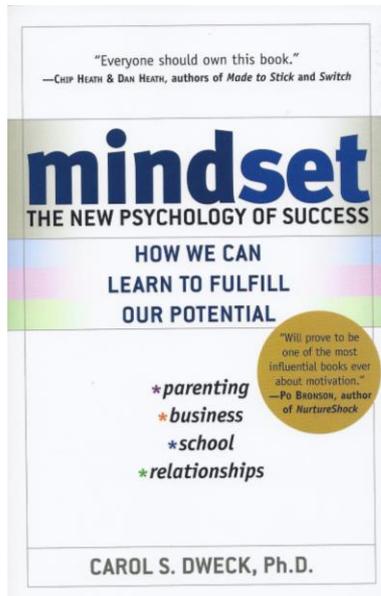


# A Guide to the Fixed Mindset V the Growth Mindset



World-renowned Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck, in decades of research on achievement and success, has discovered a truly groundbreaking idea – the power of our mindset.

**Mindset – The New Psychology of Success**  
How we can learn to fulfil our potential  
Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D.  
Ballantine Books, 2007

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## Definitions

Dweck describes the fixed mindset as a state where you believe that your qualities are carved in stone, one that creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over (Dweck, 2006). Conversely the growth mindset is based on the belief that your qualities are things that you can cultivate and change through your own efforts. Essentially, the growth mindset allows individuals to change and grow through application, effort and experience (Dweck, 2006). Effort is one of the key principles that Dweck discusses throughout her book and it is clear that with tremendous effort, we can change, we can grow and we can become smarter. Dweck (2006, p.7) states that:

“...a person’s true potential is unknown (and unknowable); that it’s impossible to foresee what can be accomplished with years of passion, toil, and training.”

## The Main Differences between the two Mindsets

### 1. Talent V Effort

One of the biggest differences between the two mindsets is that of talent versus effort. The fixed mindset believes that talent and intelligence is everything; it is what defines you and what protects you from failure. From this point of view, effort is only for people with deficiencies and as Dweck points out, if you have no deficiencies and are considered a genius, a talent or a natural, then you have a lot to lose and effort can reduce you.

Dweck states that the growth mindset is very different; even the ‘*genius*’ has to work and work hard for their achievements. There is no honour in being gifted but effort can be admired and aimed for. No matter what level of ability you are, effort ignites ability and ability turns into accomplishment and achievement.

### Examples

Dweck continues to make the point that many of our respected and esteemed historical figures like Charles Darwin, Leo Tolstoy and Thomas Edison were considered to be *ordinary* children. They weren’t; they had a passion for learning and their hard work led to great achievements.

It is worth noting the conclusion from educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom’s study of 120 outstanding achievers. After studying musicians, Olympians, mathematicians and scientists, he concluded that most of them were not that remarkable as children and didn’t show clear talent before they started training. As Dweck states, it was only their persistence, motivation, commitment and their network of support that made them successful. Bloom concluded (cited in Dweck, 2006, p.65):

“What any person in the world can learn, almost all persons can learn, if provided with the appropriate and current conditions of learning.”

## The Main Differences between the two Mindsets

### 2. Failure

The subject of failure is another point where the two mindsets differ greatly. To the fixed mindset the idea of trying and failing is terrifying. Dweck writes about individuals who describe the idea of failing as *haunting* and *paralyzing* because they believe geniuses are not supposed to need to put effort into their work (Dweck, 2006). Dweck continues to state that trying hard, robs the fixed mindset individual of all her excuses because without effort, there is always someone or something else to blame. Compare this approach with that of the growth mindset where individuals can find failure painful but not defining. Failure is important because it highlights a problem that allows the individual to face, deal with and learn from. This is summed up succinctly (Dweck, 2006, p.16/17):

“...success is about stretching themselves. It’s about becoming smarter (and) effort is what makes you smart or talented.”

In creating a love of learning, teachers can foster a culture where being challenged is a positive thing. In a growth mindset, getting things right is attributed to effort, working hard and being determined in the face of pressure. Getting things wrong leads people with the growth mindset to ask the question *why?* and what can be done to help them improve. They learn from every negative experience they encounter.

