they face an obstacle. (There’s a lot of great literature available on this topic. Two books I particularly

recommend are *Building Resilience in Children and Teens* by Ken Ginsburg and *Helping Children Succeed* by Paul Tough.)

4. *Provide a high level of challenge mixed with support.* A number of studies have shown that stating high expectations while providing support is the best way to increase students' persistence and performance (Yeager et al., 2014). When you set high expectations, you will invest more in your students. You will also have more positive feelings for them (putting money into that bank account). Let your students know you think they can meet your expectations while supporting them along the way. For example, when giving feedback, say "I am giving you this feedback because I have high expectations for you, and I know you can reach them." If you see a student struggling with that feedback, let her know she can turn to you for help. (See activity 22 to learn more about creating the right mix of support and expectations.)
5. *Create a classroom culture that supports grit.* Students work best where they feel connected, competent, and autonomous. When teens feel a sense of belonging, they are more likely to come to class, stick with difficult tasks, and rebound from setbacks. Work should be challenging, but not overwhelming; students should feel that they can succeed at the task at hand. To increase autonomy, encourage cooperative teamwork and project-based learning, and provide deep learning experiences. Students need to feel that the work has value and is relevant for their future. Lastly, help students feel a sense of purpose. Youth who feel purpose in their lives are more likely to persist and be resilient. (See Deci & Ryan, 1985; Farrington et al., 2012 for more information.)
6. *Understand the effect that poverty, disadvantage, and adversity have on your students.* Students who grow up in difficult or stressful conditions are primed to believe that they don't belong at school; they often feel a lack of competence and think they have little choice in their fate (Tough, 2016). Students who face adversity can often lag behind their peers academically, adding to their sense of incompetence. In addition, living with chronic stress makes it harder to exert self-control, a necessary part of being gritty. Therefore, it is essential to show students from unpredictable environments that they can trust you, by creating a learning environment in which promises are fulfilled so that sticking with a long-term goal makes sense. It is important that we as educators are aware of the unique challenges each student faces and, in particular, the challenges associated with poverty, inequality, and disadvantage. (For more on this topic, check out Paul Tough's book *Helping Children Succeed*.)
7. *Model gritty behavior.* Don't just talk about being gritty; *be* gritty. Teens watch us closely and are more likely to do what we do than what we say. Model optimism, and stay

positive about your students; when you stop believing in them, they stop believing in themselves. Share stories with your students about times you have faced a challenge and rebounded. Show them how you are making grit into a habit. I know of one teacher who shared with her students how she made doing the laundry a habit by doing a load each day before work. Lastly, model when to “hold ‘em” (stay gritty) and when to “fold ‘em” (quit sensibly). Let your students know that sometimes it is okay to let go of something so that you can pursue something else so long as you give the original something a real try first. Teach your students to quit thoughtfully, not impulsively. (See chapter 3, on promoting gritty behavior, for more information.)

8. *Establish goals, practice, and create habits.* Help your students develop clear and specific learning goals—aims or targets that are measurable and within their reach—and give them lots of opportunities to practice behaviors that will help them achieve those goals. When your students are struggling, offer constructive feedback so they can grow with their effort. The ultimate goal should be to turn gritty behavior into a habit. For example, an easy gritty habit you can encourage in your students is to sit in the front of the room when they have a choice. Sitting up front helps students focus and work harder and shows the teacher they are interested. Use some of the routines or habits you follow in class (assignments on the board, putting the homework in the homework basket) as examples of the power and benefit of turning something into a habit. (For more on this, see chapter 3, on developing gritty behavior, particularly the activities on goal setting, practice, and establishing habits.)
9. *Help students develop a growth mind-set.* Let students know that mistakes are part of the learning process and that we grow with challenge. Help your students see setbacks as an opportunity for learning rather than a reflection of their ability or worth. For example, point out the times you have made a mistake—copied the wrong handout, assigned the wrong pages for homework—and be willing to laugh at yourself when you make one. When mistakes are made, take the opportunity to model a growth mind-set by asking your students: What went wrong? When/where/why and how did it go wrong? What can you learn from this experience? And how can you apply what you learned to future attempts? Teach your students the acronym FAIL—First Attempt in Learning—so that instead of seeing a mistake as an end point, they will see it as a “first attempt in learning” (with thanks to the late Indian president A.P.J. Abdul Kalam). Lastly, provide students with feedback and opportunities to revise their work. By allowing for revisions, you are sending a message that their work and their sense of self are not fixed, but have the potential to change and grow. Lastly, praise the effective use of strategies and progress, not mere effort. (See activity 9 to learn more about nurturing a growth mind-set.)

