

# Mindset Matters

by Rachel Williams, M.Ed., TJS Dean of Faculty

“Here it comes,” I thought as I braced myself for the inevitable meltdown. My seven-year-old son, Rafe, was trying to ride his new RipStik, which is similar to a skateboard, for the first time. As he continued to lose his balance and struggle to get back on, I mentally prepared myself to watch him give up, throw the RipStik down and walk away. Instead, to my amazement, he continued to get back on and try again. This definitely wouldn’t have happened in the past.

A few years ago, when Rafe was learning to ride his bike, he became frustrated any time the bike even wobbled. He would shout, “I just can’t ride a bike,” throw it to the ground and then walk away. This would be followed by an hour of sulking and proclaiming he would never be able to ride a bike because it was just too hard. This was typical behavior for Rafe across the board, whether it was his bike, tee-ball, or reading. Effort was not something Rafe demonstrated with any task. What changed in the past year? Rafe went from having a fixed mindset to developing a growth mindset.



## Fixed and Growth Mindsets

Initially brought to light by Carol Dweck in her book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, fixed and growth mindsets have become a popular topic for educational professionals. I originally heard about the theory of fixed and growth mindsets from Dr. Robert Brooks when he spoke at The Joy School Annual Luncheon. I learned even more about this topic at the 2014 ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) Conference last summer during a session by Janna Peskett focusing on mindsets.



Peskett presented three simple, but immensely helpful techniques for transforming a fixed mindset into a growth mindset. I use these methods both at home and at school.

A **fixed mindset** is the result of a person’s belief that their success is based on innate ability. In a fixed mindset, people believe their intelligence, talent and aptitude are fixed traits. A person with a fixed mindset believes that if something doesn’t go right the first time, it is because he or she is just not good at it. This causes people with a fixed mindset to quit and give up easily when faced with a challenge, just like Rafe used to do.

A **growth mindset**, on the other hand, results from people believing they can develop and grow their most basic abilities through dedication and hard work. For those with a growth mindset, natural talent is just a starting point upon which they can build and grow. With a growth mindset, you believe you have the ability to improve. When something is difficult, it just means you need practice.

As an administrator at The Joy School, and as the parent of a former fixed-mindset kid, I see the ways a fixed or growth mindset affects all aspects of a child’s life, including school work, sports, social situations and more.

Watching Peskett’s presentation, I learned methods for changing a child’s mindset to implement both at school with our students *and* at home with Rafe.

1

### Responding to “I Can’t”

When they say “I can’t,” you say “Yet.”

When Rafe said, “Mom, I can’t ride a bike,” I used to reply with, “Yes you can!” But that is not always the case. Whether a child hasn’t had enough practice or simply doesn’t understand a concept, sometimes kids really *can’t* accomplish the task in front of them. That’s why the word “yet” is so important. It gives them hope.

Now I remind Rafe that, yes, he fell off the bike a few times, but that is how he eventually learned to ride. Whatever it is he’s up against, it’s not that he can’t do it. It’s that he can’t do it “yet”.

2

### Give the Right Kind of Praise

This one is trickier than the first, but makes a huge difference. It is so easy to see our kids succeed and praise them by saying “You’re so talented!” and “Look how smart you are!” While this praise is well-intentioned, and all parents do it, the hidden message can be negative. This type of praise leads kids to think that if they don’t get something right, they’re **not** talented or **not** smart.

*Continued on next page*

It is much more effective to praise your child's efforts. Even if they don't achieve a goal, saying "You tried really hard" reinforces the work they put in, not just the outcome. When they do achieve success it is more helpful to say "Wow, you worked hard and now you have an A in that class." Again, it is about giving feedback that recognizes effort rather than the result.

3

### Embrace Mistakes

In addition to changing the way we talk to our kids, we also have to teach them that their brains really do grow and that talent and ability constantly change. This is one of the most important lessons to impart on a child:

- **Your brain gets smarter when you make mistakes; nothing happens when you get it right the first time.**

A brain is like a muscle. Peskett emphasized this often in her talk. If our kids don't see that, they won't understand that they really can grow their minds. We must teach children that the brain is malleable and changes with experience.

I often tell both of my children that doing hard things actually rewires their brains, making them smarter. With a lot of reinforcement, Rafe has taken this lesson to heart.

### A Visible Change

After many slips, falls and skinned knees, Rafe can finally ride his RipStik. This time, instead of seeing the meltdowns that accompanied learning to ride a bike, I saw a change in effort. We broke it down together, step by step. First Rafe had to learn how to stand on the RipStik. He had to lean against a wall for support in the beginning, but he was slowly able to get going by himself. After a while, he was good at rolling straight ahead, but then he had to keep practicing until he could do a turn. This wasn't easy. He had to work hard and show determination.

Within a month he was RipStiking everywhere. The best part? There were no meltdowns. Rafe learned that even though he couldn't do it at first, mistakes and hard work were the path to getting better. His mindset was changing. 🏠