Interview with Dr. Carol Dweck—Developing a Growth Mindset

Stanford psychology professor Dr. Carol Dweck's ground-breaking research has major implications for how we raise our children—specifically for how we encourage them, challenge them, and voice our praise. In her latest book, **Mindset: The New Psychology of Success**, Dr. Dweck explains how her observations of children demonstrate that a person's mindset can profoundly influence behavior. She has discovered that people with fixed mindsets believe that their achievements are based on innate abilities. As a result, they are reluctant to take on challenges. People with ***growth mindsets*** believe that they can learn, change, and develop needed skills. They are better equipped to handle inevitable setbacks, and know that hard work can help them accomplish their goals.

Dr. Dweck is the Lewis and Virginia Eaton Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In addition to her teaching and research, she lectures widely, sharing insights she has gained from her research with school administrators, professional athletes, people in the business community, and others.

Dr. Carol Dweck

What does Dr. Dweck's research mean for parents? She suggests that we should think twice about praising our kids for being "smart" or "talented," since this may foster a ***fixed mindset***. Instead, if we encourage our kids' efforts, acknowledging their persistence and hard work, we will support their development of a ***growth mindset***—better equipping them to learn, persist and pick themselves up when things don't go their way. Her work also suggests that we examine our own belief systems. Do we function with a ***growth mindset***? If not, what messages are we sending to our kids?

Read on to see how Dr. Dweck answers some challenging questions:

Highlights: What would you suggest to a *parent* who wants to develop a growth mindset? Is it too late for an adult to change his or her own mindset?

Carol Dweck: It's never too late to change your mindset. Mindsets are beliefs—powerful ones and ones that shape our motivation—but beliefs can be changed.

Parents should know that there is more and more new scientific evidence in support of the growth mindset. Research from cognitive psychology and neuroscience is showing that fundamental parts of intelligence can be developed and that the brain has an amazing capacity to learn and form new connections throughout life. Much new research from psychology is showing that genius and great creative contributions grow out of passion and dedication. They do not simply come from gifts we are born with. Finally, research with adults has shown that adults can learn a growth mindset and that when they do, they are more effective in many endeavors.

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Peter Heslin, a researcher, has developed a growth-mindset workshop for business managers in which he asks them a) to consider why it's important to understand that people can develop their abilities, b) to think of areas in which they once had low ability but now perform well, c) to write to a struggling protégé about how his or her abilities can be developed, and d) to recall times they have seen people learn to do things they never thought these people could do. In each case, they are asked to reflect upon why and how change takes place. Parents can easily adapt these exercises for their own mindset-changing purposes.

Parents have a strong, additional motivation to change their mindsets. If they do, they can more effectively mentor their children and help them develop the qualities that will serve them well in life.

Highlights: What are some specific steps a parent can take to help a child develop a growth mindset?

Carol Dweck: Children love the idea that their brain is like a muscle that gets stronger as they use it to learn. They also love the image of their brain forming new connections when they work hard and learn.

Parents can also show children that they value learning and improvement, not just quick, perfect performance. When children do something quickly and perfectly or get an easy A in school, parents should not tell the children how great they are. Otherwise, the children will equate being smart with quick and easy success, and they will become afraid of challenges. Parents should, whenever possible, show pleasure over their children's learning and improvement.

Parents should not shield their children from challenges, mistakes, and struggles. Instead, parents should teach children to love challenges. They can say things like "This is hard. What fun!" or "This is too easy. It's no fun." They should teach their children to embrace mistakes, "Oooh, here's an interesting mistake. What should we do next?" And they should teach them to love effort: "That was a fantastic struggle. You really stuck to it and made great progress" or "This will take a lot of effort—boy, will it be fun."

Finally, parents must stop praising their children's intelligence. My research has shown that, far from boosting children's self-esteem, it makes them more fragile and can undermine their motivation and learning. Praising children's intelligence puts them in a fixed mindset, makes them afraid of making mistakes, and makes them lose their confidence when something is hard for them. Instead, parents should praise the process—their children's effort, strategy, perseverance, or improvement. Then the children will be willing to take on challenges and will know how to stick with things—even the hard ones.

Highlights: How can a parent help a child feel unconditionally loved and supported, yet still feel challenged to succeed?

Carol Dweck: It's a mistake to think that when children are not challenged they feel unconditionally loved. When you give children easy tasks and praise them to the skies for their success, they come to think that your love and respect depend on their doing things quickly and easily. They become afraid to do hard things and make mistakes, lest they lose your love and respect. When children know you value challenges, effort, mistakes, and learning, they won't worry about disappointing you if they don't do something well right away. They can also come to talk to you about their problems and struggles without worrying about disappointing you.

