

Mindsets Matter for Gifted Children

By Dr. Megan Parker Peters and Dr. Emily Mofield

Consider the following analogy: Left alone, a gifted child's ability is like vinegar in a cup. It sits still and stagnant. But, when we provide children opportunity, motivation, and a mindset that loves challenge, we add baking soda to the vinegar. Those catalyzing ingredients interact with the vinegar, causing the mixture to bubble over. Our children's abilities can follow suit. When we strive to enhance motivation, provide appropriate opportunities, and promote a mindset that values effort, improvement, and a focus on learning, we can also support our gifted children's abilities to surge toward potential.

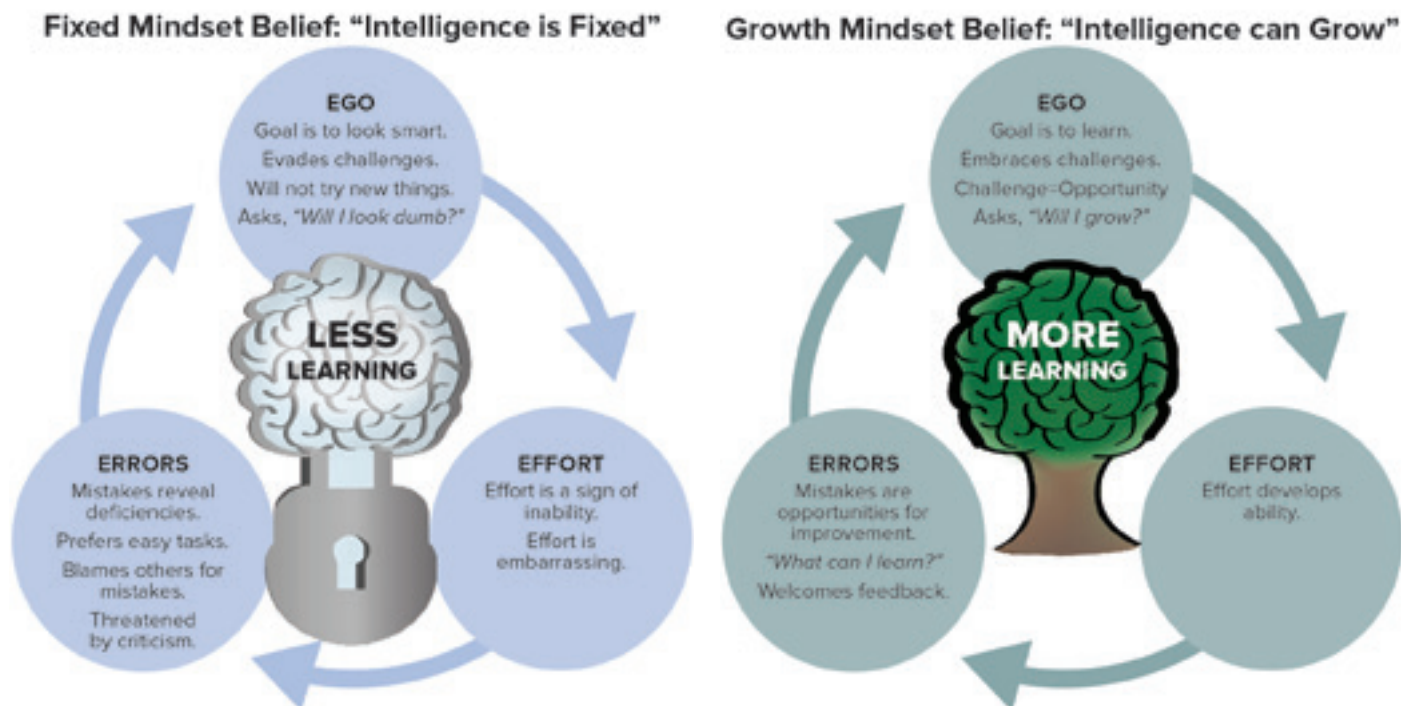
Based on the popular work of Carol Dweck, mindset is an important ingredient.¹ The realization of potential starts with how both we and our children think about abilities. As a parent, do you believe that intelligence is a static characteristic that cannot change? Or do you think that intelligence is a malleable trait that can continue to grow? What does your child believe about intelligence?