10. *Don't bulldoze; nudge.* Teens are sensitive to how a message is delivered and do best when interventions like the ones I've suggested are stealthy and indirect. You want to nudge them toward grit, not bulldoze. For example, instead of having a direct conversation with teens about their lack of grit or why "teens today" are just not gritty, assign leadership positions that give them the opportunity to teach others. Or ask students at the end of the year to write a postcard to next year's students, telling them what they have learned about being persistent, resilient, and successful. Although the students writing the postcards think they are the ones giving advice to others, *they* are actually the ones receiving the benefit, gaining inspiration from their effort to inspire others. Another nudge is to have students write about their values without explicitly asking them how those values are connected to grit. Let what they write percolate within them; allow them to make the connection on their own. It is best for teachers to nudge teens in directions that align their behaviors with their long-term goals and a sense of higher purpose. (For more ideas on stealthy and wise interventions, see the article "The New Science of Wise Psychological Interventions" by Gregory M. Walton 2014.)

## for you to do

I have outlined ten ways for you to foster gritty behavior in your classroom. Now let's engage in some activities that bring these concepts to life. Check off ways in which you are already engaging in strategies that foster gritty behavior in your students. Have you...

- 1. Established a positive relationship with your students?
- 2. Helped students find value and connection at school?
- 3. Used empathy and effective problem solving in the classroom?
- 4. Established high expectations while offering support?
- 5. Created a culture that promotes grit (social connection, competence, and autonomy)?
- 6. Understood the role of poverty and disadvantage?
- 7. Grown your own grit so you can lead by example?
- 8. Helped students create goals, practice, and habits?
- 9. Promoted a growth mind-set?
- 10. Nudged teen behavior by using stealthy interventions?

Next, write down three ideas or strategies that you are not currently using but plan to incorporate into your classroom. Briefly describe how you will implement these strategies.

1. Chosen strategy \_\_\_\_\_

I will implement this strategy by: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Chosen strategy \_\_\_\_\_

I will implement this strategy by: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Chosen strategy \_\_\_\_\_

I will implement this strategy by: \_\_\_\_\_

Were any of the strategies you chose stealthy ones? Be sure to set up at least one stealthy intervention that nudges your students towards being grittier. Or, if you can't think of one on your own, look back at what I suggested in point #10.

The stealthy intervention I will use in my classroom is

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Make a commitment to promoting grit in your classroom by telling another teacher or administrator what you are committing to do so that you will be accountable. Or partner with a colleague so you have a grit partner to share ideas with.

# let's dig deeper

If you were to write a quiz for your students based on what you have learned about grit—why it's important and how to grow it—what three questions would you ask?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## *Bonus Activity*

It is easy for students to look at us and not see the hard work it took for us to get to where we are today. Share with your students a not-too-personal challenge that you overcame so that they can see that with obstacles comes opportunity and with challenge comes growth—in other words, that grit pays off!

Share with your students a time you faced a challenge. What was it?

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What steps did you take to overcome this challenge? If you did not succeed at first, how did you get back on track?

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How did you have to *think* and *behave* in order to conquer your challenge and be successful?

I thought \_\_\_\_\_

I behaved \_\_\_\_\_

How did your life change as a result?

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Often what is most challenging can also be most rewarding. Share with your students what made this particular challenge rewarding.

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Being a teacher is challenging, but deeply rewarding—in a word, it requires *grit*. By connecting to the passion, perseverance, and purpose that brought you to teaching in the first place, you can be a true person of grit for your students.

If you would like to learn more about how you can cultivate a gritty mind-set and behavior in your students, including the latest research emerging in the field, check out the following books, papers, and websites:

## readings

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## websites

<https://www.characterlab.org>

<https://www.greatergood.berkeley.edu>

<https://www.mindsetkit.org>

<http://www.mindsetscholarsnetwork.org>

<https://www.perts.net>