

# **Faith, Mindset, and Education: Success at Home and in Catholic Schools**

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Mindsets are views people adopt for themselves profoundly affecting their learning and the way they lead their lives. Tapping into this psychology can help us understand what it means to be a beloved child of God. It can also aid in reducing anxiety, perfectionism, and quitting in our children. Building a Growth Mindset helps kids increase learning, develop fortitude, and stretch themselves to become the people God created them to be. This Community Information Night will focus on understanding and applying Mindset while connecting it our Catholic faith.

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*"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."*

Romans 5:1-5

## **PART I - Defining Mindset**

*Mindset* is clear and easy-to-understand psychology that helps us better understand ourselves and today's children.

*"For 20 years, Dweck's research has shown that the view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life" (Dweck 6).*

### **Fixed - An Introduction**

*"Fixed Mindset: The belief that we're born with a fixed amount of intelligence and ability. People operating in the fixed mindset are prone to avoid challenges and failures, thereby robbing themselves of a life rich in experience and learning" (Brock 1).*

*People with a **Fixed Mindset**:*

- Believe their qualities are carved in stone.
- Believe their intelligence, personality, moral character are limited
- Believe that talent alone creates success – usually without effort.
- Create urgency to prove themselves over and over again
- Resort to quitting or cheating instead of facing adversity or challenge
- Learn these behaviors at an early age

### **Growth - An Introduction**

*"Growth Mindset: The belief that with practice, perseverance, and effort people have limitless potential to learn and grow. People operating in the growth mindset tackle challenges with aplomb, unconcerned with making mistakes or being embarrassed, focusing instead on the process of growth" (Brock 1).*

*People with a **Growth Mindset**:*

- Believe their basic qualities are things they can cultivate through effort
- Believe initial talents, aptitudes, interests, or temperaments can change and grow
- Believe that talent is a starting point, but effort ultimately leads to success
- Are open to accurate information about their abilities, even if it is unflattering; they actually *need* that information to learn effectively.
- Enjoy challenge
- Persevere through setbacks

## **SUCCESS according to the Mindsets**

*People with the **Fixed Mindset** believe they have succeeded when they:*

- don't make mistakes
- finish fast and perfect
- find something easy that is hard for others
- feel special or superior; the scariest thought is being ordinary

*People with the **Growth Mindset** believe they have succeeded when they:*

- try really hard, never give up, and eventually figure it out
- do something they couldn't do before
- give and receive support from the whole learning community.

## **EFFORT according to the Mindsets**

*People with the **Fixed Mindset** believe effort:*

- Takes too long; the tortoise is not that appealing
- Is only for people with deficiencies
- Is risky
- Is terrifying because it means you are not good at something
- Should be avoided

*People with the **Growth Mindset** believe effort:*

- Is the admired quality in a story of success
- Can ignite one's ability
- Becomes just as satisfying as success
- Counts twice as much as talent or skill in the equation for achievement

## **CHALLENGE according to the Mindsets** (including *struggle, obstacles, failure, and hardships*)

*In the **Fixed Mindset**, challenges:*

- Appear to be a permanent
- Sometimes lead to cheating
- Are only manageable if someone else did worse than you did
- Are often avoided or lead to quitting
- Decrease brain activity
- Can lead to problems such as depression

*In the **Growth Mindset**, challenges:*

- Make you engage deeper
- Make you want to improve
- Are part of the learning process
- Increase brain activity
- Can lead to feelings of triumph

## **OUR CATHOLIC FAITH according to the Mindsets**

*How does your faith look with a Fixed Mindset?*

- Imperfection (our sin) is failure.
- Reconciliation is scary or avoided because I have to admit my shortcomings.
- I measure my lack-of-Catholic-ness compared to others.
- I avoid or feel uncomfortable talking about my faith.
- I struggle with pride.

*How does your faith look with a Growth Mindset?*

- Jesus loves my imperfections; they are opportunities for God's work.
- Reconciliation is the source of Grace I need to become who I was made to be.
- I look to grow from the Catholic-ness of others.
- I want to share my faith journey with others.
- I practice humility.

No matter our mindset, we need to remind our children what we, as Catholics, believe: they are children of God. He has a plan for their lives and created them for a purpose. That purpose is about *who* they become, not just *what* they do or *what* they achieve. Progressively more of our students are concerned about what they achieve rather than who they are becoming.

Also, our mindsets, although powerful, are a puff compared to the power of God. As we will see in the Part II, when we shift our focus away from ourselves, and we begin to focus on God, all things are possible.

There is good news in all of this: we can control our mindsets, but it takes practice and dedication. Parents should also know that their children will follow them, especially in matters of mindset.

