

# Scenarios You May Experience

and

How Understanding Mindsets Can Help Guide Your  
Responses to Such Situations

Excerpts from

*Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*

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- **The Precocious Fixed Mindsetter (pages 228 – 230)**
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## Possible Scenarios You May Experience

### **The Precocious Fixed Mindsetter (p. 228 – 230)**

Imagine your young son comes home from school one day and says to you, “Some kids are smart and some kids are dumb. They have a worse brain.” He talks often about all the things he can do and other children can’t.

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### **Effort Gone Awry (p.230 – 232)**

Sometimes the problem with a child isn’t too little effort. It’s too much. We’ve all heard about schoolchildren who stay up past midnight every night studying.

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### **The Low-Effort Syndrome (p. 58 – 59) and Students Who Don’t Care (p. 193 – 194)**

What about students who won’t work, who don’t care to learn? This low-effort syndrome is often seen as a way that adolescents assert their independence from adults, but it is also a way that students with the fixed mindset protect themselves.

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### **Messages About Failure (p. 174 – 175)**

A student enters a competition, puts in her best effort, and doesn’t win? What do you say to her?

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# Changing Your Child's Mindset

From, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, pages 228 – 232

Many of our children, our most precious resource, are stuck in a fixed mindset. You can give them a personal Brainology workshop. Let's look at some ways to do this.

## *The Precocious Fixed Mindsetter*

Most kids who adopt a fixed mindset don't become truly passionate believers until later in childhood. But some kids take to it much earlier.

**The Dilemma:** Imagine your young son comes home from school one day and says to you, "Some kids are smart and some kids are dumb. They have a worse brain." You're appalled. "Who told you that?" you ask him, gearing up to complain to the school. "I figured it out myself," he says proudly. He saw that some children could read and write their letters and add a lot of numbers, and others couldn't. He drew his conclusion. And he held fast to it.

Your son is precocious in all aspects of the fixed mindset, and soon the mindset is in full flower. He develops a distaste for effort—he wants his smart brain to churn things out quickly for him. And it often does.

When he takes to chess very quickly, your spouse, thinking to inspire him, rents the movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer*; a film about a young chess champion. What your son learns from the film is that you could lose and not be a champion anymore. So he retires. "I'm a chess champion," he announces to one and all. A champion who won't play.

Because he now understands what losing means, he takes further steps to avoid it. He starts cheating at Candy Land, Chutes and Ladders, and other games.

He talks often about all the things he can do and other children can't. When you and your spouse tell him that other children aren't dumb, they just haven't practiced as much as he has, he refuses to believe it. He watches things carefully at school and then comes home and reports, "Even when the teacher shows us something new, I can do it better than them. I don't have to practice."

This boy is invested in his brain—not in making it grow but in singing its praises. You've already told him that it's about practice and learning, not smart and dumb, but he doesn't buy it. What else can you do? What are other ways you can get the message across?

**The Growth-Mindset Step:** You decide that, rather than trying to talk him out of the fixed mindset, you have to live the growth mindset. At the dinner table each evening, you and your partner structure the discussion around the growth mindset, asking each child (and each other): "What did you learn today?" "What mistake did you make that taught you something?" "What did you try hard at today?" You go around the table with each question, excitedly discussing your own and one another's effort, strategies, setbacks, and learning.

You talk about skills you have today that you didn't have yesterday because of the practice you put in. You dramatize mistakes you made that held the key to the solution, telling it like a mystery story. You describe with relish things you're struggling with and making progress on. Soon the children can't wait each night to tell their stories. "Oh my goodness," you say with wonder, "you certainly did get smarter today!"

When your fixed-mindset son tells stories about doing things better than other children, everyone says, "Yeah, but what did you learn?" When he talks about how easy everything is for him in school, you all say, "Oh, that's too bad. You're not learning. Can you find something harder to do so you could learn more?" When he boasts about being a champ, you say, "Champs are the people who work the hardest. You can *become* a champ. Tomorrow tell me something you've done to become a champ." Poor kid, it's a conspiracy. In the long run, he doesn't stand a chance.

