

Learning Coach Series

Module 6

Deliberately reinforce positive mindsets of learning.

Introduction

The attitudes a person brings to learning influence success more than how smart they are. More than twice as much! Here are three ways of working toward positive outlooks on learning.

Close to 70 percent of the influence on our success in school is in our attitudes. Only about 30 percent of what influences grades is how “smart” we are or our previous success. By far the biggest influence on how successful we are in school is our habits, attitudes, feelings, and thoughts.

Here are three different pieces of “mindset” research to help you have ongoing conversations with your child about how important it is for them to take personal responsibility for their own learning.

1. Locus of Control⁸

“There’s one [attitude] in particular that has a higher predictor of academic achievement than [test] scores and high school grades combined, and that’s called “locus of control.” *Locus* is a Latin word that means *place*.

Some people tend to believe this “place” of control is inside of them. They have an *internal locus of control*. Some people tend to believe this “place” of control is outside of them. They have an *external locus of control*.

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms —to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

VIKTOR FRANKL,
Man’s Search for Meaning

A student with an *internal locus of control* believes that the grades and other outcomes they get in school are a result of their own effort. If they get a low score on a test they are likely to say, “I must not have studied enough.” or “I studied the wrong things.” The low score is a function of their choices. They know they must do something different for their grade to improve. They will likely say something like, “I need to prepare better. Maybe I should spend some time with the instructor.” They look inside themselves for explanations and solutions. *I decide. I have the control.*

A student with an *external locus of control*, however, believes that the grades and other outcomes they get in school are a result of things *outside* themselves —luck, chance, a teacher, or their parents. If they get a low score on a test, they are likely to say, “That teacher is so hard,” or “That test was just ridiculous.” They believe the low score they received was caused by the test or the teacher rather than their personal effort or preparation. Although sometimes bad tests or deficient teachers have an influence, you can still make the choice to learn and succeed. Students with an external locus of control are likely to say things like, “I hope the teacher explains things better before the next test,” or “My parents just make me do too many things. I don’t have time to study.” They constantly look outside themselves for explanations and excuses. *Other people or circumstances decide. I do not have the control.*

Scenarios and Discussions

Two boys get in a fight. Both go home and explain to their parents what happened. The first boy says, “I was teasing him and he pushed me. I had to hit him.” The second tells his parents, “He was saying some pretty mean things to me. It made me angry. I lost my temper and pushed him.” Which boy has an internal locus of control, and which boy has an external locus of control? Why?

Your child gets a low test score and is angry. How can you teach her to look inside herself for solutions (internal locus of control) rather than blaming outside people and circumstances (external locus of control)?

2. Fixed Mindset vs. Growth Mindset⁹

After more than 30 years studying factors that lead to achievement and success, one researcher found that people tend to have one of two “mindsets” about their capabilities—a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. A person’s mindset is critical to how he views and responds to his efforts, successes, and failures. *It makes all the difference.*

“In a fixed mindset, people believe their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits that cannot be changed. They spend their time documenting their intelligence or talent instead of developing them.

They also believe that talent alone creates success—without effort. They’re wrong.

“In a growth mindset, people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work—brains and talent are just the starting point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment. Virtually all great people have had these qualities” (italics added).⁷

Teach your children to have a growth mindset. Teach them that the brain is a muscle that can be strengthened with exercise. Every time they say “I can’t do this, respond with “I can’t do this YET.” and have them repeat it with you.

Scenarios and Discussions

Have you ever said, “That’s just the way I am?” How is that a fixed mindset? How can we change our reaction to a growth mindset?

Fixed mindsets lead to feelings like “I can’t do it, and it won’t matter how hard I try.” How can we change fixed mindsets to growth mindsets in our children?

Fixed Mindset	Growth Mindset
<p>“I’m just not a math person.” <i>I won’t do any better no matter how much I study—so why study at all?</i></p>	<p>“I don’t understand this yet.” <i>I obviously need to get some help and study more. I can still succeed..</i></p>
<p>“I passed the test. I’m so smart!” <i>I guess I don’t have to work hard to be successful.</i></p>	<p>“I passed the test. I’m sure glad I studied this week!” <i>I expected myself to do well because I worked at it.</i></p>
<p>“That’s just the way I am.” <i>...and there’s nothing I can do about it. It’s not my fault if I am bad-tempered.</i></p>	<p>“I lost my patience. I need to work on that.” <i>I can and should gain greater and greater control of myself.</i></p>
<p>“I’m not smart enough.” <i>“I only have so much intelligence and talent, and there is nothing I can do about that. I just have to learn to live with it.”</i></p>	<p>“I didn’t work hard enough.” <i>“I know my intelligence and talent can grow and develop if I work hard and stay with it. The sky’s the limit!”</i></p>

Listen for the kind of language in black print in this chart. The red print tells what may *really* be going on in the person’s mind.

