

Growth Mindset: Help Your Child Try New Things!

What is growth mindset theory and how can it help your child's learning and social skills?

Practising growth mindset theory with children is a great way to get your children engaged with subjects and activities that they try to avoid through fear of getting things wrong or not being good enough.

In EYFS (Reception at school), the key pillars of learning are communication and language development, physical development, and personal and social development along with literacy and maths. If a child starts to fall behind in one of these areas and believes that their abilities and talents are a fixed state then they can become easily discouraged. In this article we'll begin to explain how fixed and growth mindsets affect children's thinking, learning and development from the Early Years onwards through primary school and beyond.

What is a growth mindset?

Has your child ever said to you 'There's no point, I'll never be able to do it' or avoided doing something because they've failed at it in the past?

Feelings like this can be related to what children believe about what makes them 'good' at something – whether it's school work, sport, or even their ability to manage their emotions and behaviour.

Some children will tend to give up on challenging tasks easily, or avoid tasks they've failed at before. They tend to believe that being 'good' at a particular activity is a fixed state, and is something they can't control. In psychology, this way of thinking is called a '**fixed mindset**'.

Others might bounce back quickly from failure and be more likely to explore how they can get better at doing something. They tend to be children who believe that they can improve their abilities by practising, or by finding a different way to achieve their goal. This way of thinking is called a '**growth mindset**', and developing it can help make children more resilient for life.

There are lots of small things you can do every day that can help your child develop a growth mindset.

Is ability something innate?

Professor Carol Dweck, an American psychologist at Stanford University, found that we all have different beliefs about the underlying nature of ability but after much research over many years, she has concluded (along with many leading neuroscientists) that ability and intelligence can be grown and are not innate.

Children (and adults!) with a **growth mindset** believe that intelligence and abilities can be developed through effort, persistence, trying different strategies and learning from mistakes.

On the other hand, people with a **fixed mindset** believe that our intelligence and

abilities are fixed traits; something that we are born with and that we can't really do anything about.

How do the different mindsets develop and why are they important?

Most babies are excited to learn. However, as soon as children are able to compare themselves to others, some will stop focusing on learning and will instead focus on performance; they want to look good in front of others and more importantly, they want to feel like they are the best or at least keeping up with what they perceive is the best.

According to someone with a **fixed mindset**, if you fail at something, make a mistake, or even have to put effort in, it must be because they are just not good/clever enough. Because of that belief, children begin to avoid challenges and choose activities that they find easy.

People with a **fixed mindset** feel as if they have no control over their abilities, and are more helpless in the face of difficulties and setbacks. They begin to feel disheartened if they find something difficult, which can lead to low self-esteem and a developing sense that there is 'just no point' in trying.

Over time, children who feel like this may decrease their efforts and sometimes even engage in disruptive behaviours (anything that will detract from the fact that they are struggling).

Children (and adults!) with a **growth mindset** think very differently. They believe that they can get better at something by practising, so when they're faced with a challenge, they become more and more determined to succeed, wanting to persevere and overcome knockbacks. They tend to feel as if they're in control, and are not threatened by hard work or failure.

Although no one likes failing, children with a **growth mindset** do not let failure define them; instead, they use setbacks and mistakes to learn from them and motivate themselves. Children encouraged to adopt a **growth mindset** enjoy challenges and the sense of achievement they get when they succeed.

Researchers have found that building a **growth mindset** helps children at school; making them more motivated, more engaged in the classroom and much more likely to attain higher levels and greater rewards from their work.

Lots of research has been conducted in America (this approach is really popular in schools in the US), and our team at the University of Portsmouth has found that developing a **growth mindset** has a positive impact on children's learning, attainment and, more importantly, understanding of the learning process in UK schools too.

But it's not all about educational outcomes. Research also suggests that having a **growth mindset** increases children's ability to try all sorts of different challenges and problems that they might not have otherwise tackled.

