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PARENTS, TEACHERS AND COACHES: WHERE DO MINDSETS COME FROM?

Parents (and teachers)

We can communicate one of two things to our children or students: I'm judging your permanent traits OR I am committed to the development of the developing person that you are.

It feels counter intuitive to a lot of us but praising children's intelligence does not set them up for success, it harms their motivation—and therefore their performance. If success means that I'm intelligent, failure automatically means that I'm dumb; that's fixed mindset 101.

In Carol Dweck's words:

“Parents think they can hand children permanent confidence—like a gift—by praising their brains and talent. It doesn't work, and in fact has the opposite effect. It makes children doubt themselves as soon as anything is hard or anything goes wrong. If parents want to give their children a gift, the best thing they can do is to teach their children to love challenges, be intrigued by mistakes, enjoy effort, seek new strategies, and keep on learning. That way, their children don't have to be slaves of praise. They will have a lifelong way to build and repair their own confidence.”

It doesn't mean that we cannot praise children when they do something great or that we can't admire their successes. We just have to make sure of phrasing our praises in a growth minded way. They must understand that we're proud of the efforts they made, not of their intelligence or talent. The goal is to show interest and recognition for their efforts and choices, not their success itself.

And it's the same if the child doesn't perform well despite a lot of effort. We must reinforce the power of perseverance and of trying different approaches to overcome a challenge, to help them understand that it is not a sign of deficiency: they've just not found the way which works for them yet!

It's also very important to remember that children are not only listening to what we say about them... but also about others. If we're careful to praise their efforts but then admire someone else's talent, they might still learn that some have it...and some do not.

Another important point to keep in mind: if no effort is needed for a child to complete its task, it means it's too easy for them. We must help them gain awareness around that: if it takes no effort, there's no learning involved.

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And finally, when **reassuring** children, we must once again be careful of not focusing on their intelligence or talent. The goal is for them **to feel supported, not evaluated**. Telling someone that they can't mess something up because of how smart they are will fill them with shame if they do mess it up. We aim to bolster them, without realizing that what we're actually doing is raising the stakes...

Trying to protect children from failure is another misconception of our roles as parents. Yes, it lessens the risk of immediate disappointment, but it's harmful in the long run. The child knows that they didn't win a competition if they didn't win. That's what we call a fact. Telling them that we thought they were better than everyone else will achieve nothing, it can't feel genuine. Telling them that they were robbed of their victory teaches them to blame others whenever they don't get what they were reaching for. Telling them that not achieving what they tried to achieve is not important teaches them to devalue anything they're not good at. Telling them that given their abilities they will win the next time is once again driving children to believe that abilities are everything and effort not the most important part of the journey. However, owning the fact that the child didn't deserve to win this time allows us to validate their experience, offer support for their disappointment and provide insights and motivation for them to stay motivated and ready to work harder until they reach their goals. Children need **honest** and **constructive** feedback.

"Withholding constructive criticism does not help children's confidence: it harms their future."

Now most people think that the criticism they give is **constructive**. Otherwise they would (hopefully) abstain. However it's not as easy as it looks not to include judgment of the child. We must make sure that what we share is helping by **allowing the child to fix something, build something better or do a better job**. It must not be about them but about the way they're handling a situation. And it must not be about what is wrong about the way they resorted to, it must be about how to choose a better way and why or how the new way will work better.

Things are changing, but a lot of people still believe that when they judge or punish, they're teaching children about life. But they're only teaching them that if you go against your parents' rules or values, you'll be judged and punished, not how to think through issues and reach their own ethical and mature decisions. And they're definitely NOT teaching children that communication is open.

Our role as growth minded adults is to **set high standards** for children, while **teaching them how to reach them**. It's also okay to say no to children! As long as it's a fair, thoughtful and respectful one

*"Next time you're in a position to discipline, ask yourself: What is the message I'm sending here?
I will judge and punish you OR I will help you think and learn?"*

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All (a large majority of) parents want the best for their children. The growth mindset teaches us that it is achieved by **fostering their interests, growth and motivation to learn**.

We must be very careful of not sending the message to a child that they're being judged. We must be even more careful not to let them believe that they're being judged and will only be loved if they succeed... on OUR terms.