When he does his homework and calls it easy or boring, you teach him to find ways to make it more fun and challenging. If he has to write words, like boy, you ask him, "How many words can you think of that rhyme with boy? Write them on separate paper and later we can try to make a sentence that has all the words." When he finishes his homework, you play that game: "The boy threw the toy into the soy sauce." "The girl with the curl ate a pearl." Eventually, he starts coming up with his own ways to make his homework more challenging.

And it's not just school or sports. You encourage the children to talk about ways they learned to make friends, or ways they're learning to understand and help others. You want to communicate that feats of intellect or physical prowess are not all you care about.

For a long time, your son remains attracted to the fixed mindset. He loves the idea that he's inherently special—case closed. He doesn't love the idea that he has to work every day for some little gain in skill or knowledge. Stardom shouldn't be so taxing. Yet as the value system in the family shifts toward the growth mindset, he wants to be a player. So at first he talks the talk (squawking), then he walks the walk (balking). Finally, going all the way, he becomes the mindset watchdog. When anyone in the family slips into fixed-mindset thinking, he delights in catching them. "Be careful what you wish for," you joke to your spouse.

The fixed mindset is so very tempting. It seems to promise children a lifetime of worth, success, and admiration just for sitting there and being who they are. That's why it can take a lot of work to make the growth mindset flourish where the fixed mindset has taken root.

### ***Effort Gone Awry***

Sometimes the problem with a child isn't too *little* effort. It's too *much*. And for the wrong cause. We've all heard about schoolchildren who stay up past midnight every night studying. Or children who are sent to tutors so they can outstrip their classmates. These children are working hard, but they're typically not in a growth mindset. They're not focused on love of learning. They're usually trying to prove themselves to their parents.

And in some cases, the parents may like what comes out of this high effort: the grades, the awards, the admission to top schools. Let's see how you would handle this one.

**The Dilemma:** You're proud of your daughter. She's at the top of her class and bringing home straight A's. She's a flute player studying with the best teacher in the country. And you're confident she'll get into the top private high school in the city. But every morning before school, she gets an upset stomach, and some days she throws up. You keep feeding her a blander and blander diet to soothe her sensitive stomach, but it doesn't help. It never occurs to you that she's a nervous wreck.

When your daughter is diagnosed with an ulcer, it should be a wake-up call, but you and your spouse remain asleep. You continue to see it as a gastrointestinal issue. The doctor, however, insists that you consult a family counselor. He tells you it's a mandatory part of your daughter's treatment and hands you a card with the counselor's name and number.

**The Fixed-Mindset Reactions:** The counselor tells you to ease up on your daughter: Let her know it's okay not to work so hard. Make sure she gets more sleep. So you, dutifully following the instructions, make sure she gets to sleep by ten o'clock each night. But this only makes things worse. She now has less time to accomplish all the things that are expected of her.

Despite what the counselor has said, it doesn't occur to you that she could possibly want your daughter to fall behind other students. Or be less accomplished at the flute. Or risk not getting into the top high school. How could that be good for her?

The counselor realizes she has a big job. Her first goal is to get you more fully in touch with the seriousness of the problem. The second goal is to get you to understand your role in the problem. You and your spouse need to see that it's your need for perfection that has led to the problem. Your daughter wouldn't have run herself ragged if she hadn't been afraid of losing your approval. The third goal is to work out a concrete plan that you can all follow.

Can you think of some concrete things that can be done to help your daughter enter a growth mindset so she can ease up and get some pleasure from her life?

**The Growth-Mindset Step:** The plan the counselor suggests would allow your daughter to start enjoying the things she does. The flute lessons are put on hold. Your daughter is told she can practice as much or as little as she wants for the pure joy of the music and nothing else.

She is to study her school materials to learn from them, not to cram everything possible into her head. The counselor refers her to a tutor who teaches her how to study for understanding. The tutor also discusses the material with her in a way that makes it interesting and enjoyable. Studying now has a new meaning. It isn't about getting the highest grade to prove her intelligence and worth to her parents. It's about learning things and thinking about them in interesting ways.

