

The Growth Mindset Message

A toddler struggled to buckle the straps on her high chair. “Almost,” she muttered as she tried again and again. “Almost,” her mother agreed, trying not to hover. When she got it, her mother exclaimed, “You did it! It was hard, but you kept trying, and you did it. I’m so proud of you.”

The way the mother praised her daughter’s effort took a little effort on her part. If she hadn’t known better, she might have just said, “Clever girl!” (Or even “Here, let me help you with that.”) What’s so bad about that?

Stanford researcher Carol Dweck has been studying motivation and perseverance since the 1960s. And she found that children fall into one of two categories:

- Those with a fixed mindset, who believe their successes are a result of their innate talent or smarts
- Those with a growth mindset, who believe their successes are a result of their hard work

Fixed mindset: *‘If you have to work hard, you don’t have ability.’*

Children with a fixed mindset believe that you are stuck with however much intelligence you’re born with. They would agree with this statement: “If you have to work hard, you don’t have ability. If you have ability, things come naturally to you.” When they fail, these children feel trapped. They start thinking they must not be as talented or smart as everyone’s been telling them. They avoid challenges, fearful that they won’t look smart.

Growth mindset: *‘The more you challenge yourself, the smarter you become.’*

Children with a growth mindset believe that intelligence can be cultivated: the more learning you do, the smarter you become. These children understand that even geniuses must work hard. When they suffer a setback, they believe they can improve by putting in more time and effort. They value learning over looking smart. They persevere through difficult tasks.

What creates these beliefs in our children? The type of praise we give them.

The research

In one study, Dweck gathered up Year Five children, randomly divided them in two groups, and had them work on problems from an IQ test. She then praised the first group for their intelligence:

“Wow, that’s a really good score. You must be smart at this.”

She praised the second group for their effort:

“Wow, that’s a really good score. You must have tried really hard.”

She continued to test the children, including presenting them with a choice between a harder or easier task.

Children praised for their effort tended to take the challenging task, knowing they could learn more. They were more likely to continue feeling motivated to learn and to retain their confidence as problems got harder.

Children praised for their intelligence requested the easier task, knowing there was a higher chance of success. They lost their confidence as problems got harder, and they were much more likely to inflate their test scores when recounting them.

Later, Dweck and her colleagues took the study into the home. Every four months for two years, Stanford and University of Chicago researchers visited fifty-three families and recorded them for ninety minutes as they went about their usual routines. The children were 14 months old at the start of the study.

Researchers then calculated how often parents used each type of praise: praising effort; praising character traits; and “other praise” that has a neutral effect, like “Good!” and “Wow!”

They waited five years.

Then the researchers surveyed the children, now 7 to 8 years old, on their attitudes toward challenges and learning. Children with a growth mindset tended to be more interested in challenges. Which children had a growth mindset? Those who had heard more process praise as toddlers.

The message

The brain is like a muscle. The more you use it, the stronger it gets. The way you exercise your brain is by embracing challenges, practicing skills, learning new things. Which is why, when the toddler was trying to snap her own buckle, her mother needed to encourage her to take on the challenge by saying, “Almost!” and “Try again” instead of “Here, let me do that for you.”

If society as a whole begins to embrace the struggle of learning, there is no end to what that could mean for global human potential.