

MINDSETS

Strategies to Encourage
Growth Mindsets in Kids

for Parents

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WHAT ARE MINDSETS AND HOW DO THEY AFFECT OUR CHILDREN?

“I want to make sure my children never stop learning!”

– Gina, parent of three

Have you ever caught yourself thinking any of the following about your children?

- ◆ “Poor thing, she isn’t very good at maths. She must have gotten that from me.”
- ◆ “He takes after me in his sporting ability.”
- ◆ “Maths and science are his strengths. He doesn’t do well in literature.”

The way we think about and react to our children depends on our mindset.

What are mindsets? Thanks to the research of Dr Carol Dweck, Stanford University professor of psychology, society is going through a shift in thinking about learning and intelligence. Dweck (2006) described a belief system that asserts that intelligence can be developed and coined the term *growth mindset*. Parents with a growth mindset believe that their children can achieve at higher levels – with effort, perseverance and resiliency. Learners with a growth mindset believe

that they can grow their intelligence with hard work and learn just about anything. It might take some struggle and some failure, but they understand that with effort and perseverance, they can grow and succeed. Growth mindset adults and children focus on the learning, growth and improvement – not the grades or trophies, not on looking “smart” or talented. A growth mindset home environment encapsulates the philosophy that there is enough success for everyone. Both parents and children learn about the malleability of the brain and what can happen as a result of practice, perseverance, resiliency and grit.

Conversely, Dweck coined the term *fixed mindset*, which is a belief system in which one believes that intelligence is something you are born with – it is genetic, it is innate – and although everyone can learn new things, your innate level of intelligence cannot be changed. A person with a fixed mindset might believe that he or she has predetermined “smarts” or talents in a particular area, but not in other areas. A child or adult with a fixed mindset might believe that he or she will never be good in a particular subject or talent or be afraid to try something that he or she thinks is too difficult or at which he or she fears failure. For people who do not perceive themselves as “smart”, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is important to avoid classifying people into “fixed mindset” or “growth mindset” categories. Rarely does anyone fit 100% into a category – we are certain degrees of each, depending on the situation. We know of a teacher who has a very growth mindset when it comes to her students and her teaching. She believes that they can increase their skills and abilities in a variety of different areas and her classroom is a space where the word “can’t” is rarely spoken. This teacher expects each student to put forth great effort and believes that all can achieve at a high level. She is a model growth mindset teacher; however, at home, she transitions into a fixed mindset thinker when it comes to her cooking skills. In fact, she is so sure that she can’t cook, she unplugged her oven and uses it to store her books!

Think for a minute about your own mindset. A mindset is a set of personal beliefs and is a way of thinking that influences your behaviour and attitude toward yourself and others. A parent’s mindset directly influences how a child feels about himself or herself and how he or

she views himself or herself. (In Chapter 2, you will find the Parent Mindset Reflection Tool to help gauge your parenting mindset.) A child's mindset directly affects how he or she faces challenges. A child with a growth mindset perseveres even in the face of barriers. A child with a fixed mindset may give up easily and decide to check out of the learning process because he or she believes that he or she does not possess the ability to understand this particular new learning.

A fixed or growth mindset can directly affect family dynamics as well. It is not surprising to note that parents have a big impact on how children view themselves. Parents will often view their children through specific lenses: "Joseph was born knowing his maths facts," "Patrick has always asked good questions" and "Catherine just knows how to interpret a piece of literature." These are all examples of a fixed mindset, even though the statements sound positive. These statements describe who these children "are", not what they have done or the effort that they have put forth. Think of some occasions when you have thought or heard yourself describe your child in a way that rationalises perceived weaknesses: "She is just like me; maths was not my thing either" or "I can understand why he does not do well in reading; I never liked to read" (Ricci, 2013).

SHIFTING MINDSETS

Breaking down the belief that intelligence is static can be a challenge, but with the proper groundwork and education, little by little a mindset can shift. Expecting a shift in mindset immediately is not realistic; after all, some adults have had a fixed mindset belief for most of their lives. No fault to them – fixed mindset thinking was likely embedded in many of us from a young age. Even after someone has had a self-proclaimed mindset shift, he or she will need to make a conscious effort to maintain that belief. A fixed mindset has an elasticity that continually wants to spring back. For example, a twice-exceptional child

GROWTH MINDSET PRAISE TYPE 1: EFFORT PRAISE

Embracing challenges with hard work and effort is a hallmark of a growth mindset.