And because children no longer need to engage in various self-protection strategies,

developing a **growth mindset** also appears to improve behaviour, increase life satisfaction, and help children to control their emotions.

How can I help my child to develop a Growth Mindset?

The exciting thing about the **growth mindset** approach is that it is not just about ability. It focuses on what people *believe* about ability – and there are lots of ways that we can help our children to develop a **growth mindset**.

Research has shown that Mindsets can be changed relatively quickly and there are plenty of things that parents and families can do to help. Below are a few tips and ideas that can help promote a **growth mindset** in children.

Set high expectations for your child:

It is commonly believed that lowering our expectations promotes self-esteem in children (e.g. “never mind, let’s try an easier one”), but this is not the case. Having high (yet achievable) expectations works like a self-fulfilling prophecy. It shows that you believe they can do it, which in turn has a positive impact on their own beliefs, behaviour and outcomes.

Encourage children to be resilient and not give up, even when they find something difficult or frustrating:

We now know that the brain adapts to new information and practises by creating new connections, so help your child to believe that challenge is a positive thing because it means they are growing their brains! This can help them to be comfortable with the times that they struggle and means that they see this struggle and effort as a sign of learning.

Celebrate mistakes!

The fear of making mistakes and associated shame can stop children from giving something a go in the first place. We all make mistakes, so try to embrace these mistakes and use them as learning opportunities, rather than feeling embarrassed about them. If we are not making mistakes then we are not stretching ourselves. Children learn to fear mistakes when they are criticised and teased about them and fear disapproval.

Use inspirational role models:

Think about your child’s favourite athlete, musician or teacher and talk about their journey to success. We call this unravelling the talent myth. If someone has done well we have a tendency to think they were born that way. We need to show our children that this is not the case. Rather than focusing on somebody’s ‘natural talents’, focus on their early efforts, strong work ethic, and the mistakes and learning that led them to where they are now.

How can the way I praise my child help develop a Growth Mindset?

It’s natural to want to praise children when they do something well, but we need to do this carefully. Research suggests that the type of praise that we use can have a big impact. It’s all a matter of context and even positive praise can encourage a **fixed mindset**.

Praising our children by saying things like “you’re a natural!” or “you seem to be able

to turn your hand to anything!” without clarity of the process by which they got to that point can lead to the belief that being good at something is out of their control. In other words understanding how they got to be good at it the key.

This focus on being good at something might lead to children feeling happy in the short-term, but confused when the reason they were praised is not evident. If children believe that they succeeded in something simply because they are gifted, they can end up re-evaluating their abilities if it doesn't go as well next time.

Instead, research shows that it is much more effective if the grown-ups around the child focus praise on the **effort they've made** to get to that point of triumph, the **strategy they used** or the **outcome** itself, saying things like “You've worked so hard on this, well done!” or “You get better every time because of all the practise you've been doing.” or “You have found a great way to do that, it worked out really well.”

This kind of feedback helps to develop children's resilience to setbacks and failure as it teaches them what to do when they are challenged or fail – try again, try harder or try a different way, all things that are within their own control.

This type of praise is sometimes called 'process praise' and Dweck's research found that children became much more motivated when their parents used more of this kind of praise.

That's not how I've praised my child so far – is it too late to change?

It's never too late to change our mindsets! We've worked with children from the age of three, right up to university students and adults, and we've seen that anyone can develop a **growth mindset**.

It seems that the trick is to be open with children. If you are going to change the way you praise your child or the type of behaviours that you encourage, let them know why you are doing it. Tell them all about helping them to develop a growth mindset.

We're not saying that everyone is born with the same abilities or can all become Einstein or Usain Bolt, but what is clear is that practise, effort and finding the best strategy are crucial in determining how successful our children are in life, perhaps even more so than any natural abilities that they were born with.

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N.B. This article was taken from the CBBC website with a few small edits made by Mrs Jones