

All in the mindset

The work of Carol Dweck tells us that encouraging a particular way of thinking – that talent and intelligence are not ‘fixed’ – can make all the difference to how children learn. *Jan Dubiel* explains

We all want the children we work with to be successful. Although we recognise that each learner is unique, with a unique manner and pace of learning, we know that all children have the potential – indeed the right – to succeed in what they do. We shape our environments, choose our resources, plan activities, teach knowledge and skills and refine our interactions to achieve this.

We know that children develop differently and find some aspects of learning easier than others, and that children can differ enormously in how quickly they develop and secure new skills and knowledge. Sometimes labels are ascribed to this, implicitly or explicitly – in the worst cases, children are described as being of ‘low’, ‘medium’ or ‘high’ ability.

With such labels come assumptions and expectations, often reinforced through the language we use. How often do we use words like ‘clever’, ‘bright’, ‘smart’, ‘intelligent’, ‘gifted’ (or indeed the opposites of these) when thinking about or describing children to other professionals, parents or the children themselves?

Without realising it, our behaviour can often reinforce and create the conditions not for success but for children’s long-term disengagement, loss of self-confidence, and the biggest enemy of learning – the fear of ‘getting it wrong’.

Carol Dweck is a psychologist from Stanford University, California. Her work over the past 40 years has revolutionised thinking about and perceptions of learning and has challenged traditionally held notions of ‘ability’ and ‘intelligence’.

Drawn from extensive psychological research, her work has had a profound influence on all aspects of educational practice, particularly within early years, as so many of our attitudes to our abilities and potential



are formed within this time. By taking on board Dweck’s findings and adapting our practice in the light of her work, we can create infinite possibilities for children’s learning, and their success as lifelong learners.

MINDSET

Central to Dweck’s theory is the idea of ‘mindset’: the way we think about our ‘intelligence’ and ‘ability’ and how this affects the success of our learning.

Dweck argues that there are two kinds of ‘mindset’ – a ‘fixed mindset’ and a ‘growth mindset’. These are not permanent features of our personality or psychology, but are changeable. Indeed, Dweck advocates the importance of learning how to develop a ‘growth mindset’ and discard a ‘fixed’ one.

Embracing challenges makes it easier for children to tackle future obstacles

The power to do this, and so change the way we think about our learning, can have dramatically positive effects for us a lifelong learners. The important message, therefore, is that, like many aspects of learning, our very attitude to learning is something that is ‘learnable’, ‘teachable’ and changeable.

Fixed mindset

A ‘fixed mindset’ is the belief that intelligence, ability and talent are innate – you either have it or you don’t; you are born with it, or without it, and everything you do is a result of this.

Dweck points out that this belief has consequences for people at both ends of the spectrum. If you believe that you are innately bad or lack talent, then each time you experience failure, the experience will reinforce

your belief and justify it, to the point that it becomes a reality.

Conversely, Dweck has observed, people who believe themselves born intelligent or talented are much more likely to give up straightaway when faced with 'obstacles' in their learning, tasks or activities. They tend to avoid any kind of challenge, as this might threaten their view of themselves. Similarly, they perceive effort in a negative way, because if you are innately talented then you don't need to try. Therefore, the logic follows that trying hard at something evidently means that you are not very good at it. Consequently, such people remain in a 'comfort zone' of learning, doing what they know they will be good at, avoiding challenges and refusing to take any risks.

Growth mindset

Dweck contrasts this 'fixed' attitude to learning with a 'growth mindset', which emanates from the belief that intelligence, talent and ability are not 'fixed' but fluid, that they are aspects that can be developed, with effort, application and determination.

People with this attitude take the view that you 'become' skilled or knowledgeable through rehearsing, practising and refining these 'abilities'. Everybody, they would argue, has different 'strengths' and aspects of learning that they find easier or harder, but the right amount of commitment makes anything possible.

Consequently, because they view learning as a 'developmental' process rather than an 'entity' fixed at birth, challenges and 'obstacles' to their learning become opportunities to be embraced.

Embracing challenges also makes it easier for them to tackle future obstacles, because every challenge that they face and overcome establishes new neurological connections in the brain and gives them greater diversity of thought or 'cognitive flexibility'. Each new skill or piece of knowledge provides greater options, an extended well of experiences, and so adds to the process of learning and development. Challenge, difficulties and obstacles, rather than being avoided, therefore need to be actively sought out.

Learners with a 'growth mindset' also view effort in a completely different way. Because they see their 'intelligence' as changeable, and view anything as possible, then they believe that the more effort they

make, the greater the development that will occur.

These people, Dweck has observed, have an ongoing desire to keep improving and developing, learning new skills and acquiring new knowledge, because they see their learning as an infinitely possible 'changeable' process and, consequently, go on to experience higher degrees of success.

'Getting things wrong' doesn't deter them, because they view setbacks as simply something they can't do... yet. A particular skill might take them longer to achieve, and they might find it more difficult than other skills, but they will achieve eventually.

MOTIVATION

Central to changing from a 'fixed' to 'growth' mindset is motivation. Dweck sees this as the most important driver for success; wanting to acquire knowledge or master a skill is dependent on summoning the energy and commitment to keep trying, overcome obstacles, take risks and seeing failure as an opportunity to learn and develop.

However, the type of motivation is crucial. Psychologists have identified two main kinds of motivational drive:



WHAT IS YOUR MINDSET?