Individuals with a fixed mindset do not entertain the notion of being challenged or that of curiosity, they merely see their intelligence as something they need to prove to others rather than build on. Avoiding a challenge guarantees success in everything that is attempted. Being correct is attributed to talent whereas a wrong answer evokes the response that they just don’t care; there is no love of being challenged and no love of learning. In summary, *I can’t do this*, versus, *I can’t do this yet*. One is of the fixed mindset and one is growth; they are easily distinguishable.

## **The Main Differences between the two Mindsets**

### **3. How individuals view others in the learning environment**

In Dweck's research, she states that children with a fixed mindset say that they get constantly judged by their parents. It is this judgement that defines how they relate to other people around them, as Dweck explains (Dweck, 2006, p.215):

“They [mindsets] guide the whole interpretation process. The fixed mindset creates an internal monologue that is focused on judging: “This means I’m a loser.” “This means I’m a better person than they are.””

Those with a growth mindset learn from people; people that help them improve by being honest and providing constructive criticism. They seek help from other people to ensure they develop and grow and, providing those who help them are of a growth mindset, they encourage and foster a love of learning. A successful student is one whose primary goal is to expand their knowledge, how they think and investigate the world around them. They do not see results as an end point but merely as a means to continue and grow (Dweck, 2006).

Individuals with a growth mindset get smarter because they put in a lot of effort, have positive learning strategies including good planning, they are committed to their work and work hard at it. They persist, practise and confront any obstacles head on and together this leads to new skills, ability, achievement and ultimately, success.

Dweck sums up her chapter on *The Truth About Ability and Accomplishment* with the following paragraph (Dweck, 2006, p.67):

“important achievements require a clear focus, all out effort, and a bottomless trunk full of strategies. Plus allies in learning. This is what the growth mindset gives people, and that’s why it helps their abilities grow and bear fruit.”

We have all experienced a situation where what we are learning gets a little tough and walking away from the activity seems like the only reasonable strategy. But by placing ourselves firmly in a growth mindset, we can picture our brain forming new connections as the challenge is met and the lesson learned. It is this powerful mental imagery that should give us the drive to persist at what we seek to accomplish (Dweck, 2006).

## **Growth Mindset Strategies**

### **1. Model effective learning by showing the children you love learning too**

It is a teacher's mission and role to develop people's potential and this can be achieved by using the lessons of the growth mindset because growth-orientated teaching can unleash children's minds (Dweck, 2006). Teachers need to impart a passion for learning and a love of all challenges onto everyone they teach. In the section on growth-minded teachers, Dweck recalls that her professor said that schools are just as much for teacher's learning as they are for the students (Dweck, 2006, p.201):

“They [teachers] love to learn. And teaching is a wonderful way to learn. About people and how they tick. About what you teach. About yourself. And about life.”

The best way of doing this is to show all learners that teachers love to learn as well and are fascinated with the process of learning. If children, especially young children, see teachers engaged in and enjoying learning, they will want to emulate that behaviour and feed their natural curiosity. See OA Four.

## **Growth Mindset Strategies**

### **2. Effort**

It is important that teachers encourage children to try hard and put maximum effort into every task set because the experience of learning is as important as the end result. As previously explained, people with the fixed mindset are reduced by effort and many people have a negative view of what effort entails. They believe that the try-hards are not smart. People with the growth mindset know that even the celebrated '*genius*' has to work hard and it is the same message for every child in our classrooms all over the world. The sociologist Benjamin Barber said (cited in Dweck, 2006, p.16):

“I don't divide the world into the weak and the strong, or the successes and the failures... I divide the world into the learners and the non-learners.”

