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Positioning Kids & Teens to Thrive: 11 Practical, Powerful Ways to Build a Growth Mindset

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There's something that every child and adolescent needs to believe with every cell in their bodies. When they do, they will thrive. There is a powerful way that we, as the adults in their lives, can nurture this belief and set them up to learn, grow and flourish.

They need to know that their brains can grow stronger – measurably stronger – with time and effort. It sounds simple, but the effects of believing this are profound. Some children will have been born believing this, but others will be certain that they are as they are and that nothing will change that.

There is no doubt that encouragement and praise are vital for kids of all ages, helping to lift them to great heights – but not all praise is good praise. The research around this is robust, leaving little doubt that different types of praise, though given with the most loving intent, can potentially be harmful to our kids and teens.

‘The wrong kind of praise creates self-defeating behavior. The right kind motivates children to learn.’ – *Carol Dweck*

Carol Dweck is a leader in the field and according to an abundance of research conducted on children from as young as four, right through to adolescence, praise that focuses on intelligence (‘You’re so clever!’) will ultimately undermine achievement and performance. One of the main reasons is because of the effect it has on their mindset.

Children generally tend towards one of two types of mindsets – a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. Praise that focusses on intelligence promotes a fixed mindset, which is the belief that intelligence cannot be changed in any meaningful way. Children with a fixed mindset believe that they are born with certain character traits and a fixed

amount of intelligence and creativity, and that nothing they do will change that in any meaningful way.

In contrast, praise that focuses on effort ('You've worked really hard on that!') promotes a growth mindset, which is the belief that intelligence can grow and be strengthened with effort. Children with a growth mindset believe that they are capable of achieving what they want if they put in the time and effort to get there.

Fixed Mindset v. Growth Mindset. The Mind-Blowing Differences.

The effects of mindset are remarkable. Here are some of the big differences between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset.

- **Giving Up (Fixed) v. Persistence (Growth)**

A growth mindset fosters motivation, resilience and persistence. A fixed mindset kills it.

Children who believe that intelligence lies with the genetically blessed are quicker to give up, believing that if they can't do something, it's because they aren't smart enough, creative enough, good enough, whatever enough.

Children who have a growth mindset on the other hand, are more likely to keep working hard towards a goal, believing that all that stands between them and success is the right amount of effort.

- **Lack of Confidence (Fixed) v. Confidence (Growth)**

Children with a fixed mindset are more likely to interpret difficulty as confirmation that they don't have what it takes. If success means they are clever ('You did it! You're so clever!'), then a lack of success means they aren't. Once children believe this, their lack of confidence spills into other tasks, eventually wearing down their motivation and their love of learning.

Praising children for effort will lift them above the times they don't do as well as they would like – which, let's be honest, happens to all of us. They will interpret a lack of success as a sign that they need to work a little harder or differently, rather than as evidence of a personal deficiency.

- **Avoid Challenge (Fixed) v. Embrace Challenge (Growth)**

When given the choice between a challenging task or an easy task, children with a fixed mindset will be more likely to choose the easy task. If children believe their intelligence is fixed and impossible to change, it is understandable that they will choose easy tasks to prove themselves. This leaves very limited scope for the vulnerability needed to learn and grow. Learning is all about starting at the edge of our capabilities and pushing beyond them. That will mean sometimes failing, sometimes falling, and sometimes admitting that, for the moment, we haven't got a clue.

Children with a growth mindset will embrace challenge, seeing it as an opportunity to learn and grow.

- **Failure: Personal Deficiency (Fixed) v. Opportunity to Learn (Growth)**

Children with a fixed mindset will be more likely to interpret failure as evidence of their lack of intelligence or capability.

Failure isn't so bleak for kids with a growth mindset. They have a healthy attitude to failure, seeing it as an opportunity to learn. Even when they are disappointed, they are able to keep their confidence intact and bounce back from the stumbles, believing they have it in them to succeed if they keep working at it.

- **Hiding the Struggle (Fixed) v. Seeking Help (Growth).**

Children who believe their performance will be attributed to intelligence, or to something about themselves that can't be changed, will be more likely to hide their struggles and lie about their mistakes. In Dweck's research, almost 40% of children who had been praised for intelligence, compared to 10% of children who had been praised for effort lied when they were asked to anonymously disclose the number of mistakes they made. When children believe that intelligence is fixed they will identify themselves as 'smart' or 'not smart'. Rather than seeing mistakes as a sign that they may need to work a little harder, they will see mistakes as evidence of a lack of inherent capability and will work harder to stop the world from seeing them as 'stupid' or incapable.

On the other hand, children with a growth mindset will be more likely to seek help when something gets in their way, believing the capability is in them, but they just need a hand to find it.

Nurturing a Growth Mindset.

A growth mindset will supercharge their capacity to learn and grow. We know that for certain. Parents, teachers and any important adult in the life of a child or adolescent has enormous power to steer them towards the happy headspace of a growth mindset. Here's how.