*"You have a choice. Mindsets are just beliefs. They're powerful beliefs, but they're just something in your mind, and you can change your mind" (Dweck 16).*

## **PART II - Using Mindset**

*Mindset* is a foundation to make decisions as people who work with today's children.

*"As parents, teachers, and coaches, our mission is developing people's potential. Let's use all the lessons of the growth mindset – and whatever else we can – to do this" (Dweck 212)*

### **STRATEGY 1 - Talk with your kids about the Mindsets**

*"Research has shown that teaching students the concept of growth mindset can have positive implications on student achievement [...] In fact, researchers have begun to see results with as little as one forty-five-minute lesson on brain development" (Brock 28).*

1. **Read Mindset Books.** Start with Dweck's *Mindset: The Psychology of Success*, then see the "Works Cited" at the end of this packet for a list for related books. The more you read *Mindset* related books, the more Growth Mindset decisions become automatic. You will develop a "feel" for the Growth Mindset in your interactions with your children.
2. **Use Mindset Websites.** There are endless online resources for learning about *Mindset*. These include the Project for Education Research that Scales (PERTS), [midsetkit.org](http://midsetkit.org), and Khan Academy. You can find fantastic *Mindset* videos on YouTube.
3. **Use Children's Literature** to convey Mindset. See your school's librarian or counseling psychologist for suggestions. Some of my favorite include *The Girl Who Never Made Mistakes* by Pett, *Your Fantastic Elastic Brain* by Deak, *Beautiful Oops!* by Saltzberg, and *Not Yet* by Cox.

### **STRATEGY 2 - After you embrace a Growth Mindset, show your value of challenge, effort and GRIT.**

1. **"The Hard Thing Rule"** (Duckworth). Everyone in your family picks something hard to do – something that interests them, but will stretch them. Discuss your journey as a family often. You can only quit at a "natural stopping point."
2. **Model Mistake Making.** If we expect our children to value struggle and mistakes in the learning process, then we need to model how we deal with them. We don't lead perfect lives, so we should not expect that from our children.
3. **Believe in the "Power of YET!"** *"The very best opportunities to learn come about when students believe in themselves" (Boaler 5).*

## **STRATEGY 3 - Maintain a Growth Mindset view of school.**

1. **Growth Mindset accelerates learning!** Recent biological studies have shown that our brains have more plasticity and that our brains grow more than previously realized. This can be empowering to young people.

*"It used to be believed that the brains people were born with couldn't really be changed, but this idea has now been resoundingly disproved. Study after study has shown the incredible capacity of brains to grow and change within a really short period" (Boaler 1).*

2. **It's ok that struggles and mistakes are part of learning.** If we have a Growth Mindset, then being challenged is actually a good thing! Not everything in school should come easy. So, give your kids room to breathe. They don't need to be perfect. Help them maintain a healthy perspective; it will help your children more in the long run.

**As a teacher's aside:** *"We want students to make mistakes, yet many [American] classrooms are designed to give students work that they will get correct." (Boaler 13)*

*"Many educators think that lowering their standards will give students success experiences, boost their self-esteem, and raise their achievement. It comes from the same philosophy as the overpraising of students' intelligence. Well, it doesn't work. Lowering standards just leads to poorly educated students who feel entitled to easy work and lavish praise" (Dweck 193).*

*"...for the vast majority of children – about 95% -- any levels of school math are within their reach[...] Some teachers find the idea that anyone can learn math to high levels difficult to accept, especially if they have spent many years deciding who can and who can't do math and teaching them accordingly" (Boaler 4).*

3. **Deemphasize Grades.** *"Cognitive research done by Dr. Amit Sood (2013) at the Mayo Clinic brings another perspective [...] The brain likely perceives bad grades as a threat. Grades, then may create a dynamic where students overestimate the severity of the grade("I am a failure...") and underestimate their ability to get any better ("I'll always be a failure...")" (UST 81).*

Focusing on grades feeds the damaging Fixed Mindset. Research shows that students focused on growth outperform those focused on results in the long run. Our priority as parents and teachers is to grow and develop our children, not constantly judge and evaluate them. When we focus on results such as grades, our children view it as judgment and usually break.

4. **Balance high expectations with unflagging support.** Your expectations for your children should focus on effort and skill, not ability and results. But expectations alone are not enough; our children need to know they have our unflagging support.

## **STRATEGY 4 - Use Growth Mindset focused Feedback and Praise**

*"In fact, every word and action can send a message. It tells children—or students, or athletes – how to think about themselves. It can be a fixed-mindset message that says: You have permanent traits and I'm judging them. Or it can be a growth-mindset message that says: You are a developing person and I am interested in your development" (Dweck 173).*

If you are like most teachers and parents (and even grandparents) I know, the praise you give kids is *intended* to be supportive, to encourage confidence and achievement, and to boost esteem. However, after *"seven experiments with hundreds of children, [Dweck and her team] had some of the clearest findings she'd ever seen: Praising children's intelligence harms their motivation and it harms their performance"* (Dweck 175).

