

INSIGHTS

Mind your language. How what you say creates your child's mindset.



One of the big ideas in education over the past 10 years has been Professor Carol Dweck's work on Growth Mindset. However, despite (or perhaps because of) the hype, much of Dweck's work has been misunderstood, or misapplied. Too often we've tried to teach about growth mindset, instead of teaching for a growth mindset. Importantly, the role parents play in helping develop a growth mindset in their child has been largely overlooked.

In this article I share a simple way you can help your child develop a more growth-oriented mindset.

About Mindsets

Your child's mindset is how they view their most basic abilities, like their talents and intelligence, and it has a profound impact on their learning.

A child with a fixed mindset believes they are fundamentally limited. Who they are today, is pretty much who'll they be in the future. For them, school and learning is a way to discover those abilities. They'll ask if they are musical, or how smart they are. For these children, school becomes one long test to discover the answers to these questions.

A child with a growth mindset understands they have the capacity to develop their abilities. For them learning becomes a vehicle for creating and developing those abilities. You'll hear this child say things like "I want to become really good at maths, so I'm going to work hard to make that happen."

Why parents matter

Contrary to what social media might say, you can't just tell your child to have a growth mindset. Their mindset is rooted in a lifetime of experiences.

As parents we play an important role in creating the experiences that develop our child's mindset. What we repeatedly say, value, and reward all shape our child's mindset. And I should know because I got it wrong.

What I did wrong

When my daughter was young, I encouraged her to try lots of different activities. She tried music, art, gymnastics, singing, the Maths Olympics. You name it, we tried it. And that's fundamentally a good thing.

The problem wasn't what I was doing. It was the messages I attached to it. Sometimes when she wasn't keen to try a new activity, I'd say something like "Come on sweetheart, give it a go. You never know, you might be good at it!"

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Can you hear the fixed message in there? “You might (already) be good at it.”

I turned trying something new into a test to find out if she was good at it. I promised her the possibility of instant success. To make things worse, if she didn't have instant success, I'd often console her with something like “Well, don't worry. You can't be good at everything.”

In other words, she'd failed that test. Now it was on to the next test to see if she was good at that instead. The unintended lesson: If you're not immediately good, give up.

Why did I do that?

If you just had an “ouch” moment, you're not alone. Parents say these types of things all the time. We say them out of love, and with the best of intentions.

When we see our child upset or struggling, our natural reaction is to want to protect them from that discomfort. But what I did was to provide my daughter with an excuse for struggle by saying “you're not that type of person.”

Perhaps you've provided your child with a similar excuse by saying something similar like “I was never good at that either.” The underlying message being “we aren't the right type of person to be good at that—we don't have those abilities.”

A nudge in the right direction

To help us be better parents and nurture a more growth-oriented mindset in our children, we need a little nudge. A reminder that helps us counter any unconscious bias and ensure we create more growth-oriented messages for our children.

I've created lots of these nudges, for all types of situations. The one relevant to this situation is to remember that “Learning is about creating, not discovering.”

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In the context of trying new things, this nudge reminds us that we're not trying to find out if my daughter has those abilities. We're trying to decide if she wants to develop those abilities. So, now I might say:

“Darling, getting good at something takes time and the right type of effort. You need to decide if this is something you're prepared to invest the time and effort into getting good at.”

The nudge helps us repeat this message over and over, slowly creating a more growth-oriented mindset. They become more empowered and see life as being in their control. They recognise they can become whoever they want, or need, to become.

It's like George Bernard Shaw said, “Life is not about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.”



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James Anderson is an international speaker, author and educator. In an educational landscape focused on teachers, James' work focuses on learners. His signature work defines *Learnership™ – the skill of learning*. He answers the question: What does it mean to be a *skillful* learner? For further information visit www.jamesanderson.com.au. You can also listen to James and Dr Justin Coulson discuss *Learnership™* on the *Happy Families* podcast episode [#529 \(The Growth Mindset\)](#) and [#559 \(How to Create Skillful Learners\)](#).