Highlights: Why should a parent spur a child to try harder if the child does well right away?

Carol Dweck: Parents must teach children to love effort and challenges. If a child does well right away, that's fine, but that should not be the end-all and be-all. They will not always do well right away, so they need to learn to welcome hard tasks and to know what to do when they encounter them.

Highlights: What do you find happens to "naturals"? What are the pitfalls of effortless accomplishment?

Carol Dweck: I get so many letters from people who were naturals as children—immensely bright and talented. Everything came easily to them, and they were praised to the hilt for being so smart. They never had to work for anything—until one day they did and it terrified them.

Their original claim to fame was that they never had to push themselves while the other children were working and struggling. Then when they had to work hard as well, they couldn't do it. They didn't know how to push themselves past what came easily. Now, 10, 20, and 30 years later, they have not graduated from college or found fulfilling careers. And many feel bitter, as though they had been made a false promise—the promise that if they just sat there with their enormous talent, it would bring them success. But it didn't. Instead, success came to those who worked for it.

Bruce Jenner, one of the greatest Olympic athletes of all time, said that he would never have achieved as much as he did in sports if he had not had a learning disability. In sports he was a natural. But he would never have learned the importance of effort if he had not had to struggle with his schoolwork. When he applied that same kind of effort to sports, he made history.

Highlights: With so many school demands and limited time, why should a child put a lot of time and energy into tasks that require great effort, rather than rely (or even coast a bit) on existing strengths?

Carol Dweck: I am very sympathetic to the plight of children today, who may have little time to just do what they want to. I don't think schoolwork should be their whole lives. However, I think it is extremely important for children not to get into the habit of coasting. They must learn to welcome challenges and to deploy and enjoy effort when the task calls for it.

Highlights: To what extent is a child's starting mindset innate, and to what extent learned?

Carol Dweck: Children are born with different temperaments, and these can certainly play a role in their mindsets. Some toddlers tear around the world exploring everything, with little concern for setbacks. Others are quite shy and self-reflective, worrying about mistakes and criticism. However, learning can play a huge role. In our research we have seen how certain kinds of praise can put children into a fixed or growth mindset. And we have shown that we can teach students a growth mindset and have a clear impact on their motivation and achievement. So regardless of the mindset that a child may gravitate toward, parents and educators must be careful to send the right messages about learning, challenges, effort, and mistakes.

Highlights: With so much concern about kids experiencing stress, what would you say to those concerned that it may be stressful for kids to continually strive for greater accomplishment?

Carol Dweck: A lot of the stress comes from kids feeling that they are on display all the time, that they have to be smart and accomplished and successful, that they have to get into the right schools. This stress comes from a fixed mindset, not a growth mindset. A growth mindset says: Focus on the learning and the enjoyment of it.

We did a study of premed students at an Ivy League university. They were taking their first (very challenging) organic chemistry course, and the grade in that course was very important. The students with a growth mindset, who viewed learning as their first priority, enjoyed the course more (even when they happened to get a disappointing grade on a test), bounced back from setbacks, and ended up earning higher grades in the course. It was the students with a fixed mindset who thought their intelligence was on the line and who were stressed out and debilitated by setbacks.

Highlights: What has been the impact of your research on educators and

parents? Any surprises? What has particularly pleased you about the influence of your research?

Carol Dweck: It has been immensely gratifying to see my work having an influence on how educators and parents think about children, their learning, and their well-being. But, in some ways, the task is just beginning because many educators, whether they admit it or not, still believe in fixed intelligence. Many parents still believe in praising their children's intelligence and protecting them from mistakes and challenges instead of teaching them to welcome and deal with them.

I have had surprises. The biggest surprise has been learning the extent of the problem—how fragile and frightened children and young adults are today (while often acting knowing and entitled). I watched as so many of our Winter Olympics athletes folded after a setback. Coaches have complained to me that many of their athletes can't take constructive feedback without experiencing it as a blow to their self-esteem. I have read in the news, story after story, how young workers can hardly get through the day without constant praise and perhaps an award. I see in my own students the fear of participating in class and making a mistake or looking foolish. Parents and educators tried to give these kids self-esteem on a silver platter, but instead seem to have created a generation of very vulnerable people. My hope is that my work can help to reverse this trend.

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