

THE GROWTH MINDSET: HOW PRAISE SHAPES LIFELONG RESILIENCE

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Abstract:

This article explores the psychological foundations of the Growth Mindset—the belief that intelligence and abilities are malleable rather than fixed—and investigates how parental and educator feedback serves as a primary architect of childhood resilience. By synthesizing the research of Carol Dweck and contemporary developmental psychologists, the piece examines the critical distinction between Person Praise (focusing on innate talent) and Process Praise (focusing on effort and strategy).

The analysis reveals that while trait-based compliments often inadvertently foster a fear of failure and risk aversion, process-oriented feedback empowers children to view setbacks as essential learning opportunities. Ultimately, the article argues that by shifting our linguistic habits and embracing "the power of yet," we can equip the next generation with the cognitive flexibility and persistence required to navigate lifelong challenges.

We all want the children in our lives to succeed. When a child brings home an "A" or wins a soccer match, our natural instinct is to shower them with love and affirmations like "You're so smart!" or "You're a natural athlete!"

However, decades of psychological research suggest that these well-intentioned compliments might actually be doing more harm than good. The way we praise children directly influences whether they develop a **Growth Mindset** or a **Fixed Mindset**, ultimately determining how they handle failure and challenges for the rest of their lives.

Keywords: Growth Mindset, Resilience, Process Praise, Fixed Mindset, Carol Dweck, Intrinsic Motivation, The Power of "Yet", Neuroplasticity, Maladaptive Response

Understanding the Two Mindsets

The concept of "mindsets," pioneered by Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck, categorizes how individuals perceive their own abilities and intelligence.¹

Feature	Fixed Mindset	Growth Mindset
Belief	Intelligence and talent are static traits you are born with.	Intelligence and abilities can be developed through effort.
View of Failure	A sign of lack of ability; something to be ashamed of.	An opportunity to learn and a necessary part of growth.
Reaction to Challenges	Avoiding them to stay "smart" and avoid looking "dumb."	Embracing them as a way to get stronger.
Effort	Seen as something for people who aren't "naturals."	Seen as the path to mastery.

The Trap of "Person Praise"

When we praise a child's inherent traits—calling them "brilliant," "gifted," or "talented"—we are using **Person Praise**.²

While it feels good in the moment, it creates a fragile foundation. If a child believes they are successful because they are "smart," they will inevitably feel "stupid" the moment

they encounter a problem they cannot solve. To protect their "smart" label, these children often become risk-averse, avoiding difficult tasks where they might fail.³

The Power of "Process Praise"

To foster resilience, we must shift our focus toward **Process Praise**. This involves highlighting the strategy, effort, focus, and perseverance the child used to reach a goal.

Instead of "You're so good at math," try:

- "I can see how hard you practiced those equations!"
- "I love the creative strategy you used to solve that puzzle."
- "You didn't give up even when it got frustrating. That's impressive."

By praising the **process**, we give children a "toolkit" for success.⁴ They learn that their results are within their control, which builds the internal grit necessary to navigate the complexities of adulthood.⁵

Resilience and "The Power of Yet"

The hallmark of a growth mindset is resilience: the ability to bounce back from setbacks.⁶ One of the simplest ways to instill this is through a tiny, three-letter word: **Yet**.

When a child says, "I can't do this," adding "yet" changes the entire narrative.⁷

- "I can't ride a bike... **yet**."
- "I don't understand fractions... **yet**."

This small shift acknowledges the current struggle while maintaining the belief that the "bridge" to success is simply time and practice.

Moving Forward: Changing Our Language

Changing the way we praise is not about lowering standards or participating in "participation trophy" culture. It is about valuing the **journey of learning** over the **ego of achievement**.⁷

When we celebrate the struggle, the strategy, and the sweat, we raise children who aren't afraid to fail. We raise children who see every obstacle as a chance to grow—and that is the ultimate form of resilience.

That is a powerful concluding sentiment. To make that transition from theory to practice more concrete, it helps to see exactly how these linguistic shifts look in daily conversation. The goal is to move away from "evaluative" language (which judges the child) and toward "descriptive" language (which notices the work). Practical Language Swaps for Growth Mindset Instead of saying... Try saying... Why it works "You're a natural at this!" "I noticed how you kept trying different ways until it worked. "It highlights persistence over luck or DNA. "You're so smart, you got an A without even trying." "I'm happy for your grade, but I'm more impressed by your focus. "It discourages the idea that "not trying" is a badge of honor." It's okay, maybe you're just not a 'math person.'" "Math is a skill that takes practice. Which part is confusing right now? "It removes the "label" and focuses on specific obstacles. "I'm so proud of your trophy!" "You must be so proud of how much you've improved since the start. "It shifts the source of pride to the internal self, not external awards. Key Takeaways for "Moving Forward"

Be Specific: Generic praise like "Good job!" is less effective than specific observations like "I see you used a lot of colors in this drawing." Normalize Struggle: Talk about your own mistakes and how you learned from them. This shows children that even adults have a growth mindset. Reward the Strategy: If a child fails but used a great plan, praise the plan. This ensures they don't lose confidence in their ability to strategize.

