

A Growth Mindset

Two basic mindsets that shape our lives

LAST MONTH, I went for a tennis lesson for the first time in a long time. The first question my new tennis coach asked was, "How long have you been playing?" I looked at him – all 21 years of him – and replied, "23 years." The look on his face was difficult to describe but I had clearly shocked him.

It's true that most people in their 30s, particularly those who play sports, believe that they are past their peak. However, unlike most people, I still believe that I can become a better player than I was when I was 16. Physiologically, my body may never reach the same levels of physical fitness or flexibility, but I firmly believe that there are many things I can do to become a better player than I was all those years ago, like improve my technique, develop new tactics, and work on thinking skills to cope with the mental side of the game.

The point I'm trying to make is that, over the years, I have developed a growth mindset. As a teacher, I come across many children who think very differently. They believe that they are either good at something or they are not. Put simply, some people come to believe that success is based on their innate abilities – their natural capacity to do well. These people are said to have a "fixed" mindset. Others, who believe their success is based on hard work, learning, practice and doggedness are said to have a "growth" mindset.

What I have just described is the life's work of Carol Dweck (*Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, 2006), a pioneering researcher in the field of motivation and why people succeed (or not, as the case may be). The key message from her research is that while ability and talent are important contributors to success, they will only get you so far. Attitude, and the way we approach things, is ultimately more important.

Praise

As simple as it may sound, Dweck's findings suggest that children develop

one or the other of these two mindsets due to the type of praise they receive from the adults in their lives. When a child does well at something, adults often give praise in an attempt to encourage that child to maintain their interest and continue to make progress. That's harmless, right?

But as adults, however, we generally assume what we say and what children hear are the same. Sadly, that is not always the case. What few people realize is that praising the talent or intelligence of a child can lead that child to develop a "fixed" mindset because the words 'talent' and 'intelligence' suggest each have pre-determined abilities. The knock-on effect is that it makes people believe past successes were simply achieved because the difficulty of tasks was within their capability.

But, with such a mindset, if we believe the task ahead exceeds our capabilities, we quickly assume we will fail and look to avoid taking part at all; hence, people with fixed mindsets are far more likely to stick to easier tasks, ones they know they will be successful at, something I'm sure we can all relate to. On the other hand, by praising the amount of effort a child



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has put into a task, it encourages them to believe that they could rise to even greater challenges, should they arise, as long as they work hard at those too.

Reaction to Failure

A key difference between these two groups is how they react to failure. Fixed-mindset individuals dread failure because they believe they will be judged as lacking in talent. In contrast though, individuals with a growth mindset do not fear failure nearly as much as they realize that past performance is not necessarily an indicator of future performance. They believe that they can exercise control over what happens next time.

Ultimately, it is this positive 'can-do' attitude that leads some people to seek harder challenges continually, and to accomplish great things.

So, what can be learnt from all of this? Well, simply put, both parents and teachers should give praise carefully. By that, I mean we should be careful about what we praise because, ultimately, the type of praise we give to a child will have a significant impact on the type of mindset that that child in our care comes to develop. ■

