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You Can't Learn If You're Anxious, Stressed, or Scared

No child can succeed at school if he believes he is less smart or less capable than his peers. Follow these strategies to change your child's mindset and to promote his self-esteem. Together, they can unlock a lifetime of more positive learning.

By Cindy Goldrich

But You're So Smart!

No matter how often you tell your child how smart and wonderful she is, she still gets stuck on easy problems or refuses to try new things. This is common among ADHD families; I often find loving, well-meaning parents (and teachers) who try to motivate children with ADHD by telling them, "Come on, you can do this. You're so smart!" But this doesn't seem to be working, and they're confused. They ask: "Why isn't this encouragement inspiring my child? What else can I do?"

Where's the Motivation?

In order to get to the bottom of this, we need to understand why children — particularly those with ADHD — sometimes lack motivation, avoid a challenge, or break down when things get hard. Why does your child react to a broken pencil like it's the end of the world — or at least the end of homework time? The answer is simple: Before learning can happen, you must believe you have the ability to learn. Children with ADHD don't often believe this, and that explains their response to challenges.

What the Science Says

To study the mindset-learning connection, a researcher named Carol Dweck worked with 7th grade students. She asked them to complete puzzles — away from peers, so they weren't afraid of looking foolish. To half the students, she said, "You must be smart at this." When the other half finished, she said, "You must have worked really hard." Then she gave both groups more challenging puzzles. With each new puzzle, she asked the students if they wanted to do a more difficult puzzle or if they wanted to do another easy one.

The Results

What happened? The first group — the ones who were praised for being smart — showed lower and lower levels of confidence as the puzzles became more difficult, and their performance dropped dramatically. They also became more risk averse; even if they successfully completed a puzzle, they hesitated to move on to a more challenging one.

They started to give up, because they had convinced themselves, "If I can do it, I'm smart. Therefore, if I can't do it, I'm not smart. Therefore, what's the point?"

Praising for Effort

On the other hand, the children praised for working hard did not focus solely on results or on "looking smart;" they focused on learning the task. With each more challenging puzzle, their level of confidence, motivation, and performance actually increased. Why? They believed in their ability to work hard so they kept trying, and when they were given a choice between an easy puzzle and a harder one, they were willing to take a risk and pick the latter without risking a blow to their "intelligence."

Mindset Matters

Dweck's work shows us the impact of a fixed mindset vs. a growth mindset. In a fixed mindset, you believe that success is based on fixed, unchangeable traits and abilities. In other words, you think that some people are smart, and others simply aren't. When you have a growth mindset, you believe intelligence and expertise can be developed through effort and instruction. You have a desire to learn, and you recognize that effort — *combined* with effective strategies and support — is the way to get to mastery.

Mindsets in Action

Children with fixed mindsets tell themselves, "I can't do this. I give up. I'm never going to succeed." They view criticism as judgment, and the success of others can actually feel threatening: "That kid got a 90 on a test and I got a 70. He must think he's so smart—and he must think I'm *not* smart."

A child with a growth mindset, on the other hand, tends to look back on past successes when she's struggling, and to talk to herself positively. She views others' success as potential lessons: "You got a 90 and I got a 70. How? What strategies did you use?"

Changing Mindset

How can you impact your child's mindset? First, **teach your child how learning happens**, because this often isn't something that kids understand or that's taught in school. Second, **create a growth culture mindset at home**, by applying lessons of positive self-talk, strategy exploration, and rewarding effort to your own actions. Finally, **help kids believe that they can learn**, by applying some of the strategies in the following slides.

Explain the Brain

Teach kids how learning happens by giving them a basic overview of the brain. Find a simple picture of the brain's different regions, and explain how the prefrontal cortex controls executive functions like planning, organizing, and self-talk. Then, give a quick overview of the hippocampus, in the middle of the brain, where memories are stored. Tell your child, "You want to send information to the center of your brain, so it can stay put for a long time." End with a look at the amygdala, which deals in emotions and helps us connect feelings together as we learn.

Failure is Data

Teach your kids the concept of neuroplasticity, which means our brains change physically as we learn new things. Every time you learn something new, your brain forms new connections; in other words, the more you use it — even if you don't grasp a concept yet or if you fail at something — the stronger your brain becomes. Failure is data; it helps you figure out what you need to learn, and what strategies you could use to help you perform. When children learn from their mistakes and don't give up, they have a higher rate of success.

How to Praise

"Emphasizing effort gives a child a variable that they can control," said Dweck. "They come to see themselves as in control of their success." So how can we recognize and reward effort — without letting our kids fall back into a fixed mindset? The key is sharing the right kind of praise a lot and with impact. It's not enough to just say, "Good job." We need to **notice**, **name**, and **nourish**.

The 3 Ns

Notice, name, and nourish your child:

- **Notice** when your child does something positive.
- **Name** what you notice to your child, and explain the value in what you see.
- **Nourish** your child with warmth. The tone of your voice conveys as much or more than the words, so make sure

you sound sincere. Here's an example: "Jared, I see you working very hard at that math problem. I noticed that you tried a few times without quitting. That shows me that you don't give up easily—good for you!"

Real-World Strategies

I recommend playing games with your children, particularly games that aren't win or lose. I'm partial to toothpick puzzles, which you can find online with some simple searches. You can also try word puzzles or open-ended games like Jenga. As you play with your kids, talk to them: Ask them what strategies they're using, and what they've learned about overcoming obstacles or moving past frustration. If they think about these things in low-pressure situations, they'll know how to deal with real-world events that throw them for a loop.

Helping Teens

These strategies work best with younger kids, who will speak frankly with their parents about what they're thinking and feeling. Teenagers can be a little trickier. At this age, they're gravitating away from parents and toward peers, and you may feel like there's a widening gap between you and your kid. If this sounds like you, try reminding your child of past growth experiences when he gets frustrated.

Helping Teens, Continued

Try something like: "I know this seems hard now, Rob, but remember when you were worried you wouldn't be able to finish that charity bike ride? You worked extra hard with your coach and focused on getting through each individual mile, and you finished all 35! Think you can apply any of that to this situation?" He won't feel like you're speaking down to him, and he'll see that he has the strategies already; he just needs to reimagine how he can apply them.

Stress = No Learning!

"How can I help my child when he gets 'stuck'? What do I do when he just gives up and shuts down?" When I get this question, I remind parents that when the brain is overwhelmed with stress, it goes into "fight or flight" mode. For many kids, particularly those with ADHD, "flight" generally means "freeze" — they shut down completely and their brains won't learn. When too much stress happens, learning can't take place, so it's important for parents to recognize when children need to be comforted or left alone — not expected to continue with their work.

Recognizing Teachable Moments

After your child has calmed down, revisit the incident to teach her how to do better in the future. Try something like, "I noticed yesterday that you got stuck. It was really hard for you, right? You're probably going to face difficult problems like that again. Let's talk about what you can do next time. What are some ways I could help you, or what strategies could you use next time to get past that tough spot?"