

How can a Growth Mindset support Mental Health and Wellbeing?

‘If you have a growth mindset, you’re more likely to do well in school, enjoy better emotional and physical health, and have stronger, more positive social relationships with other people.’

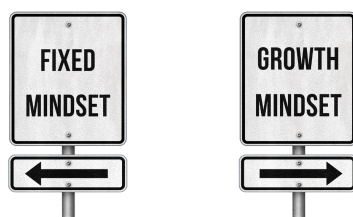
- Angela Duckworth, Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance, 2016

What is Growth Mindset?

Growth mindset, a concept put forward by Prof Carol Dweck, relates to whether students believe their intelligence is a 'fixed trait' or 'something they could develop'.²⁵

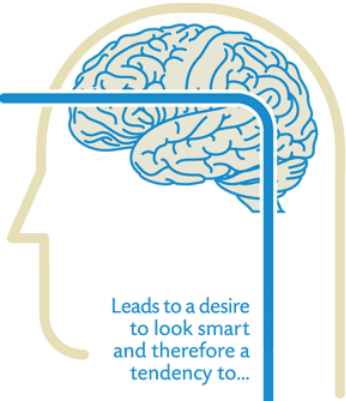
Dweck's research demonstrates that **children and young people who believe they can develop their intelligence try harder and do better than those who believe that they have a fixed level of intelligence.** Those whose mindset is more fixed, Dweck writes, often 'mobilise their resources, not for learning, but to protect their egos. And one of the main ways they do this [...] is by not trying'.²⁶ The tragedy here is that some children and young people foster a negative view of themselves and invest a lot of effort to avoid risking short term failure, rather than seeing themselves as capable and taking the risks that lead to learning.

Children and young people need to know, in Angela Duckworth's words, that 'the emotions of confusion and frustration are typical, and possibly essential, to learning'.²⁷ A growth mindset, should, Carol Dweck says, lead to children saying: 'Wow, this is when I'm getting smarter' when they attempt challenging work.²⁸



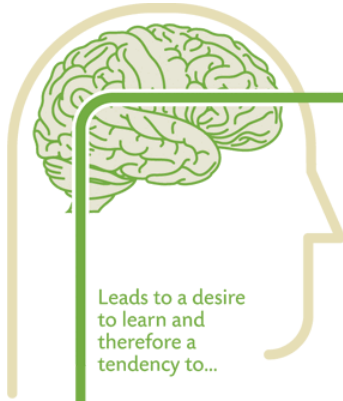
The graphic below outlines the differences between a fixed and a growth mindset:

Fixed Mind-set
Intelligence is static



Leads to a desire to look smart and therefore a tendency to...

Growth Mind-set
Intelligence can be developed



Leads to a desire to learn and therefore a tendency to...

CHALLENGES

...avoid challenges



...embrace challenges



OBSTACLES

...give up easily



...persist in the face of setbacks



EFFORT

...see effort as fruitless or worse



...see effort as the path to mastery



CRITICISM

...ignore useful negative feedback



...learn from criticism



SUCCESS OF OTHERS

...feel threatened by the success of others



...find lessons and inspiration in the success of others



As a result, they may plateau early and achieve less than their full potential.

All this confirms a **deterministic view of the world.**

As a result, they reach ever-higher levels of achievement.

All this gives them a **greater sense of free will.**

Graphic by Nigel Holmes

What impact can a growth mindset have on mental health and wellbeing?

The implications for mental health and wellbeing are striking. **Children and young people with a growth mindset feel greater agency – a greater sense that their growth and development are within their control – and feel less afraid of challenge, error and failure.**

Describing the differing outlooks that emerge from a fixed or growth mindset, Dweck writes:

When you enter a mindset, you enter a new world. [...] In one world, failure is about having a setback. Getting a bad grade. Losing a tournament. Getting fired. Getting rejected. It means you're not smart or talented. In the other world, failure is about not growing. Not reaching for the things you value. It means you're not fulfilling your potential. In one world, effort is a bad thing. It, like failure, means you're not smart or talented. If you were, you wouldn't need effort. In the other world, effort is what makes you smart or talented.²⁹

A growth mindset brings many potential benefits: optimism, improved self-perception, a willingness to seek help, a belief in the power of practice, among other things. This mindset unlocks many other positive beliefs and actions.

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How can we support children and young people to develop a growth mindset?

Carol Dweck's research has shown that a growth mindset can be developed within a relatively short time frame.

A first step in supporting pupils to develop a growth mindset is simply to talk about and explain it explicitly to children and young people.

Sharing an image like the graphic above (or something simpler for younger children) can be an effective way to bring the concept to life.

Another important tactic is to praise children and young people's effort and progress rather than praising them or their attainment.

This reinforces the idea that effort is what school and college staff value. It also enables school and college staff to avoid making implicit comparisons between the achievements of different pupils. Instead, pupils compare their current with their past performance and feel that their progress is valued on its own terms.

Dweck, Walton and Cohen recommend the following additional methods for helping pupils to absorb the idea of a growth mindset:³⁰

- Explain to pupils how the brain works: how it makes new connections and gets more intelligent when working on challenging tasks
- Ask older pupils to talk to younger pupils about the connection between intelligence and hard work
- Ask pupils to communicate the idea of a growth mindset to younger pupils themselves, in person or in writing

Caveat:

Dweck is careful to point out that we don't simply have a fixed mindset or a growth mindset: building a growth mindset is a gradual, ongoing process and might be something we have in certain areas of our life and not in others.

In an article debunking myths about the growth mindset, she wrote:

Let's legitimize the fixed mindset. Let's acknowledge that (1) we're all a mixture of fixed and growth mindsets, (2) we will probably always be, and (3) if we want to move closer to a growth mindset in our thoughts and practices, we need to stay in touch with our fixed-mindset thoughts and deeds.³¹

This is an important point for school and college staff to bear in mind. **Children and young people may have a growth mindset about certain aspects of themselves and their learning and not others. A growth mindset isn't simply something pupils either have or don't have.**

References

- 25** Dweck, C., *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, 2006
- 26** Ibid.
- 27** Duckworth, A., 'Research Statement', [Online] The Duckworth Lab, 2015
- 28** Dweck, C. 'Growth Mindset – Interview with Dr. Carol Dweck & Dr. Greg Walton', [Online], Coursera, 2013
- 29** Dweck, C., *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, 2006
- 30** Dweck, C., Walton, G., and Cohen, G., 'Academic Tenacity: Mindsets and Skills that Promote Long-Term Learning', The Gates Foundation, 2012
- 31** Dweck, C., 'Carol Dweck Revisits the 'Growth Mindset' [Online] Education Week, 2013