Your daughter's teachers are brought into the loop to support her in her reorientation toward growth. They're asked to talk to her about (and praise her for) her learning process rather than how she did on tests. ("I can see that you really understand how to use metaphors in your writing." "I can see that you were really into your project on the Incas. When I read it, I felt as though I were in ancient Peru.") You are taught to talk to her this way too.

Finally, the counselor strongly urges that your daughter attend a high school that is less pressured than the one you have your eye on. There are other fine schools that focus more on learning and less on grades and test scores. You take your daughter around and spend time in each of the schools. Then she discusses with you and the counselor which ones she was most excited about and felt most at ease in.

Slowly, you learn to separate your needs and desires from hers. You may have needed a daughter who was number one in everything, but your daughter needed something else: acceptance from her parents and freedom to grow. As you let go, your daughter becomes much more genuinely involved in the things she does. She does them for interest and learning, and she does them very well indeed.

Is your child trying to tell you something you don't want to hear? You know the ad that asks, "Do you know where your child is now?" If you can't hear what your child is trying to tell you—in words or actions—then you don't know where your child is. Enter the growth mindset and listen harder.

## **The Low-Effort Syndrome**

From, *MindSet: The New Psychology of Success*, pages 58 – 59

Our students with the fixed mindset who were facing the hard transition [from elementary to junior high school] saw it as a threat. It threatened to unmask their flaws and turn them from winners into losers. In fact, in the fixed mindset, adolescence is one big test. *Am I smart or dumb? Am I good-looking or ugly? Am I cool or nerdy? Am I a winner or a loser?* And in the fixed mindset, a loser is forever.

It's no wonder that many adolescents mobilize their resources, not for learning, but to protect their egos. And one of the main ways they do this (aside from providing vivid portraits of their teachers) is by not trying. This is when some of the brightest students, just like Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, simply stop working. In fact, students with the fixed mind- set tell us that their main goal in school—aside from looking smart—is to exert as little effort as possible. They heartily agree with statements like this:

"In school my main goal is to do things as easily as possible so I don't have to work very hard."

This low-effort syndrome is often seen as a way that adolescents assert their independence from adults, but it is also a way that students with the fixed mindset protect themselves. They view the adults as saying, "Now we will measure you and see what you've got." And they are answering, "No you won't."

John Holt, the great educator, says that these are the games all human beings play when others are sitting in judgment of them. "The worst student we had, the worst I have ever encountered, was in his life outside the classroom as mature, intelligent, and interesting a person as anyone at the school. What went wrong? ... Somewhere along the line, his intelligence became disconnected from his schooling."

For students with the growth mindset, it doesn't make sense to stop trying. For them, adolescence is a time of opportunity: a time to learn new subjects, a time to find out what they like and what they want to become in the future.

Later, I'll describe the project in which we taught junior high students the growth mindset. What I want to tell you now is how teaching them this mindset unleashed their effort. One day, we were introducing the growth mindset to a new group of students. All at once Jimmy—the most hard-core turned-off low-effort kid in the group—looked up with tears in his eyes and said, "You mean I don't have to be dumb?" From that day on, he worked. He started staying up late to do his homework, which he never used to bother with at all. He started handing in assignments early so he could get feedback and revise them. He now believed that working hard was not something that made you vulnerable, but something that made you smarter.

## Students Who Don't Care

From, *MindSet: The New Psychology of Success*, pages 193 – 194

What about students who won't work, who don't care to learn? Here is a shortened version of an interaction between [Chicago teacher Marva] Collins and Gary, a student who refused to work, ripped up his homework assignments, and would not participate in class. Collins is trying to get him to go to the blackboard to do some problems:

COLLINS: Sweetheart, what are you going to do? Use your life or throw it away?

GARY: I'm not gonna do any damn work.

COLLINS: I am not going to give up on you. I am not going to let r you give up on yourself. If you sit there leaning against this wall allday, you are going to end up leaning on something or someone all your life. And all that brilliance bottled up inside you will go to waste.