With a **fixed mindset ideal**, children learn that they can either be the **brilliant/talented** child OR the **unworthy** one:

“There is no room for error. And there is no room for the children’s individuality—their interests, their quirks, their desires and values.”

With a growth mindset ideal, children have something they can strive for. They have **room to grow** into full human beings and to choose in which way they want to contribute to society, **a way that excites them**.

Teachers (and parents)

Contrary to common beliefs, **lowering our standards does not help our students**. It only leads to poorly educated students feeling entitled to great praises for easy work. Hovering **raising standards is not enough either**: if we don't give students the means to meet them, it's a recipe for disaster.

Great teachers are fascinated by the learning process... and believe in the growth of both intellect and talent. The **promise** they make to their students is that **they will LEARN**. That's the goal and the destination.

Carol Dweck quotes a formidable teacher called **Marva Collins** saying to one student:

“You must help me to help you. (...) Success is not coming to you, you must come to it.”

She also said to another:

“I am not giving up on you. I am not going to let you give up on yourself.”

She fostered **an atmosphere of affection and concern**; teaching the child that their teacher would love them even when they didn't love themselves. Now teachers do not have to love all their students, adds the author, but they have to care for each and every one of them.

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Another inspiring teacher, **Rafe Esquith**, reminds his students daily that he's **not smarter but more experienced** that they are. He helps them see **how much they have grown**, and how practice and discipline allows them to do easily what they once thought was so difficult.

Dorothy DeLay, a wondrous violin teacher at Julliard reminds herself that if a student **doesn't know** how to do something **YET**, **she** has to find another way to get them there. She says that:

*“Too many teachers hide their own lack of ability behind
[the idea that a student just wasn't born with the necessary talent]”.*

The two pillars of her approach were **“challenge and nurture”**.

Great teachers set the **same standards** for their students who are **achieving** and for those who are **not**. They show **commitment** to each and every one of them.

Interestingly, when Benjamin Bloom was studying 120 world class prodigies (be it in art, sport, science or any other field), he found out that most of them had started their learning journey with a very warm and accepting teacher—someone who created an atmosphere of trust, not judgment. A nurturing environment, even when strict discipline was needed.

Once again, it's not about lying to students about where they are right now. It's about **telling them the truth** if they have obstacles to overcome AND to **give them the tools** to overcome them.

*“When teachers are judging them, students will sabotage the teacher by not trying.
But when students understand that school is for them—a way for them to grow their minds—
they do not insist on sabotaging themselves.”*

Finally, **great teachers love to LEARN**. And teaching is potentially the best way to learn.

They have a growth mindset about children AND about themselves.

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Coaches

This time the author chose Coach Bobby Knight as a counter example. She also reminds us how the fixed mindset can turn human beings into what she calls **complicated people**. Because of how worried they are about their fixed traits, they have to constantly document them sometimes at the expense of everyone else. At the very least, it drives people to be judgmental.

Coach Knight could be incredibly kind and gracious AND he could be unfathomably cruel and demeaning. Because **coaching was his identity**, any failure coming from one of his athletes felt like an attack of his own character. Interestingly, Knight firmly believed in his players ability to develop and grow. But he had a fixed mindset about himself and his coaching ability. Therefore **any loss made HIM a failure** and obliterated his identity. He went as far as not allowing a player to drive home with the team if they were involved in costing them a win. Carol Dweck explains:

“The team was his product, and they had to prove his ability every time out.”

One of his former athletes and biggest star, Isaiah Thomas, reports having oscillated between rushes of love and the will to face him with a gun. Carol Dweck points out then:

“I would not consider myself an unqualified success if my best student had considered shooting me”.

On the other end, we’re told the stories of Coach John Wooden and Coach Coach Pat Summit who embodied the growth mindset.

Coach Wooden believed in providing his players with the basic **skills**, the proper **conditioning** and the right **mindset**. He asked for **full preparation and for full efforts**, not victory. He was also very committed to giving the **same amount of attention to each and every one** of his students. He said:

“The jersey and the number on it never belong to just one single player, no matter how great or how big a ‘star’ that particular player is. It goes against the whole concept of what a team is.”

