



ASK DR. DANA

Q. Why does it seem like many children I know who excel in elementary school do not excel when they get to Middle and High School?

A. While there could be many reasons for some children's decline in success as they transition to Middle and High School, one theory in particular rings true for me. A Psychology professor at Stanford University, Dr. Carol Dweck has tested her theory that students who believe they were born with all the smarts they're ever going to have approach life with what she calls a "fixed mind-set." In contrast, those who believe that their own abilities can expand over time, approach life with a "growth mind-set."

Dr. Dweck's extensive research suggests that the students who believed that intelligence and ability can grow (i.e., seeing the brain as a muscle that can be strengthened and understanding that neurons in the brain continue to make new connections) received higher grades than those who believed that intelligence is a fixed trait. Students with a fixed mindset believe that if you have to work hard it means that you don't have the ability, and that you are just not smart enough. These kids are more likely to give up when they make mistakes and face challenges, believing they just don't have what it takes to be successful.

This research drives one of Dr. Dweck's main messages to parents, "If you really want smart kids, start by not telling them they're smart". Instead, praise their effort. Students who believe that the harder they work, the better their grades will be are more likely to persist, and therefore succeed, in the face of difficulties.

The idea of a growth mindset motivates teacher, parents, and students to hold a more optimistic, elastic attitude toward learning and intelligence.

My take away—praise specific instances in which your child demonstrates tenacity. Being smart will only get him/her so far.