TIPS FOR INCREASING EFFORT, HARD WORK, AND PERSEVERANCE IN KIDS

MINDSETS *for Parents*

Strategies to Encourage Growth Mindsets in Kids

New York Times Best-Selling Author
Mary Cay Ricci
and Margaret Lee

A **Prufrock Press** Book

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DEDICATION

For my husband, Enio Ricci, with love to my partner in parenting.

For my kids, Christopher, Patrick, and Isabella—Live your life with a growth mindset!

For my parents, Joe and Mary Ellen Marchione, with gratitude.

For my mother-in-law, Vincenzina Ricci, a selfless and loving mother and grandmother, whom we lost (and heaven welcomed) on February 9, 2016.

—Mary Cay/Mom

For my parents, Katherine Lee and the late David Lee, with love, gratitude, and admiration.

—Meg

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CHAPTER 1

WHAT ARE MINDSETS AND HOW DO THEY AFFECT OUR CHILDREN?

"I want to make sure my children never stop learning!"
—Gina, parent of three

Have you ever caught yourself thinking any of the following about your children?

- "Poor thing, she isn't very good at math. She must have gotten that from me."
- "He takes after me in his sports ability."
- "Math and science are his strengths. He doesn't do well in literature."

The way we think about and react to our children depends on our mindset.

What are mindsets? Thanks to the research of Dr. Carol Dweck, Stanford University professor of psychology, society is going through a shift in thinking about learning and intelligence. Dweck (2006) described a belief system that asserts that intelligence can be developed and coined the term *growth mindset*. Parents with a growth mindset believe that their children can achieve at higher levels—with effort, perseverance, and resiliency. Learners with a growth mindset believe

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that they can grow their intelligence with hard work and learn just about anything. It might take some struggle and some failure, but they understand that with effort and perseverance, they can grow and succeed. Growth mindset adults and children focus on the learning, growth, and improvement—not the grades or trophies, not on looking "smart" or talented. A growth mindset home environment encapsulates the philosophy that there is enough success for everyone. Both parents and children learn about the malleability of the brain and what can happen as a result of practice, perseverance, resiliency, and grit.

Conversely, Dweck coined the term *fixed mindset*, which is a belief system in which one believes that intelligence is something you are born with—it is genetic, it is innate—and although everyone can learn new things, your innate level of intelligence cannot be changed. A person with a fixed mindset might believe that he or she has predetermined "smarts" or talents in a particular area, but not in other areas. A child or adult with a fixed mindset might believe that he or she will never be good in a particular subject or talent or be afraid to try something that he or she thinks is too difficult or at which he or she fears failure. For people who do not perceive themselves as "smart," it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is important to avoid classifying people into "fixed mindset" or "growth mindset" categories. Rarely does anyone fit 100% into a category—we are certain degrees of each, depending on the situation. We know of a teacher who has a very growth mindset when it comes to her students and her teaching. She believes that they can increase their skills and abilities in a variety of different areas and her classroom is a space where the word "can't" is rarely spoken. This teacher expects each student to put forth great effort and believes that all can achieve at a high level. She is a model growth mindset teacher; however, at home, she transitions into a fixed mindset thinker when it comes to her cooking skills. In fact, she is so sure that she can't cook, she unplugged her oven and uses it to store her books!

Think for a minute about your own mindset. A mindset is a set of personal beliefs and is a way of thinking that influences your behavior and attitude toward yourself and others. A parent's mindset directly influences how a child feels about himself or herself and how he or

she views himself or herself. (In Chapter 2, you will find the Parent Mindset Reflection Tool to help gauge your parenting mindset.) A child's mindset directly affects how he or she faces challenges. A child with a growth mindset perseveres even in the face of barriers. A child with a fixed mindset may give up easily and decide to check out of the learning process because he or she believes that he or she does not possess the ability to understand this particular new learning.

A fixed or growth mindset can directly affect family dynamics as well. It is not surprising to note that parents have a big impact on how children view themselves. Parents will often view their children through specific lenses: "Joseph was born knowing his math facts," "Patrick has always asked good questions," and "Catherine just knows how to interpret a piece of literature." These are all examples of a fixed mindset, even though the statements sound positive. These statements describe who these children "are," not what they have done or the effort that they have put forth. Think of some occasions when you have thought or heard yourself describe your child in a way that rationalizes perceived weaknesses: "She is just like me; math was not my thing either" or "I can understand why he does not do well in reading; I never liked to read" (Ricci, 2013).

SHIFTING MINDSETS

Breaking down the belief that intelligence is static can be a challenge, but with the proper groundwork and education, little by little a mindset can shift. Expecting a shift in mindset immediately is not realistic; after all, some adults have had a fixed mindset belief for most of their lives. No fault to them—fixed mindset thinking was likely embedded in many of us from a young age. Even after someone has had a self-proclaimed mindset shift, he or she will need to make a conscious effort to maintain that belief. A fixed mindset has an elasticity that continually wants to spring back. For example, a twice-exceptional

child (a gifted student with learning disabilities) called to share a college schedule with his mother who also happened to be an educator. The parent had a mindset "shift" several years ago and had proudly shared all she did to encourage a growth mindset environment within their home. The schedule her son told her about involved 8 a.m. classes and a course roster that included macroeconomics, international business, accounting, analysis of media, and management. His mother noted that the fixed mindset mentality buried within her wanted to scream, "Are you crazy? You are setting yourself up for failure!" Instead, she responded, "It sounds like a challenging schedule, and I know that with continued effort, you will be able to manage it." Believing that all children can succeed—with effort, persistence, and motivation—is the heart of this belief.