1. Tell them, over and over and over that 'Brains can get stronger.'

As if being a brain wasn't impressive enough, they've proven to be all the more remarkable by showing how much they can change. 'Brains can get stronger.' Say this over and over to the kids in your life until they're reciting you or telling you to stop – and then keep going. The more they can believe this, the more empowered they'll be to keep doing what they need to do to strengthen that powerhouse in their heads. Here is one way to explain it to them.

'Imagine that in your brain are billions of tiny lightbulbs. There is a lightbulb for everything you could ever do. There's a dancing lightbulb, a maths lightbulb, a soccer lightbulb, an imagination lightbulb, a science lightbulb, a cooking lightbulb, a flying a plane lightbulb You get the idea. The thing is, they only turn on when you do what they are there for, so not all of your light bulbs will glow all the time. Some of them will never glow at all. That's exactly as it should be. Nobody is great at absolutely everything!

The really cool thing about these lightbulbs is that the more you turn them on (by practicing whatever it is they're there for), the brighter they glow, and the brighter they glow, the stronger your brain. The first time you try something, its lightbulb will only glow a little bit but the more you practice and learn that thing, the brighter that lightbulb will glow. Remember, not all of these lightbulbs are glowing all the time – only the ones that have been turned on.

If you never ride a bike, for example, the riding-a-bike lightbulb won't glow at all. The first time you ride a bike, that lightbulb will glow just a little bit. The more you ride your bike, the brighter the riding-a-bike lightbulb will glow. It might take a lot of practice before your riding-a-bike lightbulb is as bright as your teeth-brushing lightbulb but when it is as bright, you'll be just as good at riding a bike as you are at brushing your teeth.

Of course, your teeth-brushing lightbulb is very bright because you brush your teeth every morning and every night! When it comes to riding bikes though, you might fall off a few times but that doesn't mean that you can't be great at riding bikes. It just means that you're not good at riding them *yet*. You're still charging up that lightbulb.

Every time you learn something or practice something, you're turning on a lightbulb and strengthening your brain. In the same way exercise makes your body strong by strengthening your muscles, learning and practicing makes your brain strong. You're very capable of learning things and strengthening your brain, but no brain is going to build itself. All brains can all be strong, smart and capable of amazing things, but they need you to work and make the lightbulbs glow ... and you can do that brilliantly.

2. Pay attention to effort over results.

A grade that has been earned with hard work, whatever that grade is, should always be rewarded before something that was achieved without effort.

'You studied hard for that exam and your marks show that. That's great!'

'It was a hard assignment but you didn't give up. You kept going and working hard and you did it!' 'I loved the way you kept trying different things until you found something that worked.'

3. Catch them being persistent.

Any time you see them putting in effort, working hard towards a goal or being persistent, acknowledge it. It doesn't mean you have to gush with praise every time they apply themselves, but it will mean a lot to them that you notice.

'You're working hard at that aren't you.'

4. Be specific with praise.

Attach your praise to something specific. Rather than 'You're really smart,' try 'It was really clever the way you experimented with a few different ways to solve that problem. Nice work!'

5. Encourage a healthy attitude to failure and challenge.

Speak of failure and challenge in terms of them being an opportunity to learn and grow.

6. Use the word 'yet', and use it often.

When they say 'I don't know how to do it', encourage them to replace this with, 'I don't know how to do it *yet*.' Keep doing this and soon they will learn to do this for themselves. Self-talk is a powerful thing.

7. Show them that they don't always have to be successful to be okay.

Kids don't learn what they're told, they learn what they see. Let them see when you hit a snag (when it's appropriate of course) and let them see you being okay with that. Talk about the things you learn when something doesn't quite go as planned. If you take a wrong turn, for example, point out the interesting things you notice now that you're on a different road. Failure is part of learning and has absolutely nothing at all to do with how clever or capable they are. It's an opportunity to learn, in disguise.

8. Encourage them to keep the big picture in mind.

It's where they end up that matters. The stumbles on the way are just part of the learning and the way there. Learning takes time and the path won't be straight – it will be crooked and interesting and full of great opportunities, exactly as it was meant to be.

9. When they do well without effort ...

For a student who does really well without putting in any effort, it's still important to hold back from making it all about how clever or capable they are. Instead, Dweck suggests trying, 'Ok. That was too easy for you. Let's see if there's something more challenging that you can learn from.'

10. And when they put in the effort but don't do so well ...

If they've worked hard but haven't achieved what they wanted, notice the effort. This will nurture their confidence, resilience and motivation to keep learning and working hard. 'I loved seeing the effort you put into that assignment. Let's see what you can learn from for next time.'

11. Permission to fail.

Take the anxiety out of learning and put back the love. Giving kids permission to get it wrong sometimes will broaden their willingness to take risks and experiment with better ways of doing things. This will expand their creativity, problem solving and readiness to embrace challenge.

And finally...

Intelligence is not fixed and can be flourished with time and effort. Nurturing this belief in children is one of the greatest things we, as the adults in their lives, can do to help lift them so they can reach their full potential. The effort will come from them, but it's important that we do what we can to have them believe that the effort will be worth it.