At that, Gary agreed to go to the board, but then refused to address the work there. After a while Collins said:

“If you do not want to participate, go to the telephone and tell your mother, ‘Mother, in this school we have to learn, and Mrs. Collins says I can’t fool around, so will you please pick me up.’ “

Gary started writing. Eventually, Gary became an eager participant and an avid writer. Later that year, the class was discussing Macbeth and how his misguided thinking led him to commit murder. “It’s sort of like Socrates says, isn’t it, Miss Collins?” Gary piped up. “Macbeth should have known that ‘Straight thinking leads to straight living.’” For a class assignment, he wrote, “Somnus, god of sleep, please awaken us. While we sleep, ignorance takes over the world. ... Take your spell off us. We don’t have long before ignorance makes a coup d’état of the world.”

When teachers are judging them, students will sabotage the teacher by not trying. But when students understand that school is for them—a way for them to grow their minds—they do not insist on sabotaging themselves.

In my work, I have seen tough guys shed tears when they realize they can become smarter. It’s common for students to turn off to school and adopt an air of indifference, but we make a mistake if we think any student stops caring.

## Messages About Failure

From, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, pages 174 – 176

Praising success should be the least of our problems, right? Failure seems like a much more delicate matter. Children may already feel discouraged and vulnerable. Let’s tune in again, this time to the messages parents can send in times of failure.

Nine-year-old Elizabeth was on her way to her first gymnastics meet. Lanky, flexible, and energetic, she was just right for gymnastics, and she loved it. Of course, she was a little nervous about competing, but she was good at gymnastics and felt confident of doing well. She had even thought about the perfect place in her room to hang the ribbon she would win.

In the first event, the floor exercises, Elizabeth went first. Although she did a nice job, the scoring changed after the first few girls and she lost. Elizabeth also did well in the other events, but not well enough to win. By the end of the evening, she had received no ribbons and was devastated.

What would you do if you were Elizabeth’s parents?

1. Tell Elizabeth *you* thought she was the best.
2. Tell her she was robbed of a ribbon that was rightfully hers.
3. Reassure her that gymnastics is not that important.
4. Tell her she has the ability and will surely win next time.
5. Tell her she didn’t deserve to win.

There is a strong message in our society about how to boost children’s self-esteem, and a main part of that message is: *Protect them from failure!* While this may help with the immediate problem of a child’s disappointment, it can be harmful in the long run. Why?

Let's look at the five possible reactions from a mindset point of view —and listen to the messages:

The first (*you* thought she was the best) is basically insincere. She was not the best —you know it, and she does, too. This offers her no recipe for how to recover or how to improve.

The second (she was robbed) places blame on others, when in fact the problem was mostly with her performance, not the judges. Do you want her to grow up blaming others for her deficiencies?

The third (reassure her that gymnastics doesn't really matter) teaches her to devalue something if she doesn't do well in it right away. Is this really the message you want to send?

The fourth (she has the ability) may be the most dangerous message of all. Does ability automatically take you where you want to go? If Elizabeth didn't win this meet, why should she win the next one?

The last option (tell her she didn't deserve to win) seems hardhearted under the circumstances. And of course you wouldn't say it quite that way. But that's pretty much what her growth-minded father told her.

Here's what he actually said: "Elizabeth, I know how you feel. It's so disappointing to have your hopes up and to perform your best but not to win. But you know, you haven't really earned it yet. There were many girls there who've been in gymnastics longer than you and who've worked a lot harder than you. If this is something you really want, then it's something you'll really have to work for."

He also let Elizabeth know that if she wanted to do gymnastics purely for fun, that was just fine. But if she wanted to excel in the competitions, more was required.

Elizabeth took this to heart, spending much more time repeating and perfecting her routines, especially the ones she was weakest in. At the next meet, there were eighty girls from all over the region. Elizabeth won five ribbons for the individual events and was the overall champion of the competition, hauling home a giant trophy. By now, her room is so covered with awards, you can hardly see the walls.

In essence, her father not only told her the truth, but also taught her how to learn from her failures and do what it takes to succeed in the future. He sympathized deeply with her disappointment, but he did not give her a phony boost that would only lead to further disappointment.