

Growth Mindset – What's the Story? (Louise Hall, May 2016)

Given the recent education buzz surrounding the phrase 'growth mindset', it is more than likely you are familiar with the term; but what does this mean, why is it important and what is your role, as a parent, in encouraging this approach for your children?

Mindset, as a term in itself, tends to relate to a self-determined theory, belief or perception we have about ourselves, usually about how good or bad we are at something or how likely we are to succeed in a venture. We all have different mindsets, and not only do these vary between people, they can also vary within each of us, according to the situation. We are likely to determine or alter our mindset, even if we are not aware of it, according to our prior experience, expectations and confidence in our success within a given task or field. However, understanding mindset and its implications goes much deeper.

Psychologist and renowned author, Carol Dweck (*Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*), identifies a relationship between mindset and impact on learning, skill development and achievement, in addition to within many other areas of life. Widely acknowledged for her related work, she explains the differences between growth and fixed mindsets.

In a fixed mindset, Dweck says:

'People believe their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits. They spend their time documenting their intelligence or talents instead of developing them. They also believe that talent alone creates success—without effort'

What this perhaps means in reality for a child is they feel their perceived intelligence level, whether considered high or low, has little chance of changing. As a result, they are more likely to experience slower progress than if they were more open to the notion of the power of effort. A further potential worry is whether they will then learn less than they might otherwise, especially as this kind of mindset means they are less likely to put themselves at risk or under challenge, for fear of 'failing' and either disproving their intelligence or reaffirming the opposite. Such a mindset might invoke excuses, avoidance or use of 'can't' and 'won't'.

Conversely, Dweck notes that in a growth mindset:

'People believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work—brains and talent are just the starting point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment'

For a child, possessing a growth mindset is likely to make them more open to the belief that success and achievement are a consequence of them putting in the time and effort, regardless of their level of intelligence or knowledge. They will inevitably believe that hard work pays off. As a result, they will perhaps make more rapid progress and will hopefully develop greater coping ability when things do not go to plan, seeing this not as failure, moreover, a stepping stone to their own improvement and development.

Our own mindset in any situation is not always something we are necessarily consciously aware of, yet there may be some correlation between general outlook in life and mindset. A more positive outlook might infer more of a growth mindset or indeed, the reverse in cause and effect, with a more negative outlook, similarly implying the converse. Mindset should not, however, be generalized, and much like self-esteem, this might alter, depending on the scenario. Take a child, confident in their sport or music, but less so in the classroom. They might demonstrate more of a growth mindset in their co-curricular achievements but a rather fixed mindset for their curriculum studies; the challenge therefore, is making sure what matters to that individual is recognized as all of us are different, but also that a 'no limitation' focus is central to all that they do, so that a growth mindset is encouraged in all disciplines.

As Dweck's work highlights, there are real implications for application of mindset research to education, as children's perceptions about themselves are increasingly accepted to have major impact on their achievement, progress and improvement within their school careers. Teachers do have an important role to play in wholeheartedly believing in the power of the growth mindset, ensuring the praise they give recognises effort rather than ability and that they teach purposely to allow children to develop the belief and attitude that they have greater control over their pathway through life. However, development of this concept cannot be

solely depended upon in the classroom, on the sports field or in the arts arena; parents must also be on board to promote optimal opportunity for growth mindset to be allowed to flourish.

Practical advice for parents in assisting their children in developing a growth mindset:

- Help foster the belief that anything is possible and encourage children to follow their dreams and ambitions
- Nurture and develop a positive approach in children pursuing any goals and assisting them in focusing on what is going to happen rather than what might go wrong or might not happen
- Promote the concept that hard work, effort, practice etc are the critical and changeable factors; children will learn better and achieve greater things if they believe that they hold the key, rather than it being down to how intelligent they are, or perceive themselves to be
- Encourage the understanding that things take time and success in any endeavour rarely comes right away; sticking with a journey rather than giving up at any sign of unrest or difficulty, is vital
- Praise effort, perseverance and progress rather than giving too much emphasis on how intelligent, bright or talented a child is; this will help them to understand success is achieved and recognized through factors they have control over, rather than an innate ability they have no power over
- Allow children to learn (within reason, as naturally, we do not want children to be in danger) from their own errors rather than yours; going wrong provides us with one of the best learning experiences and a mistake for one person, might indeed be a success for someone else
- Support children in being comfortable, rather than afraid, to make mistakes or 'fail' (ban the use of the word 'failure' if possible, to encourage everything to be a learning curve or opportunity)
- Help children to understand that some things are simply out of our control; it is necessary to have a plan but also to recognize that even the best plans need to change and it is how we respond to any obstacles or challenges that is important
- Aid children in focusing on competition with themselves, rather than others; they really can only try better than they have done before and should learn not to compare too much to others. Dreams and ambitions are personal!
- Research quotes relating to growth mindset and use these, as appropriate, to reinforce the message with your children but also inspire and motivate them
- Follow these principles yourself - be an outstanding role model in your own behaviour, language and attitude!

The growth mindset is perhaps one of the most important and exciting concepts to consider in relation to child development in recent years. It may seem relatively common sense, but nevertheless, we are all guilty on occasion, even within our own lives, of putting something down to 'being no good at it' or 'not being clever enough for it' or similar, and this is an approach that would benefit from changing to support our younger generation through life.

As Dweck says 'If parents want to give their children a gift, the best thing they can do is to teach their children to love challenges, be intrigued by mistakes, enjoy effort, and keep on learning'

For more information relating to Growth Mindset, recommended authors include Carol Dweck and Matthew Syed.