According to experts, intelligence is our capacity to learn, reason, problem-solve, and think abstractly. So, can these skills be consciously developed? Yes! We can sharpen our problem-solving skills and creativity. In fact, this is what many gifted programs strive to do. So, why is the belief—the *mindset*—that intelligence is malleable so important? It's important because our concept of ability influences our behavior.

Take the teacher who believes abilities are malleable versus



FIGURE 1. HOW EGO, EFFORT, & ERRORS INFLUENCE MINDSET



Adapted from Dweck's "Implicit Theories of Intelligence"

the teacher who believes intelligence does not change very much. The first teacher will be more likely to do everything possible to support his students by providing engaging, enriching, and challenging educational opportunities. This contrasts sharply with the teacher who believes that his students' abilities are set in stone. Now, consider what difference it would make for your child to have a parent who believes that abilities are changeable versus static.

Beliefs about intelligence can affect how children both approach school work and perform. It is why some gifted children tackle challenges with excitement while others feel threatened by challenges and avoid them. The mindset beliefs influence how the child views ego, effort, and errors (see Figure 1). Those with a fixed mindset believe that their potential has been defined, measured, and chiseled in stone. The child is more concerned with looking smart than getting smarter. The child's major goal is to prove his "chiseled potential" by looking smart at all costs, thereby protecting the "smart" ego.

In the elementary years especially, children are inclined to believe that if things come easy, then, "I'm smart!" Their identity as smart is reinforced through praise for getting work done or learning something quickly without even trying. When children eventually experience a task where they have to try hard, work, and get stuck, they think, "I must not be so smart at this since I

had to work at it." They develop the belief that working hard at something is embarrassing and a sign of inability, shattering their "smart" identity. These children believe errors are personal failings and will avoid challenging experiences. The result is less learning and less actualized potential.

In contrast, children with a growth mindset believe they have an unknown potential and strive to do all they can in order to develop it. When encountering a challenge, they think, "Will this be an opportunity to help me get smarter?" instead of "Will this make me look stupid?" They view mistakes as feedback and opportunities to improve. Since their focus is on continued improvement and growth, these children will learn more and be free to achieve their potential without the fear of losing their "smart" identity.

Mindsets and Gifted

Mindsets matter for *all* students, but there are some additional considerations for what this powerful idea means for gifted students, who often do not have to persevere through a challenge or work hard until they reach college or graduate school. Here are some questions and misconceptions about giftedness and mindsets:

Are gifted students more prone to developing fixed mindsets? We recently conducted a comparison study and found

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How to Promote a **GROWTH** Mindset

GIVE APPROPRIATE PRAISE

Often parents and teachers might say, “*She is brilliant!*” “*He’s so talented!*” “*She’s a natural!*” These statements are intended to be positive and to describe a high level of performance or ability. However, Dweck’s research shows that statements like these can temporarily raise children’s self-esteem, but this boost lasts for only a short amount of time, until they experience a setback. The setback does not mesh with their vision of self as “brilliant, talented, and gifted.” Comments like these may make you as a parent feel better, but they do not necessarily translate into long-term learning and success for children.¹

Rather than focusing on static abilities in your praise (e.g. “genius,” “brilliant,” “gifted”), focus on the process your child took to achieve a set outcome. Process praise helps children connect their success to the strategies and steps they took to be successful.

The quality of praise is key. Process praise should be specific and authentic. Look over your child’s work so that you can clearly state the positive things you see in it regarding their strategies, specific progress, and effort. This type of praise actually acknowledges and honors the time, effort, and thought your child devoted to the task.

REINFORCE RISK TAKING

It’s important to get children out of their “easy” comfort zone. Encourage your child to take achievable risks, like sitting with someone new in the cafeteria or trying a new class or sport. These create opportunities to try new things without the pressure of being the best right away.