## Growth Mindset Strategies

### 3. Encouragement and Positivity

There are many ways to encourage children; being supportive and accepting, nurturing and positive, by giving appropriate praise. In her book, Dweck refers to teachers with a growth mindset who established an atmosphere of genuine affection and concern while caring about each and every student under their tutorage. When Bloom conducted his study into 120 achievers he discovered that most of their first teachers were incredibly warm and accepting. They created an atmosphere of trust, not judgement (Dweck, 2006). Jensen states that the emotional 'limbic' part of the brain is the gateway to long term memory, so great teaching encourages warm emotions, which is exactly what Bloom's 120 achievers reported (Dryden and Vos, 2001).

The fixed mindset teacher looks at their students at the beginning of the year and decides who's smart and who's stupid. Then they give up on the stupid ones because they don't believe in improvement through effort and hard work. For them it is easier to say that the *stupid* children are not their responsibility and focus on the *clever* students. Dweck states that (Dweck, 2006, p.198):

“[success is]...achieved in an atmosphere of affection and deep personal commitment to every student.”

With encouragement and support comes a natural air of positivity. When discussing the idea of using visualising as a powerful learning tool, Jensen suggests teachers should encourage students to visualise how they would use the knowledge they have learned in the future and to plant a positive thought that encourages students to learn. Jensen continues to stress the point that negative suggestions can be very damaging to the learning process (Dryden and Vos, 2001).

Dryden and Vos (2001) believe the power of suggestion is essential when learning; we do best when we think we can do it and fail when we think we can't. They continue to make the point that every adult has seen how infants' learning dramatically increases in a favourable, positive atmosphere.

## Growth Mindset Strategies

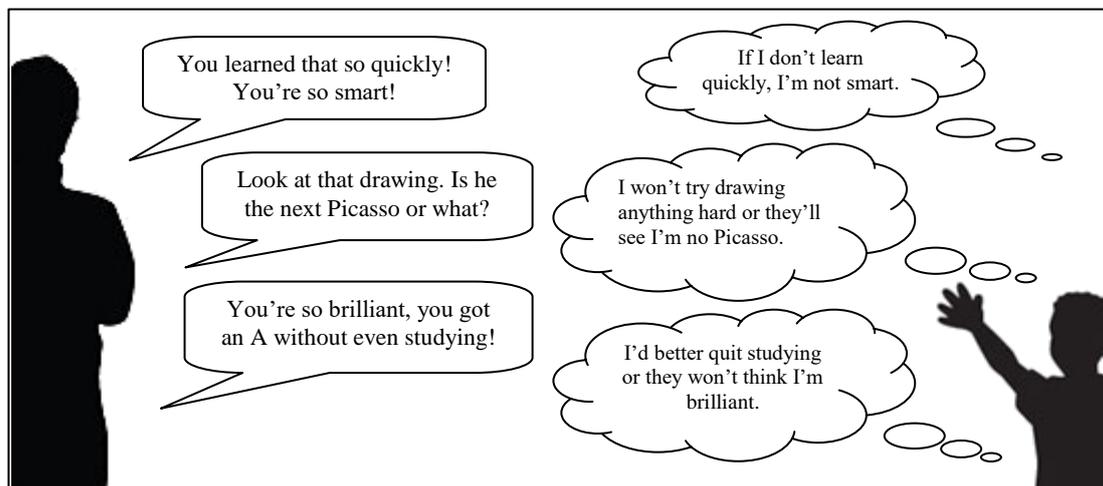
### 4. Praise

Praising children is also a very important role of the teacher. However, it is not as clear cut as one may imagine and requires further discussion because every word, every phrase and every action sends a message. It is this message that tells children how to think about themselves. Dweck explains (Dweck, 2006, p.173):

*“It can be a fixed mindset message that says: *You have permanent traits and I’m judging them.* Or it can be a growth-mindset message that says: *You are a developing person and I am interested in your development.*”*

Dweck studied this idea and after seven experiments concluded that (Dweck, 2006, p.175):

*“Praising children’s intelligence harms their motivation and it harms their performance.”*



**Figure 1 – How adult messages are interpreted by children (adapted from Dweck, 2006)**

Dweck’s work on praise was backed up by Haim Ginott, a child psychologist, who came to the same conclusion (cited in Dweck, 2006, p.178):

*“Praise should deal, not with the child’s personality attributes, but with his efforts and achievements.”*

Our mantra as educators should be *praise the process, not the talent*. Figure 2 clearly outlines the steps that teachers should embrace.