BRAIN-BASED RESEARCH

One of the reasons for this shift in thinking about intelligence is due to the available technology and research that examines the function and make-up of the brain. Recent brain research negates the notion that intelligence is "fixed" from birth. Formal and informal studies demonstrate that the brain can develop with the proper challenge and stimuli. Other current research in neuroscience emphasizes the concept of neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity is the ability of the brain to change, adapt, and "rewire" itself throughout our entire life. Anyone who has ever witnessed someone recovering from a stroke has had a front row seat in watching neuroplasticity. In the case of a stroke, for most patients, the brain begins the rewiring process almost immediately so that patients learn to speak and become mobile again; however, it takes the hard work and effort put forth in physical, occupational, and speech therapy for stroke patients to regain much of what they've lost. You might compare this "rewiring" of the brain after a stroke to learning to navigate a different route on a familiar map. Even though the final

destination may be the same and the landmarks might be familiar, the brain needs to learn new pathways to accomplish the tasks that used to be routine. Neuroplasticity works both ways; it creates new connections and eliminates connections that are not used very often (Ricci, 2013).

Neuroplasticity is the ability of the brain to change, adapt, and "rewire" itself throughout our entire life.

We now know so much more about the neurological aspects of the brain that it cannot help but inform the way we approach how our kids learn and our own parenting. It directly affects adults' beliefs and expectations about children's potential and achievement. When parents and children (as well as their teachers) learn about the brain and all of its potential, they witness the impact that it has on learning and mindsets can begin to shift.

INTELLIGENCE AND MEASURING INTELLIGENCE

Is it possible to increase your IQ? The University of Michigan partnered with the University of Bern to conduct a study that looked at the possibility of increasing IQ. This 2008 study (see Palmer, 2011) required participants to continually play a computerized memory game that involved remembering visual patterns. Each time a different pattern appeared, the participants heard a letter from the alphabet in their headphones. They were asked to respond when either the visual pattern on the screen or the letters they were hearing in their headphones were repeated. The time between the repeating of patterns and letters became longer as the game became more difficult. The researchers found that as the participants had practice and got better at the game, scores on IQ-style tests increased (Palmer, 2011).

This research and other studies like it contribute to the understanding of malleable intelligence, a key factor in growth mindset and a concept many parents and educators struggle to understand. In general, adults do not have a lot of background in cognitive science. After asking several groups of parents and educators, "What do cognitive abilities tests/IQ tests measure?", without exception, there was hesitancy in responding to the question. After giving sufficient wait time, a few responses were shared: "a child's capability," "how smart kids are," and "their innate ability." What was more surprising than their responses was the observation that so many of these parents and teachers just could not answer the question. There are many times that parents and educators are in situations where data is shared about a child and that data often includes cognitive scores from gifted and talented screening processes, special education screening processes, and/or IQ tests. Who knew so many people really have no idea what these assessments actually measure?

IQ tests and cognitive ability assessments used for "gifted and talented" identification do not measure an innate, genetic intelligence. They measure *developed* ability. If a child has had opportunities to develop the kind of reasoning that happens to be measured on these assessments, then he or she will score in the high range. However, if a child has never had an opportunity to develop these specific reasoning processes, the outcome of one of these assessments would not be noteworthy. David Lohman (2002), professor of educational psychology at the University of Iowa, stated that abilities are developed through experiences "in school and outside of school" (para. 3). When parents and educators review these "intelligence" scores, assumptions may be made about the child and beliefs may kick in that place limits on the child's potential.

THE ROLE OF POTENTIAL AND HARD WORK

Potential. It is all about possibilities and promise. However, the word *potential* is often used in ways that don't always make a whole lot of sense. Think of the phrases, "He is not working to his full potential" or "We will help your child reach his full potential." How does potential become "full?" Is it something that can be checked off on a report card? Potential can never be "full;" it is never-ending and our possibilities are infinite. As a child grows, learning and experiences become more sophisticated and challenging, growth continually occurs, and potential is never reached because it is impossible to reach. Perhaps many thought Michael Phelps reached his "full" potential after his 10th Olympic medal in 2008—a feat he went on to shatter at the 2012 Olympics when he won eight more medals. Believing that intelligence, talent, skills, and yes, even athletic ability can be developed encourages these endless possibilities (Ricci, 2013).

We are all born with potential. However, we might have innate strength or capacity in one or more specific areas. These strengths can manifest themselves in many ways. Strengths can be shown physically, creatively, socially, academically, athletically, musically, and artistically—the possibilities are endless. Every child has strengths, and some children are born with a greater degree of specific strengths or talents compared to their peer group. For those children with outstanding domain-specific strengths, their strengths and talents deserve to be further developed. However, it is also important to consider that other children have the potential to work side-by-side or even surpass those with intrinsic abilities.

Strengths can be shown physically, creatively, socially, academically, athletically, musically, and artistically—the possibilities are endless.

Think of a time that it took you a little longer to learn a new skill. It may have been something that required physical coordination,