

Helping Your Child to Develop a Growth Mindset

Growth Mindset theory is becoming very popular in our schools lately – you may well have heard about it either from your child or from their school. But what is Growth Mindset theory, what are its benefits, and how can you encourage your child to develop a growth mindset?

Growth Mindset Theory

In a nutshell, it is all about what individuals believe about their ability to learn new things. Many people have a ‘fixed’ mindset, which leads them to believe that intelligence and abilities are fixed, and that a person cannot improve upon their ability to do something. People with a fixed mindset will often say things like, ‘There’s no point in trying, because I won’t be able to do it,’ or ‘I’ve never been any good at...’ They will give up on challenging tasks easily, or avoid activities they have found difficult in the past. They tend to focus heavily on the result of a task, rather than the effort required to achieve it.

Unfortunately, the underlying drive in the British education system in recent decades, with its focus on results and direct comparisons, could well have encouraged this type of thinking in many pupils and their parents. Babies and young children are excited to learn on their own terms, but as soon as children become able to compare themselves with others, many become more focused on performance (results) rather than effort. This attitude can also be common amongst parents, who are often extremely keen to know things such as spelling test results and book levels and to make comparisons with other children.

However, research shows that humans’ brains have a quality known as ‘neuroplasticity’ – in other words, it is actually possible to learn new things and make new connections between the neurons in our brains, even as we progress through into adulthood. People who innately recognise this fact tend to bounce back quickly from failures and setbacks and are more likely to explore how they can get better at doing something. They are described as having a ‘growth’ mindset; they do not define themselves by the outcomes of tasks but by the effort put in.

In summary, people with a fixed mindset believe that intelligence and ability are fixed – something that we are born with and that we can’t really do anything about. People with a growth mindset believe that intelligence and ability can be developed through **persistence, effort, learning from our mistakes** and **trying different strategies**.

Why Develop a Growth Mindset?

It makes sense that having a growth mindset is likely to lead to greater emotional well-being. People with a fixed mindset tend to feel that they fail at things because they are ‘just not good enough’. They feel they have no control over their abilities and are helpless in the face of difficulties, and this can lead to self-esteem issues. Ironically, it is often the ‘more able’ pupils in a school who have a fixed mindset as they are used to finding many things relatively easy; so when faced with something more challenging they will often avoid it completely or suffer damage to their self-esteem. Pupils who find learning more challenging, however, will often have more of a growth mindset, as they are used to setbacks; they are more able to celebrate small gains and improvements rather than focussing on results.

Growth Mindset in Schools

Many schools now are using growth mindset theory in their everyday interactions with pupils. They encourage them to use setbacks and difficulties to motivate them; they celebrate effort rather than results and encourage pupils to accept challenges with a sense of achievement for trying. Schools find that this makes pupils more motivated, more engaged with their learning and more likely to put in effort to seek improvement.

Examples of some things schools may do are:

- Change their reward system so that things such as effort and attitude are rewarded rather than results.
- Change the language they use when speaking to children: 'You tried really hard with your tables test, well done', rather than 'ten out of ten - well done, you're a brilliant mathematician'.
- Encourage children to choose their own level of challenge in lessons, rather than having one worksheet for this group and another for that one.

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Clearly, it will be beneficial for children if these messages are also being reinforced at home. Try these simple strategies:

- **Set high expectations.** Tempting though it may be to say, 'never mind, try the easier one', this approach doesn't nurture self-esteem. By expecting your child to try something more challenging, you are showing them that you believe they can do it.
- **Don't be afraid to criticise your child supportively.** Teach your child to see criticism as useful feedback on how to improve. Remind them that it is always the 'mean' judges on reality shows whose criticism means the most to the contestants!
- **Don't do everything for your child** (at an age-appropriate level). If you do everything for them, you are simply telling them that you think you can do it better, and that they are not good enough.
- **Encourage resilience and 'stickability'**, even when something is tough. It's helpful to talk to children in terms of 'growing their brains' - when something is at its most challenging for them, that is when their brains are making lots of new connections. Encourage them to see that struggling is a sign of learning, not of failure.
- **Celebrate mistakes.** Children should not be made to feel ashamed of mistakes since mistakes can help us to learn. If in doubt, look online for examples of famous sports people, inventors and other well-known people who struggled with errors, setbacks and failures before achieving their goals.
- **Whilst looking at these famous people, find out about their approach to effort.** Many people who have achieved great things have also talked at length about the hard work, effort and persistence they have put in, in order to achieve their goals. The modern 'reality-show' approach to fame can persuade children that results can be achieved through little effort; but truly successful people, who have worked hard to achieve their goals, are far better role models.
- **Think about how you talk to, question and praise your child.** Try swapping the following phrases with some alternatives:

Don't say	Instead say
'You're a natural!'	'You're getting better because you're working so hard!'
'Is that too hard for you?'	'It's challenging you, so you must be growing your brain.'
'You're so clever!'	'You always try so hard to do your best.'
'Not everyone is good at that, just do your best.'	'If it's hard, it's because you are learning something new.'
'Why did you get these ones wrong?'	'Let's look at the ones you got wrong and find out why.'

- Similarly, encourage your child to use growth mindset language. Try these:

Don't say	Instead say
'I'm no good at this.'	'What am I missing?'
'I'm really good at this.'	'I'm working hard at this.'
'I give up.'	'What strategies have I learnt to help me with this?'
'This is too hard.'	'This may take some time and effort.'
'I'll never be as clever as her.'	'I'm going to work out how she does it so I can do it too.'
'I can't do Maths.'	'How can I train my brain to be better at Maths?'

Finally, don't be concerned if this language and way of thinking is very new to you, in your own life and in your interactions with your child. It is never too late to change the way you think, and even a small change will have a positive outcome. Try it out and see what happens. Remember - it's not about the end result, it's about the effort you put in to get there!