Capture the power of the word “yet.”
Fixed mindset: “I can’t do this.”
Growth mindset: “I can’t do this yet.”

1. Praise Effort, Not Ability¹⁰

It makes sense to praise children.

As parents, we believe that if a child knows we notice and approve of what they are doing, they will be more likely to keep doing it! It seems clear to us that, over time, praise will help a child develop in positive and productive ways. Parents naturally look at praise as a way to teach a child what is right and wrong, good and bad, effective and not effective.

However, praise may do more harm than good. Be careful *what* you praise, and be specific.

"Contrary to popular belief, praising children's intelligence did not give them confidence and did not make them learn better. ... [C]hildrens' performance worsens if they always hear how smart they are. Children who get too much praise are less likely to take risks, are highly sensitive to failure and are more likely to give up when faced with a challenge."¹¹

Learn to praise things the child has control over, especially effort. Help them to see that persistence will get them a long way. A child has control over how hard they try, how much effort they give, the strategies they choose, and so on. They *do not* have control over how smart or handsome or talented they are.

Success in school is, in fact, not so much about how smart you are. It is more about how tough you are, how much effort you are willing to give, how hard you are willing to work.

Some Thoughts About Effort

"Continuous effort—not strength or intelligence—is the key to unlocking our potential."

WINSTON CHURCHILL

"Hard work beats talent when talent won't work hard."

TIM NOTKE

"Satisfaction lies in full effort, not in the attainment. Full effort is full victory."

MAHATMA GHANDI

"What separates high performers from low performers is not some divine spark. It is, the most recent research findings suggest, a much more boring—but ultimately controllable—factor. **All other things being equal, it is effort.** Good old fashioned neural elbow grease. Deliberate practice" (bold print added, **JOHN MEDINA**).⁹

Tips for Parents

- 1. Avoid labelling your children.** Praising effort sends the message that your child has the power to improve and change, but labelling him "smart" gives him little control over changing how he is perceived. Labelling him "average" or "not good at math" is equally damaging and stops effort.
- 2. Teach children from an early age that the brain is a muscle that can be strengthened with practice.** This sends the message that children can directly affect their intelligence, which may empower unmotivated teenagers.
- 3. Give honest and specific feedback.** Help children learn that you are not disappointed in failure, but you are concerned when you see a lack of effort.
- 4. Effort.** One of the greatest gifts we can give our children is an understanding that it is effort that leads to success—more surely than intelligence, talent, luck, family, or anything else.

NO!! "Good for you! You are so smart!"

YES!! "Nice job! I'm proud of you for working so hard!"

Scenarios and Discussions

Your daughter gets an A on a test. How do you praise her?

Your son's team wins a rugby game. How do you praise him?

Your daughter works all afternoon on a project that doesn't turn out very well.

How do you praise her?



In summary, the
Big Ideas

Module 6

Deliberately reinforce positive mindsets of learning.

Research evidence suggests that the huge majority of a student's success is accounted for by their attitudes rather than how "smart" they are. Children need to learn that their ability to choose their own way is the most important tool they have, that they always have the ability to choose their reaction to any circumstance, to anything that happens to them. Children need to learn that their success is about their choices. It is helpful to understand the following three ideas:

First, what is called "Locus of Control"

- A student with an *internal locus of control* believes that the grades and other outcomes they get in school are a result of their own effort.
- A student with an *external locus of control*, however, believes that the grades and other outcomes they get in school are a result of things *outside* themselves—luck, chance, a teacher, or their parents.

Next, it is helpful to understand and teach the difference between "Fixed Mindset" and "Growth Mindset"

- *In a fixed mindset*, people believe that their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits that cannot be changed.
- *In a growth mindset*, people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work—brains and talent are just the starting point.
- Teach children that the brain is a muscle that can be strengthened with practice.

And finally, praise for effort, not ability.

- Learn to praise children for things they have control over, especially effort. Praise creativity, choices, good planning and execution.
- Be careful about praising for things they do *not* have control over, like being "smart" or "pretty." Children need to learn that their success is about how hard they work, not about how smart, pretty, or lucky they are.