OPPORTUNITIES FROM MISTAKES

Try to celebrate mistakes. Show how you learned from an error and how this impacted your next action. Take opportunities to verbalize the mistakes you make so that your child understands that mistakes are not shameful.

Dweck explains it’s also important to consider the power of “yet.” When your child has less than stellar performance on an assignment or activity, show them that this is not the final judgment. Explain to your child, “*You have not mastered this.... yet.*” “Yet” conveys that abilities can change.²

Also, consider how you as an adult handle mistakes. When you hide mistakes or gloss over them, this conveys to children that mistakes reflect a lack of ability or that you are not interested in learning from them in an effort to improve.

The acronym GROWTH describes six specific ways adults can nurture a love of learning and challenge in children.

WATCH WHAT YOU SAY

When talking about smart, talented, successful professionals, do you mention the hours and hard work involved in becoming “more” talented and achieving success? Are you conveying that success is based on “natural talent” alone, or are you conveying that success is based on effort, persistence, passion, and learning?

Your words and actions provide the model for your child’s thoughts and future actions.

TEACH MINDSET

Teach your child about the brain; tell him about what happens when we learn something new—that neurons form stronger connections, and our brains grow stronger as we learn more. Ask your child to consider how he can strengthen his brain when he takes on a challenge.

HAVE A GROWTH MINDSET

Take time to reflect on your own beliefs about abilities and consider how your beliefs impact your children.

For example, when given the choice between a new challenge or opportunity and a safe choice, choose the challenge. Then, discuss how this choice helped support personal growth.

Also, interpret and model obstacles as opportunities for creativity and deeper thinking. Verbalize it so that your children hear this process: “*This method did not work; what is another way that we could tackle this?*”

Consider how you think about and talk about people who are better than you in a certain area (profession, hobby, etc.). Show your children that it is important to learn from someone who has greater expertise; this expert can provide new knowledge and skills to help you grow!

As parents, it is also important to monitor your fixed mindset triggers. Consider activities in which you may think, “*I was never good at that...I better not try this. I may look stupid.*” Watch your language and actions so that these thoughts do not travel from your mind to those of your children.

Endnotes

¹ Dweck, C. (2000). *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality, and development (Essays in social psychology)*. New York, NY: Routledge.

² Dweck, C. (2014, November). *The power of believing that you can improve*. [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/carol_dweck_the_power_of_believing_that_you_can_improve

FEEDBACK THAT PROMOTES GROWTH MINDSET

SAMPLE FEEDBACK

“I see that you took your time on this! You included so many thoughtful details from your research.”

HOW IT PROMOTES A GROWTH MINDSET

This acknowledges the work involved so that children view effort as valuable.

“I like the way you thought/created/chose/decided/designed...”

This acknowledges the thought processes involved in accomplishing the task. Children understand they had control over the outcome.

“You worked really hard on this!”

This shows you value effort. However, never praise effort that wasn't there. This is an especially important caveat since many gifted students do not have to put forth much effort in tasks.

“Tell me about how you did this.”

This encourages your child to focus on her process through explanation.

“Wow! This writing shows [you really know how to develop characters, you have put thought into shaping the theme, you use lots of descriptive language to develop the setting].”

“Wow! You've got this! You really understand [fractions, ecosystems].”

This is specific feedback and acknowledges what the child knows and understands, which emphasizes the importance of learning.

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no differences between gifted and typical students' fixed mindset beliefs.² Other research has shown that gifted students actually hold higher growth mindset beliefs compared to typical students,³ however, it is important to remember that specific environmental and personality traits do matter. Some gifted students may develop fixed mindsets and avoid challenging tasks—especially those with maladaptive, perfectionistic tendencies or those who like to stay in their comfort zone. And, while one child's comfort zone may be above grade level and appear “challenging,” based on what the student is actually capable of, it may not be “challenging” enough for that individual to make continual progress.

