

# Mindset

**“mindset” (noun)**  
a set of beliefs or a way of thinking that determines one's behaviour, outlook and mental attitude.

Midlothian Council Educational Psychology Service

## How do beliefs shape learning?

**Why do people differ in how they deal with the same situation?  
Why do some people struggle to cope with failure while others thrive?**

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Psychologists think that the answer to these questions lies in our self-theories, or in

*“A few modern philosophers . . . assert that an individual's intelligence is a fixed quantity. We must protest and react against this brutal pessimism . . . With practice, training and, above all, method, we manage to increase our attention, our memory, our judgement and literally to become more intelligent*

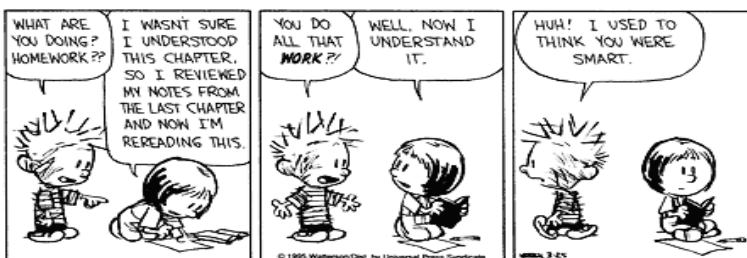
other words, our beliefs. Our beliefs are long-standing ideas which help us understand ourselves, others and the world around us. They are formed from the messages we hear, the things we see people do and the things that happen to us as we grow up. Our beliefs about the nature of intelligence and ability determine how we approach learning, the amount of effort we are prepared to invest in learning and, ultimately, our achievements. Some people view our abilities such as intelligence or artistic and sporting skills as pre-determined, fixed entities, while others see them as qualities that are malleable with the ability to be changed and developed. This debate is not new, as the quote from Binet (left) shows, but it has come to prominence over the past decade, thanks to the researcher Dr. Carol Dweck and her work on Mindset.

## Fixed and Growth Mindsets

Dweck identified two basic “mindsets”. The Fixed Mindset is the belief that personal attributes are stable and unlikely to change much: a person is either good at maths, music or sport, or they are not. The Growth Mindset, on the other hand, is the belief that personal abilities can grow and develop through effort.

So, why is this important?

Dweck's work has contributed greatly to a growing body of evidence from both the UK and the USA which suggests that the way students think about intelligence has an effect on the effort they put into their learning and the amount of personal responsibility they accept for their success or failure. When a student holds a fixed mindset, they are often fearful of challenging tasks; their identity is bound up in constantly proving their ability and with challenge comes the risk of failure and demonstration of a lack of skill. This student is more likely to regard effort as evidence



of lack of ability, for, if you are intelligent you should be able to pass an exam without revising too hard. When faced with failure, this student becomes helpless, de-motivated and is likely to blame external factors, such as being dis-

tracted by others or the poor wording of the exam questions.

In contrast, the growth-minded student believes that their abilities can be shaped and determined by the effort they are willing to invest. They understand that nobody has ever achieved greatness without hard work, regardless of their talent, and as a result, are much more willing to take an active role in their learning. These students are unafraid of taking risks in their learning and are open to challenge or even failure as they provide an opportunity for learning.

- “Becoming is better than being”  
Dweck
- “Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration”  
Edison
- “We like to think of our champions and idols as superheroes who were born different from us. We don't like to think of them as relatively ordinary people who made themselves extraordinary.”  
Dweck

## How does Mindset develop?

Observing a baby learning to walk suggests that having a growth mindset is innate. A baby will not be thwarted in its attempts to learn to walk, no matter how many times she or he falls over. However, Dweck's research indicates that by the age of four, some children are already exhibiting fixed mindset traits. So what happens to these children during infancy which produces this change in mindset? Dweck believes that this is to do with the messages that children pick up about what others value in them. These messages are communicated every day by parents, carers and teachers in many conversations, but especially in the praise children receive.

Several of Dweck's studies have suggested that ability-focused praise, such as "clever girl," or "good boy, you're good at that", tells the child that we value being clever or good at something. This encourages the child to continue to prove that they are clever or talented, leading to a fixed mindset. However, when praise focuses on the process involved, such as "I can see you worked really hard there" or even "good job!", the child receives the message that it is the learning process which is valued, leading to a growth mindset. In short, praise itself will not produce successful, confident learners, but the right type of praise will.

*"In my research, I have been amazed over and over again at how quickly students of all ages pick up on messages about themselves—at how sensitive they are to suggestions about their personal qualities or about the meaning of their actions and experiences. The kinds of praise (and criticism) students received from their teachers and parents tell them how to think about what they do—and what they are."*

Carol Dweck

## How can we foster growth mindsets?

Just as children can "learn" a fixed mindset from the messages they receive, so they can develop a growth mindset. A number of studies from across the USA and UK, including Scotland, have shown that teaching children a growth mindset leads to not only increased self-reported well-being scores, but also enhanced literacy and numeracy attainment scores.

### So, what can we do?

There are a number of ways in which we can promote growth mindsets in children and young people.

#### Be aware of your own mindset!

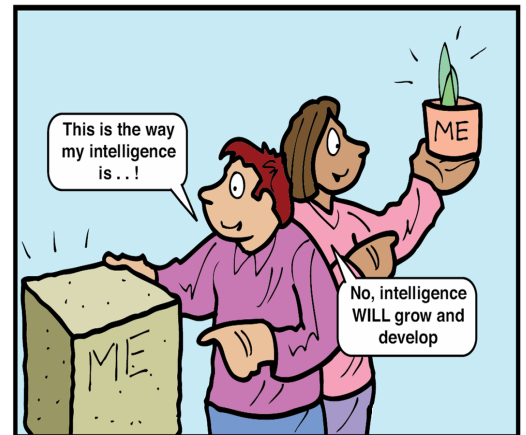
Do you have a fixed or a growth mindset? Do you believe that your child or students' ability is fixed or malleable? Fixed mindset messages encourage children to avoid making mistakes—this is unlikely to be conducive to developing resilience and being able to embrace challenge.

#### Model a growth mindset

Children learn from what the adults around them say and do. Using process praise, constructive criticism and discussing alternative strategies to use when a child or young person is stuck will give the message that everybody can learn and improve.

#### Focus on the process of learning rather than results

Create a culture of making mistakes and learning from them. Discuss your own learning processes explicitly—this will help pupils set their own goals and deal with challenge in a positive way. School staff can celebrate the journey towards a piece of work by displaying rough drafts of work alongside the finished product.



### For reflection...

What is one thing that you could do differently in



your interactions with children and other adults to foster a growth mindset in your family or learning setting?

#### Describe the behaviour, not the person

Instead of saying "you're lazy", describe how a child could put in more effort. This allows them to see that they are capable of doing things differently.

#### Find out more about mindset

Visit the following sites for more information and ideas:

[www.centreforconfidence.co.uk](http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk)

[www.mindsetonline.com](http://www.mindsetonline.com)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bhv0dznmz4A> (a video of Carol Dweck presenting at the Scottish Learning Festival in 2009)