**Figure 2 – Praise the process (adapted from Dweck, 2006)**

As well as giving the right sort of praise, honest and constructive criticism is important to encourage the growth mindset because teachers and parents can help children improve, resolve something or do a better job of something. But for the criticism to be constructive, the person offering it must ensure that no element of judgement creeps into it because as previously identified, judgement is one of the key characteristics of the fixed mindset and there is no place for that in the classroom.

As educators, we do not judge, we do not label and we do not talk-down but we do admire and appreciate everyone around us. Constructive criticism helps children learn because problems are then faced, dealt with and learned from. Protecting children from feedback is robbing them of learning and harming their potential. As with praise, the right sort of criticism, advice, coaching or feedback is essential in the classroom (Dweck, 2006).

Along with constructive criticism, failure should be embraced and encouraged and not discouraged and frowned upon because failure is the beginning of new learning. Teachers need to create a learning environment where children are intrigued by the mistakes they and their peers make and ensure that they are not used as a source of ridicule or judgement. The growth mindset classroom is one where thinking is encouraged and used as a key learning strategy.

## **Examples of Growth Mindset Praise**

*(Source: Dweck, Mindsets, 2006, p.177-178)*

We can praise them [children] as much as we want for the growth-orientated process – what they accomplished through practice, study, persistence, and good strategies. And we can ask them about their work in a way that admires and appreciates their efforts and choices.

“You really studied for your test and your improvement shows it. You read the material over several times, you outlined it and you tested yourself on it. It really worked!”

“I like the way you tried all kinds of strategies on that maths problem until you finally got it. You thought of a lot of different ways to do it and found the one that worked!”

“I like that you took on that challenging project for your science class. It will take a lot of work – doing the research, designing the apparatus, buying the parts and building it. Boy, you’re going to learn a lot of great things.”

“I know school used to be easy for you and you used to feel like the smart kid all the time. But the truth is that you weren’t using your brain to the fullest. I’m really excited about how you’re stretching yourself now and working to learn hard things.”

“That homework was so long and involved. I really admire the way you concentrated and finished it.”

“That picture has so many beautiful colours. Tell me about them.”

“You put so much thought into this essay. It really makes me understand Shakespeare in a new way.”

“The passion you put into that piano piece gives me a real feeling of joy. How do you feel when you play it?”

What about a student that worked hard and didn’t do well?

“I liked the effort you put in, but let’s work together some more and figure out what it is you don’t understand.”

“We all have different learning curves. It may take more time for you to catch on to this and be comfortable with this material, but if you keep at it like this you will.”

“Everyone learns in a different way. Let’s keep trying to find the way that works for you.”

(This may be especially important for children with learning disabilities. Often for them it is not sheer effort that works, but finding the right strategy.)

## **Growth Mindset Strategies**

### **5. Set High Standards**

To further enrich the children's experience of learning in the growth mindset classroom, one of the teacher's roles must be to set high standards. Alongside setting challenging work in a nurturing environment, great teachers set high standards for all their students and it is not exclusively for the ones who are already achieving (Dweck, 2006). As well as having high standards, it is important that teachers teach children how to reach those high standards through embracing the growth mindset and praising the process of learning (*see figure 2*).

In Dweck's research, she asked Year 2 students what advice they would give to someone who was struggling with a maths puzzle. To show that the growth mindset message had been well and truly embedded, this was one person's advice (cited in Dweck, 2006, p.186):

“...you should think for a long time – two minutes maybe and if you can't get it you should read the problem again. If you can't get it then, you should raise your hand and ask the teacher.”

**“We are entrusted with people's lives. They are our responsibility and our legacy. We know that the growth mindset has a key role to play in helping *us* fulfil our mission and in helping *them* fulfil their potential.”**

# Fixed Mindset V Growth Mindset