Since intelligence is malleable, does this mean everyone can become gifted? Everyone is capable of improvement and growth, but there are still developmental differences in ability levels for students. Educators should focus on how to help *all* children reach an unknown potential, and this will require differentiated responses to meet needs of gifted children who have exceptional, unique needs compared to their peers.

Is it possible to acknowledge a child's high ability without promoting a fixed mindset? Parents should be cautious in using fixed mindset traits or terms, such as being “*smart*,” or “*brilliant*,” but they shouldn't discount or hide the reality of their child's exceptional abilities. Some research points to the importance of how the message of giftedness is conveyed.⁴ If parents explain giftedness as a malleable quality *while also* praising hard work, they can help prevent a fixed mindset. It's not only important to recognize talent, but to recognize how talent comes to fruition and needs continual nurturing.⁵

Do gifted programs promote a fixed or growth mindset? While some have made claims that the identification of “giftedness” or placement into a gifted program might serve as ability-praise and, therefore, promote a fixed mindset, our research findings show that identified gifted students are not more vulnerable to developing fixed mindset beliefs. Gifted programs and services seek to provide the challenge that is needed to promote a growth mindset and love of challenge. All students need to be challenged, and all students need differentiated instruction, gifted or not. But, for many gifted students, their needs are best met through special programming and appropriate curriculum adaptations, which may only happen through specialized gifted programming.⁶ In fact, when their needs are not being met and they are not challenged, this could set the stage for fixed mindset beliefs to develop; students are not used to hard work, and they may avoid persevering through difficult tasks and intellectual risk-taking when they are finally faced with such challenges.

If you and your child believe that abilities can grow, then there is potential for further success and mastery—even for the already gifted child. In fact, the appropriate mindset can free your child from the fear of not living up to “smartness.” Instead, the focus is on a love of learning and continued improvement, the keys to leading your child to unknown heights. ☺

Authors' Note

Megan Parker Peters, Ph.D., is an assistant professor and the director of teacher education and assessment at Lipscomb University. She is a licensed psychologist and a Nationally Certified School Psychologist. She specializes in researching and assessing gifted and twice-exceptional learners, serves on the board of the Tennessee Association for the Gifted, and is an editorial board member of NAGC's *Teaching for High Potential*. She and Dr. Emily Mofield received the 2016 NAGC Hollingworth Award for their research on mindsets, perfectionism, and underachievement.

Emily Mofield, Ed.D., is the consulting teacher for gifted education for Sumner County Schools in Tennessee. She has been recognized as the Tennessee Association for Gifted Children's Teacher of the Year and has co-authored (with Tamra Stambaugh) the *Vanderbilt PTY Advanced ELA Curriculum* series, winning multiple NAGC Curriculum Awards (2011, 2015, 2016) for this work. She currently serves as the chair-elect of NAGC's Curriculum Studies Network.

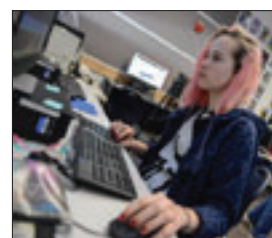
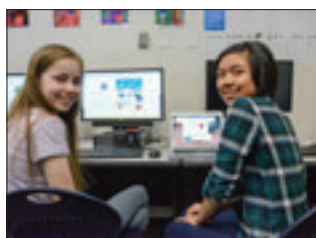
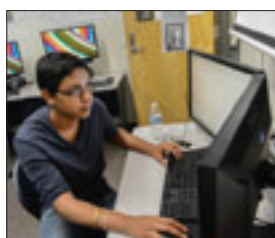
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- ¹ Dweck, C. (2000). *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality, and development (Essays in social psychology)*. New York, NY: Routledge.
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- ³ Esparza, J., Shumow, L., & Schmidt, J. (2014). Growth mindset of gifted seventh grade students in science. *NCSSMST Journal*, 19, 6–13.
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- ⁶ National Association for Gifted Children. (2009). *Grouping* [position statement]. Retrieved from <http://www.nagc.org>.



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