We need to stop praising  
*intelligence,*  
*talent,*  
*speed,*  
*and perfection.*

These types of praise lead children to doubt themselves as soon as things get tough.

Instead we need to praise  
*effort,*  
*strategies,*  
*focus,*  
*perseverance,*  
*improvement,*  
*and risk-taking.*

*"One reason so many students in the United States have fixed mindsets is the praise they are given by parents and teachers. When student are given fixed praise – for example, being told they are smart when they do something well – they may feel good at first, but then they fail later (and everyone does) they think that means they are not so smart after all" (Boaler 7).*

*"If parents want to give their children a gift, the best thing they can do is teach their children to love challenges, be intrigued by mistakes, enjoy effort, and keep on learning. That way, their children don't have to be slaves of praise. They will have a lifelong way to build and repair their own confidence" (Dweck 177).*

## **STRATEGY 5 - Use a Growth Mindset in Your Faith Life and the Faith Life of Your Children**

Growth Mindset is a relatively new concept in the field of psychology. The establishment of our Church predates the concept of Dweck's *Mindset* by a couple thousand years. However, the psychology of Growth Mindset can help us grow as Christians in our spiritual journey on the road to holiness.

1. **Have belief in more than just yourself.** Jo Boaler's research tells us, "*The very best opportunities to learn come about when students believe in themselves*" (Boaler 5). We know that "belief in ourselves" is a good start. But as Catholics, we also know that it is not enough. If we have a Growth Mindset about God's work in us, then we understand that God can elevate us to do more than we could naturally on our own. Our lives are *not* fixed. We don't know the floor or ceiling of our capabilities. Only God knows what we are capable of. Thus, we walk humbly with God.

*"Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generation for ever and ever, Amen"* (Ephesians 4:20-21).

*"I can do all things in him who strengthens me"* (Philippians 4:13).

*"For with God nothing will be impossible"* (Luke 1:37).

2. **Understand that we will always be a work in progress.** Someday God will be finished developing us, and all will be well. In the meantime, our lives on earth will always be works in progress. God has started something good; he wants us to look to him for strength and encouragement to keep striving.

*"And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ"* (Philippians 1:6).

*"By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace to me was not in vain. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me"* (1 Corinthians 15:10).



3. **Demystify Reconciliation.** When God sees a mistake, he pours in more. He sees mistakes as an opportunity to act. Make confession a central and regular part of your faith life if it's not already, and talk about your experiences with your children. Make it authentic and accessible for them. They need examples of people who know God loves each of us as His children who are learning, growing, and making mistakes...and that's how we love our kids! You are trying to love them like God loves us.

*"Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 5:20).*

*"...but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10)*

4. **Share stories of Growth Mindset from Scripture.**

- Mark 9:14-27 – Jesus heals the boy with a mute spirit, and the father of the child cries out, "I believe, help me with my unbelief."
- Numbers 13-14 – Joshua and Caleb saw possibilities when 12 other spies saw only giant roadblocks.
- 1 Samuel 17 – David saw an opponent too big to miss, while everyone else saw one too bit to hit.
- Luke 15:11-32 – No matter the extent of the Prodigal Son's mistakes, "the father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him." So it is with our Heavenly Father.

5. **Set your table for the Theological Virtues of FAITH and HOPE.** Growth Mindset (Dweck) and GRIT (Duckworth) are significant tools the secular world has identified through extensive research, and these secular tools are hints of what God offers us in the theological virtues of faith and hope. The Theological Virtues of faith, hope, and love are given to us through Christ at the moment of baptism, and they raise us above our natural potential, giving us God's own life within us. Having the attitudes and dispositions Dweck and Duckworth describe help lay a foundation upon which God can give us His greatest gifts, in particular faith and hope.

*"Faith is when you hold something to be true based on the testimony of God. With this theological virtue, God tells the person to something he couldn't have known on his own, and that person makes the decision to accept what God says as accurate. Faith is therefore the virtue that enables us to add heavenly information to our knowledge – we can know what God knows – and this information radically changes our lives" (Miravalle 67).*

*"Hope helps us desire God as our ultimate happiness, and we are able to pursue union with Him before all else [...] Hope is the virtue whereby the individual strives for Heaven as something which is possible, but not yet guaranteed" (Miravalle 64, 73).*

*"Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayers" (Romans 12:12).*

## **Works Cited**

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