

Mindset

For ages, people have questioned whether intelligence is a product of genetics or environment, nature vs. nurture. Today, most experts believe that this is not an either-or scenario, but that there is a constant give and take between the two. As explained by Carol Dweck, professor of psychology at Stanford University and author of the book *Mindset* (Random House, 2006), we often unknowingly fall into one camp or the other: our underlying assumption may be that intelligence is determined by our genetics (in this case, we possess what Dr. Dweck terms a fixed mindset); or we may believe that intelligence is impacted by hard work and the opportunities we take advantage of (a growth mindset).

How does this play out? With a fixed mindset, we define ourselves by our innate assets: our success and failures are seen as reflections of who we are, and we judge not only ourselves, but others as well, in the same way. We may be afraid to take a chance, to try something new or outside of our comfort zone, because we might fail, people might think we are stupid. Life's inevitable setbacks impact our sense of self and undermine our self-esteem. With a growth mindset, we view failures and setbacks as opportunities for growth, a chance to learn something new, to challenge ourselves to be better than we are. People with growth mindsets aren't afraid to take risks, and as a result, they continue to grow throughout their lives.

As parents and teachers, we subtly convey our mindsets in conversations with children. Here are a few tips for parents and teachers from Dr. Dweck:

- Listen to what you say to your kids and tune in to the messages you're sending. Are they messages that say: You have permanent traits and I'm judging them? For example, "You're so smart, this should be easy for you!" Or are they messages that say, You're a developing person and I'm interested in your development? For example, "You put so much thought into this essay. It really makes me understand Shakespeare in a new way."
- How do you use praise? Remember that praising children's intelligence or talent, tempting as it is, sends a fixed mindset message and tends to backfire: they'll only be more afraid to show deficiency. Instead, try to focus on the processes they used—their strategies, effort, or choices. For example: "Good for you for taking on that challenging science project. It's a lot of work—doing the research, designing the apparatus, buying the parts, and building it—you're going to learn so much!"
- Watch and listen to yourself carefully when your child messes up. Remember that constructive criticism is feedback that helps the child understand how to fix something. It's not feedback that labels or simply excuses the child.
- Parents often set goals their children can work toward. Remember that having innate talent is not a goal. Expanding skills and knowledge is.
- As parents, teachers, coaches, and counselors, our mission is developing people's potential. Let's use all the lessons of the growth mindset—and whatever else we can—to do this.

Adapted from *Mindset* (Random House, 2006), by Carol Dweck

Dr. Dweck's very readable book is filled with wonderful anecdotes and strategies. We highly recommend it to anyone interested in learning more about these ideas.

The Staples Resilience Project is an ongoing endeavor by the Staples Guidance Department aimed to promote the well-being of our students and foster a positive, inclusive school community.

shs.westportps.org/departments/guidance/staples-resilience-project