In a fixed mindset, people often view having to work hard as a sign that they are not innately “smart enough” or “talented enough” to do something. This can lead people to give up too early, feel defeated and assume that they are never going to be good at a particular skill. In a growth mindset, people view hard work and effort as a key to success. We want to be sure that our children understand that having to work hard is not a sign of weakness, but is something that should be embraced! Having to work hard – whether on a maths problem, an oil painting or a new dance routine – helps children to make stronger neural connections and “grow” their brains! Instead of shying away from circumstances that force them to give their best, we want to encourage them to seek out challenges that will require effort. Winston Churchill famously once said, “A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.” Embracing challenges with hard work and effort is a hallmark of a growth mindset.

In order to develop this quality, we need to ensure that children hear praise connected to effort. Effort praise provides specific feedback that recognises the hard work that the child is engaged in. For instance:

- ◆ “I can see how hard you are working! Keep it up!”
- ◆ “This isn’t easy, is it? That’s okay! You’re ploughing ahead and doing your best!”
- ◆ “I love to see the effort that you put into this project! You must be very proud of it!”
- ◆ “You’ve been working hard on that for an hour! Good job. How about a break for a snack before you get back at it?”
- ◆ “Even though you don’t have the hang of it quite yet, you are so much closer than when you started! I can really see how your determination is paying off!”

the coach likely thought that the timed targets would be a wake-up call to the young players, he did not consider what message the fixed time requirements might send to those who had already surpassed the goal. Unlike Colsh's players, who were given a roadmap focused on improvement, Jacob's soccer skills were not expected to grow over the holidays.

Colsh readily admitted that being a growth mindset-focused coach can be a challenge and has forced reflection and growth on the part of the coaching staff. "It took us 4 years to get to the assessment of skills piece," Colsh said, when asked about the work he and Welch put into the May feedback drills. "Try-outs are a new start for everyone, even if they have played for us before." When players don't make the team, the cuts are often harder on parents than they are for kids, Colsh noted:

There are so many kids trying out. Your kid could be a star on one team and not make the cut on another. This creates a mindset issue. One of the worst things that we can do in youth sport is identifying stand-out players too early. It often doesn't mean anything and sets up fixed mindsets in both parents and players.

Colsh's growth mindset orientation helped lead to phenomenal success on the field. The soccer team won the state championship for the first time in 22 years in 2015 under the leadership of Colsh and Welch.

IF YOU'RE GOING TO MAKE A MISTAKE, MAKE A "DOOZY"

Kearney Francis Blandamer is a respected field hockey coach with 20 years under her belt. For the last 5 of those, Blandamer has been varsity coach at Thomas S. Wootton High School and has led her team to an overall 5-year record of 67-12-1. Along with her sister, junior varsity coach Lesley Francis Stroot, Blandamer wanted to take her team to the

next level through the deliberate infusion of growth mindset principles into their preparation, feedback and team philosophy.

Because both Blandamer and Stroot teach at Wootton, they see the community through a learning lens. They started by reading about Dweck's work and considering its application to the girls at Wootton, an unusually high-achieving community, where the culture of success is bred with vigour. Blandamer admitted that,

From an outsider's perspective, this sounds like a positive thing. They succeed at just about everything they attempt. But this is actually quite crippling. It makes the stakes for failure very high, and actually discourages the highest risk taking. Our students have very high levels of anxiety, and report burnout and early "retirement" from many activities they once enjoyed.

In her first several years at Wootton, Blandamer noticed that her players' fear of failure held them back in tight, high-pressure situations. She was determined to build a culture in which players were comfortable taking risks:

We need to teach and reinforce the growth mindset. We try to give the girls experiences that get them comfortable being uncomfortable, but now we explain that all we are after is learning. We talk about risk-taking and experiencing challenges and how only when we are uncomfortable can we grow.

To that end, Blandamer and Stroot seek opportunities for their team to play top-ranked teams in the Mid-Atlantic, games that will challenge them beyond the confines of their region.

It was at one of these contests against a top-ranked team that the previously undefeated Wootton girls lost 5-0. Blandamer could not have been more pleased with her team, and the value of growth mindset was more evident than ever:

My girls were exhausted, banged up and in an unfamiliar place (being shut out and outscored by such a wide differential). And