

Do you have the right mindset?

¹ Think back to when you were in a classroom, maybe a maths classroom, and the teacher set a difficult problem. (That could have been any time between this morning or a few years ago.) Which of the two following responses is closer to the way you reacted?

A: Oh no, this is too hard for me. I'm not even going to seriously try and work it out.

B: Ah, this is quite tricky but I like to push myself. Even if I don't get the answer right, maybe I'll learn something in the attempt.

² Early in her career, the psychologist Carol Dweck of Stanford University gave a group of ten-year-olds problems that were slightly too hard for them. One group reacted positively, said they loved challenge and understood that their abilities could be developed. She says they had a 'growth mindset' and are focused on what they can achieve in the future. But another group of children felt that their intelligence was being judged and they had failed. They had a 'fixed mindset' and were unable to imagine improving. Some of these children said they might cheat in the future; others looked for someone who had done worse than them to boost their self-esteem.

³ Professor Dweck believes that there is a problem in education at the moment. For years, children have been praised for their intelligence or talent, but this makes them vulnerable to failure. They become performance-oriented, wanting to please by getting high grades, but they are not necessarily interested in learning for its own sake. The solution, according to Dweck, is to praise the process that children are engaged in: making an effort, using learning strategies, persevering and improving. This way they will become mastery-oriented (i.e. interested in getting better at something) and will achieve more. She contends that sustained effort over time is the key to outstanding achievement.

⁴ Psychologists have been testing these theories. Students were taught that if they left their comfort zone and learned something new and difficult, the neurons in their brains would form stronger connections, making them more intelligent. These students made faster progress than a control group. In another study, underperforming school children on a Native American reservation were exposed to growth mindset techniques for a year. The results were nothing less than staggering. They came top in regional tests, beating children from much more privileged backgrounds. These children had previously felt that making an effort was a sign of stupidity, but they came to see it as the key to learning.

⁵ So, back to our original question. If you answered B, well done – you already have a growth mindset. If A, don't worry; everyone is capable of becoming mastery-oriented with a little effort and self-awareness.

Multiple choice questions

1. What is the difference between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset?

- a) A fixed mindset likes learning new things, while a growth mindset avoids challenges.
- b) A fixed mindset thinks intelligence cannot change, while a growth mindset believes abilities can improve.
- c) A fixed mindset enjoys challenges, while a growth mindset prefers easy tasks.
- d) A fixed mindset focuses on progress, while a growth mindset wants quick results.

2. According to Professor Dweck, why is it a problem to praise children only for their intelligence?

- a) Because they become too confident and never fail.
- b) Because they stop studying completely.
- c) Because they fear failure and focus only on grades, not real learning.
- d) Because they lose interest in their teachers.

3. What happened when students learned that their brains form stronger connections after learning something difficult?

- a) They refused to try new challenges.
- b) They made faster progress than students who were not taught this.
- c) They became afraid of making mistakes.
- d) They decided to study less.

4. What was the result of teaching growth mindset techniques to underperforming children on a Native American reservation?

- a) They gave up because the tasks were too hard.
- b) They stayed at the same level as before.
- c) They achieved top results in regional tests, even better than children from richer schools.
- d) They only improved in sports, not academics.

True and False Questions

1. Praising children for their intelligence has a positive impact on learning.

True

False

2. Those who persist in trying to improve their abilities over time are successful.

True

False

3. Knowing how the brain works has little effect on learning.

True

False

Matching questions

Choose the best heading for each paragraph

How do you respond to a challenge?

The right and wrong kind of praise

Two ways to responding to a problem

1. Paragraph 1

2. Paragraph 2

3. Paragraph 3