



"I Can Do It...With a Little Practice": Learning to Use a Growth Mindset



By Shauna Tominey

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As a teacher, I noticed that children respond to challenges in different ways. Some children try harder when facing a tough task. Others, like Marshall, crumble at the slightest challenge.

"I can't. I don't know how. I'm not good at that. You do it."

Other teachers noticed these differences in how children approach learning too. Together we started thinking about what we could do to help all of our children develop the skills they needed to keep trying. We decided to focus on using a **growth mindset** by putting the emphasis on learning or creating something rather than just the outcome itself.

Instead of saying: *"What a beautiful picture. You are quite the artist!"*, we tried: *"What a beautiful picture. I saw you working on it for a long time and thinking really hard about how to mix all of those colors together."*

Very slowly, we started noticing changes in how our children talked about what they were learning and doing. They became more excited to share with us *how* they did something new, not just *what* they did:

"I practiced a lot and kept trying. Now I can tie my shoe by myself!"

"I can't do that yet, but I'm learning."

"Maybe if you practice, you can learn to do it like me."

Using a growth mindset encourages a child to approach a situation or task with the idea that they can learn, practice, and grow. Those who take on a growth mindset recognize that learning takes time, perseverance, and patience. They also learn that it's okay to make mistakes, take a break, and tackle problems in different ways. Children with a growth mindset outperform those with a **fixed mindset**, who believe that their intelligence or abilities are unable to improve. While we live in a society that values finishing tasks and reaching goals, we want our children to see that results come from the hard work we put in.

As parents and teachers of young children, we can encourage our children to practice using a growth mindset with the words we use and by modeling a growth mindset ourselves.

Try these strategies with the children in your life:

Focus on effort, not just outcomes.

When your child is working on something new or after they have reached a goal, celebrate the accomplishment and talk about what it took to reach that goal.

"Wow! Look at your painting. You must have spent a lot of time mixing all of those colors together. Can you tell me about how you did that?"

Share stories with your child about how far they have come.

"When you first learned how to walk, you took one step and then fell. You kept trying though and soon you could take two steps, then four, then twelve. All that practice and now you walk and run everywhere!"

Share stories from your own life and childhood, as well about things you have learned, ways you have grown, and the practice it took along the way. To help children realize that doing something new or challenging took practice, we had conversations about how they had grown and changed since they were younger and shared stories about new things we were practicing too.

Think about your child as a “learner” in all areas of their life.

It's easy to think about our children as learners when it comes to traditional academic skills, like math and reading. It's equally important to use a growth mindset when developing social skills and managing emotions.

“It's really hard to control your body when you're upset, but you stopped yourself and used your words instead of kicking this time. I can tell you've been practicing using your words.”

Try different strategies to manage challenges.

Ask questions that help your child practice problem-solving so that they are not derailed by unexpected challenges in the future.

“What have you tried so far?”

“What else could you try?”

“Can you think of another way you could do this?”

Try singing the "Keep trying, and you'll get better" song from Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood or this activity to help you talk to your child about the importance of practice when trying new things and facing challenges.

Let them know that mistakes are part of learning.

If your child feels frustrated or discouraged, let them know that everyone makes mistakes — even you! Share that it's okay to take a break and come back later. Taking a break gives your child the space to step away and try again when they are able to approach a challenge in a calm way.

“Do you think taking a break would help? Maybe we should stop and try again later.”

By carefully choosing the words we use, we can foster a **growth mindset** for our children and for ourselves. These words also serve as a reminder to us to practice empathy and understanding as we guide our children through everyday learning challenges — big and small.

Marshall surprised us one day when he tried something new that didn't go well. We braced ourselves for the meltdown that was sure to follow. Instead, he stopped himself, looked up grinning and said, “I can do it... with a little practice.”



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