Introduction to Growth Mindset

A one-page guide for students and families

For: Students in grades 3-12 and their families

What is a growth mindset?

A mindset is what you believe about your own abilities.

- A **fixed mindset** says: "I have a certain amount of intelligence and talent, and that's that. If something is hard, I'm probably not good at it."
- A **growth mindset** says: "My abilities can grow. If something is hard, that's where learning happens. I can get better with effort, good strategies and help."

The idea comes from Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck, who studied how students respond when work gets difficult. Students who believed their abilities could grow kept going, tried new approaches and improved over time. Students who believed their abilities were fixed gave up sooner and avoided challenges so they would not look bad.

Nobody has a growth mindset about everything. You might feel sure you can improve at soccer but hopeless about spelling. The good news is that mindsets can change, and the first step is noticing which one is talking.

What a growth mindset is NOT

- It is not "effort is all that matters." Effort has to go with a strategy that works and with help when you need it.
- It is not "anyone can do anything." It means you can get better than you are now.
- It is not pretending to feel confident. It is knowing what to do next when you don't.

Fixed vs growth: what it sounds like

Fixed mindset says	Growth mindset says
"I'm not good at this."	"I'm not good at this yet."
"I give up."	"I'll try a different strategy, then ask a specific question."
"This is too hard."	"This will take time and effort. Which part can I start with?"
"I made a mistake."	"Mistakes show me what to work on. What does this one tell me?"
"She's just smarter than me."	"I'm going to find out how she does it."
"I'll never be good at writing."	"My writing is better than it was. Here's what I'll work on next."
"I got a bad grade. I failed."	"The grade shows me what I haven't learned yet. What's my plan?"

Fixed mindset says	Growth mindset says
"I'm already good at this, so I don't need to practice."	"Being good at this means I can take on something harder."

Why it matters

When students believe they can improve, they:

- Choose harder tasks because they want to learn, not just to look good.
- Keep working after a mistake instead of quitting.
- Try new strategies when the first one does not work.
- Ask for help with specific questions.
- Improve more over a school year than students who believe ability is fixed.

For families: how to help

- **Praise the process.** Instead of "You're so smart," try "You kept trying different ways until it worked." Praise for being smart feels good for a moment but makes mistakes feel scarier.
- **Watch your reaction to failure.** Children read how adults feel about mistakes. Calm interest ("What happened? What will you try next?") teaches more than worry or lectures.
- **Share your own learning.** Tell your child about something you found hard and how you got better, including the part where you nearly quit.
- **Add "yet."** When you hear "I can't do this," add "yet."
- **Let them struggle a little.** Agree on a short time before you step in, then step in with a question, not an answer.

Five things to try this week

1. **Catch one fixed-mindset thought** and translate it using the table above. Write both versions down.
2. **Pick the stretch option once.** Choose the harder book, the tougher problem or the new activity, and notice how it feels to choose it.
3. **Share a favorite mistake** at dinner or in class. Say what the mistake taught you. Adults go first.
4. **Try a new strategy** on something you are stuck on: reread the question, draw it, try a smaller example, or ask one specific question.
5. **Record one thing you got better at** this week, however small. Keep the list going.

A sentence to remember

"I can't do this yet" is a true statement about today, not a prediction about tomorrow.

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