He excelled at **analyzing** and **motivating** his players, that’s how he made sure they reached their full potential in basketball AND in life. He also said:

“For me, concern, compassion, and consideration were always priorities of the highest order.”

Coach Summit taught herself to go from her hate of losing to seeing it as the greatest opportunity for her and her team to learn and improve. **She turned success into an obstacle to growth**. She argued:

“Success lulls you. It makes the most ambitious of us complacent and sloppy”

She made sure her players always had what they needed in order to give their best on the field. She knew that was the **recipe of continuing success**. Not success itself.

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False growth mindset

A few misunderstandings to be aware of:

#1 DEFINITION

Having a growth mindset is **not** the same as having an **open mind**. It's about believing that people can develop their abilities and **putting in the work** necessary to do it.

#2 EFFORT

The growth mindset is **not only about effort!** It's also about evaluating if our efforts are producing the results we're looking for, and to adapt and refine if they don't. It's about trying new strategies, asking for help if necessary and committing to the entire process from trying to succeeding. It's about **committing** to grow, not only about committing to show up.

Also, It's important to praise effort and not talent; BUT it's important to only praise effort **if effort is there**. Our role is to help children figure out why their efforts are not effective or to motivate them to put more effort in what they care about; not to make them believe that they're trying hard enough when they're not even trying.

Carol Dweck shares her fear of the growth mindset being used to make kids feel good when they're not learning, instead of a springboard to remind them that they can. She writes:

"The growth mindset is meant to help kids learn, not to paper over the fact that they are not learning."

It's about praising the process, not the success, yes; yet it still had to be **tied to the outcome**: learning, progress, achievement must have occurred. That's when praising the process empowers children. She takes that occasion to remind us that we don't always have to praise children anyway! Sometimes what they need is proof of our interest and support, nothing more.

#3 EMPTY WORDS

A growth mindset is **not** shown by **telling children they can do anything**. The goal is to help them gain the skills and find the resources they need to reach their goals, not to offer empty reassurance.

#4 PROJECTING BLAME

Blaming a kid for having a fixed mindset is a reflection of the adult's unconscious effort to absolve themselves of the responsibility they hold to teach the child how to create a growth mindset and of their responsibility to teach them in a way that will shift their mindset if need be.

"We are in the business of helping kids thrive, not finding reasons why they can't"

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Changing our mindset is a journey, not just a decision. We're all a mixture of both mindsets, and we oscillate between the two. The goal is for us to understand what drives us towards a fixed mindset, to identify the triggers and to find our way out of it. Once we understand that we all have moments when we fall into a fixed mindset, we can help each other gain awareness around it and share ways to step out of it.

A final word of caution: children do not listen to what we say as much as they look at what we do. Speaking a growth mindset is one thing. Embodying it in another one. And the latter matters a lot more.

We can have a growth mindset for ourselves but fall into the trap of focusing on our child's ability.

"It can be hard to shake the idea that telling kids they're smart will build their confidence."

We can have a growth mindset for ourselves, but still worry when our child hits a roadblock. We must be mindful of the way we react to a child's setback or failure. Our anxiety will drive them towards a fixed mindset instantly. It's very important to show them that setbacks and failures are only opportunities for growth and learning experiences.

"In other words, every single day parents are teaching their children whether mistakes, obstacles, and setbacks are bad things or good things."

It's very important to teach children how to understand and not merely ask them to memorize rules, procedures or facts. She reminds us that:

"Great contributions to society are born from curiosity and deep understanding."

"(...) the moral of this story is that parents, teachers, and coaches pass on a growth mindset not by having a belief sitting in their heads but by embodying a growth mindset in their deeds:

the way they praise (conveying the processes that lead to learning)
the way they treat setbacks (as opportunities for learning)
and the way they focus on deepening understanding (as the goal of learning)."

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Fixed mindset curse:

“When people believe in fixed traits, they are always in danger of being measured by a failure.
It can define them in a permanent way.
Smart or talented as they may be, this mindset seems to rob them of their coping resources.”

Growth mindset blessing:

“When people believe their basic qualities can be developed, failures may still hurt,
but failures don’t define them.
And if abilities can be expanded—if change and growth are possible—
then there are still many paths to success.”