Find out your own mindset by completing Carole Dweck's questionnaire at www.mindsetonline.com

MORE INFORMATION

- *Mindset: how you can fulfil your potential* by CS Dweck (2012), Constable & Robinson.
- *Mindset: the new psychology of success* by CS Dweck (2006), Random House.
- *Self-theories: their role in motivation, personality and development* by CS Dweck (1999), Psychology Press.

● **Extrinsic motivation** is an 'external' force that drives the process of doing something for a reward or a specific outcome. For children this could be praise from an adult, being allowed a specific privilege, getting a shiny sticker, and so on. The reason for doing this comes from 'outside' so the behaviour or action is wholly linked to the reward – or sanction – that follows.

● **Intrinsic motivation** is the 'internal' drive for doing something, not because it is expected or that an external reward – or sanction – will be attained. When interest, fascination and self-challenge are apparent in children's activity, it is clear that they are doing something 'for its own sake'. They are unaware of whether it will gain them an award or adult approval.

Many activities and behaviours contain elements of both, of course. Children seek praise from adults that enhances their self-esteem and confidence – also vital aspects that underpin effective learning. But without elements of intrinsic motivation, learning is less likely to be secure because its 'purpose' is an external or superficial one. The reason for doing something would not be learning itself, but simply to achieve an external expectation, reward or result. This is relevant in terms of mindset, because if we are to change children's perception of learning possibilities from fixed to changeable, then their motivation needs to predominantly 'inner' rather than 'outer'.

THE ADULT ROLE

So how does this relate to our role as practitioners? How can we ensure that children develop a 'growth mindset', rather than a 'fixed' one? What do we need to do to ensure that their motivations are 'intrinsic' rather than 'extrinsic'?

As adults, our impact on children is immense, not only in the direct teaching that we do, the carefully considered interactions and the observations that enable us to know and understand them, but also in how our 'behaviours', language and assumptions influence children on a direct and powerful level.

Challenge

Fundamental to the learning process is challenge. The brain develops by thinking and understanding, by ►





NURSERY WORLD SHOW 2015

Professor Ferre Laevers and Jan Dubiel will be presenting a masterclass at the Nursery World Show 2015. The three-hour session, on Saturday 7 February is entitled 'How children learn – delivering and assessing best practice' and forms part of an extensive seminar programme that will run over the two days of the show.

Friday's masterclass on 'Meeting the emotional learning needs of two-year-olds' will be led by Julia Manning-Morton, Penny Tassoni and Alice Sharp. The programme of hour-long seminars covers key aspects of best practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage and speakers include Stella Louis, Kay Mathieson, Vicky Hutchin and Gail Ryder-Richardson. For more information, see www.nurseryworldshow.com.

being moved out of the 'comfort zone' of what is known into the unknown, of acquiring new skills, knowledge and understanding – what Vygotsky described as the 'zone of proximal development'. To achieve this, children need continual challenge, and to learn how to embrace this challenge as something positive and important.

Setting challenges that require 'cognitive stretch' – what is sometimes called 'manageable difficulty' – enables children to take the risk of not succeeding and then adapting their strategies, rehearsing, practising and trying again until they do.

This is the essence of what having a 'growth mindset' enables learners to do. Learning does not develop if children continually find things within their 'comfort level' and, worse still, they become afraid of leaving their comfort zone.

Praise

Equally important to the learning process is how and what we praise

children for. Are we praising them for doing something they are good at, or for showing effort and trying hard – even if they don't initially succeed? Do we focus on how they completed or achieved something that we know they can do or for deliberately taking a risk that moves them out of their comfort zone?

Our approach, of course, will need to be responsive to the individual needs of the child, their particular strengths and areas for development. But what is important is to praise the motivation and effort rather than always focusing on the outcome itself. This sends a powerful message to all the children about what you consider to be important.

Language

Additionally, we need to be acutely aware of the language we use to describe children's learning to children and how this could potentially create a 'fixed' or 'growth' mindset. Rather than reinforcing their 'ability'

in an area or activity, the language we use needs to reflect the 'changeable' nature of 'ability' and the importance of effort, persistence, resilience and risk taking.

During interactions, are we unintentionally promoting a 'fixed mindset' of learning by saying things like:

- 'You are really clever'
- 'I'm really pleased with you for doing that'
- 'You are really good at that'
- 'Well done, you did that perfectly'
- 'Great – you found that easy, didn't you?'

With a subtle shift of emphasis, we cultivate a 'growth mindset' in children and encourage the very behaviours we know will support lifelong learning. For example:

- 'You tried really hard doing that'
- 'You kept going, even when you found it difficult'
- 'You must be very proud of yourself for doing that!'
- 'You tried lots of different things to get there'
- 'That was hard work, wasn't it?'

That means your brain is growing!

Facilitating children's belief that they could be capable of achieving anything if they persevere, embrace challenge, take risks and remain (intrinsically) motivated could be one of the most important 'life skills' that children could acquire in the Early Years Foundation Stage.

By being aware of mindset theory and adapting our interactions with children to enable a 'growth mindset' we will sustain learning and development as a long-term behaviour and enable them to create the infinite possibilities of all kinds of success. ■

Jan Dubiel is national development manager, Early Excellence, www.earlyexcellence.com



It is important to consider how we praise children and what we are praising them for