Practical Language Swaps for Growth Mindset

Instead of saying...	Try saying...	Why it works
"You're a natural at this!"	"I noticed how you kept trying different ways until it worked."	It highlights persistence over luck or DNA.

Instead of saying...	Try saying...	Why it works
"You're so smart, you got an A without even trying."	"I'm happy for your grade, but I'm more impressed by your focus."	It discourages the idea that "not trying" is a badge of honor.
"It's okay, maybe you're just not a 'math person.'"	"Math is a skill that takes practice. Which part is confusing right now?"	It removes the "label" and focuses on specific obstacles .
"I'm so proud of your trophy!"	"You must be so proud of how much you've improved since the start."	It shifts the source of pride to the internal self , not external awards.

To provide a comprehensive view of how these mindsets manifest in the real world, here are the **results** observed in psychological studies and educational settings. These findings highlight the tangible impact that praise has on performance and psychological health.

1. The Landmark "Praise" Study (Dweck & Mueller)

In a pivotal study involving hundreds of fifth-graders, researchers gave students a series of moderately difficult puzzles. Following the first set, students were praised in two different ways:

Intelligence Praise Group ("You're so smart"): When given a choice for their next task, the majority **avoided challenges**. They chose easier puzzles to ensure they kept looking "smart." When they eventually hit a difficult set, their performance plummeted, and their enjoyment of the task vanished.

Effort Praise Group ("You worked so hard"): Over **90% chose a harder task** to learn from. When they faced difficulty, they didn't see it as a failure; they saw it as a sign

to work harder. Remarkably, their final scores increased significantly compared to the "smart" group.

2. Impact on Academic Achievement

Longitudinal studies in schools have shown that students who embrace a growth mindset consistently outperform their fixed-mindset peers, particularly in subjects like Math and Science.

The "Gap" Closure: In low-performing schools, implementing growth mindset interventions has been shown to close achievement gaps.

Correlation with Grades: Students with a growth mindset tend to seek out feedback rather than ignore it, leading to higher GPA trajectories over time.

3. Psychological Resilience & Mental Health

The results extend beyond the classroom into emotional well-being:

Lower Anxiety: Children praised for effort show lower levels of "test anxiety." They view tests as measurements of current progress rather than final judgments of their worth.

Reduced Perfectionism: A growth mindset reduces the "all-or-nothing" thinking associated with perfectionism, which is a major contributor to burnout and depression in teenagers.

Social Resilience: Children with a growth mindset are more likely to view social rejection as a temporary situation they can improve through social skills, rather than a permanent personal flaw.

This is a crucial observation. While we often discuss mindsets in the context of grades or sports, the impact on **Social Resilience** is one of the most transformative aspects of a growth mindset.

When a child experiences social rejection—being left out of a game or not being invited to a party—their mindset determines their internal narrative.

Fixed Mindset Narrative: "They didn't invite me because I'm uncool/boring. I'll always be an outsider." This leads to withdrawal or "defensive aggression" to protect their ego.

Growth Mindset Narrative: "Maybe they didn't see me, or maybe I need to try initiating the conversation next time." This leads to **proactive problem-solving**.

4. Summary of Results by Group

Measure	Children Praised for Intelligence	Children Praised for Effort
Task Choice	Safe/Easy tasks	Challenging tasks
Response to Failure	Discouragement, lying about scores	Increased persistence, strategy shift
Performance Trend	Declines under pressure	Improves with practice
Honesty	High tendency to misrepresent results	High level of accountability

Conclusion

The way we praise children is far more than a simple exchange of pleasantries; it is the construction of an internal compass. By shifting our focus from **traits to effort**, we move away from a culture of fragile perfectionism and toward one of durable competence.

When we prioritize the "Growth Mindset," we provide children with a psychological framework that serves them long after they leave the classroom. They learn that:

- **Intelligence is dynamic**, not a fixed inheritance.
- **Failure is data**, not a definition of their worth.

- **Resilience is a skill** cultivated through the "Power of Yet."

Ultimately, the goal of process-based praise is to foster adults who are unafraid of challenge and secure in their ability to learn. By celebrating the struggle, the strategy, and the sweat, we don't just help children succeed today—we give them the resilience to navigate the complexities of an ever-changing world for a lifetime.

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