Cultivating a Growth Mindset

# What is a Growth Mindset?

A Growth Mindset is the understanding that your skills and intelligence can be developed and improved through practice. This is in contrast to a Fixed Mindset, which is the belief that your qualities are fixed, innate, and cannot be improved. These concepts were originally codified by Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck in her book *Mindset*.

# Why focus on cultivating a Growth Mindset?

Students put in more effort when they believe effort yields results. But if students do *not* believe they can improve through practice, they will see no point to tutoring. At best, sessions will seem fun but ultimately unproductive; at worst, sessions will feel like an arbitrary punishment and a waste of time. So helping students cultivate a Growth Mindset is critical for building a sense of investment in their work — and, ultimately, for supporting them to achieve greater academic success.

# Growth Mindset Focus Areas

These three qualities are key components of a Growth Mindset that tutors should focus on helping their students cultivate.

**Confidence**

*“I can reach my goals.”*

Students may lack the confidence they need to tackle rigorous academic content. You can build confidence during sessions by showing that:

1) Improvement is possible.

2) Hard work leads to improvement.

3) Both hard work and improvement will be recognized and rewarded.

**Motivation**

*“I want to reach my goals.”*

Students may feel that their work during tutoring is irrelevant to them as people. You can boost motivation through two primary strategies:

1) Get to know students’ personal and academic ambitions individually.

2) Consistently make connections to how reaching goals leads to achieving personal and academic ambitions.

**Self-Awareness**

*“I know how to reach my goals.”*

Students may know that they need to work hard to reach their goals, but not know where to start. You can provide clarity through regular goal-setting conferences to discuss:

1) What students’ specific goals are.

2) How much work they will require.

3) What specific steps students must take to work towards reaching them.

# How do you cultivate a Growth Mindset?

Relationships, goals, and growth mindset discussions matter little if students don’t *feel successful*. The biggest driver to building student confidence, motivation, and self-awareness is helping them *feel* successful and connecting that success to effort. When students see that success comes from hard work they increase their confidence, they boost their motivation to be successful again, and they often increase their effort. It’s a self-fulfilling upward spiral. Tutors must help students experience success as much as possible, highlight that success, and show how that success is a result of concerted effort.

# What does success mean through a Growth Mindset lens?

* **Increased Effort:** Revising work based on feedback, increasing attendance, taking a risk, asking more questions.
* **Academic Growth:** Improving (even slightly) on assessment scores, practice accuracy, or a chosen rubric strand.
* **Academic Mastery:** Reaching a learning goal and demonstrating it through practice, projects, or assessments.

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# **Strategies** for Cultivating a Growth Mindset During Tutoring

## Create Chances for Success

Early in the program, when your students are just beginning to develop their confidence, motivation, and self-awareness, students may not show many signs of increased effort or many signs of growth and mastery. In these cases, you will have to engineer or create opportunities for success. You will have to set students up to experience success. This might mean starting tutoring with a few problems you know a student did right, asking a student a question that you saw they wrote down the right answer to, or coaching them on a particular skill then praising increased results immediately afterwards.

## Acknowledge Effort and Praise Growth

Be on the lookout for signs of increased effort and growth. When tutors can “catch” students doing well and reinforce that, they help students build confidence that they can succeed, motivation to earn further praise, and self-awareness of how to do so. All students should receive some form of praise and acknowledgement during each session. Students who struggle most with confidence should receive acknowledgement of effort and praise for growth multiple times during each session.

## Choose Your Words Intentionally

Frequently acknowledging effort or praising growth and mastery are not enough. The specific language tutors use when acknowledging effort and praising students impacts how those students will receive and interpret the message. Showing students how their effort leads to growth is more important than praising effort alone. Consider the examples below:

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| You might reinforce a Fixed Mindset by saying… | Instead, cultivate a Growth Mindset by saying… |
| “You got an 80% on your quiz this week. See? I told you you were good at math!”  *In other words,* ***this student was always innately good or bad at the subject area****. If this student struggles in the future, they may now think “I guess my tutor was wrong. I’m bad at math after all, and there’s nothing I can do.”* | “You got an 80% on the quiz this week. I’m so proud of you. See how much better you did when you asked lots of questions? I knew you could do it.”  *In other words,* ***this student’s hard work led to success****. If this student struggles in the future, they may now think “I’d better ask more questions so I can improve at this.”* |
| “Why don’t you talk with your classmate about what she wrote. She got the theme, and she can explain it to you.”  *In other words,* ***you don’t believe this student can be successful on their own****. The student may come to self-identify as “less than” the classmate they now rely on.* | “I’m going to come back in two minutes to see how you’re doing on that question. You’re really close. You just need to think more carefully about the theme in the prompt.”  *In other words,* ***you believe this student can be successful*** *with concerted effort and adequate time to think about it.* |
| “Okay. This one is wrong. You forgot to subtract from both sides. You need to watch your work more carefully.”  *In other words,* ***despite their best effort, what the student is doing just isn’t good enough****. Maybe it never will be.* | “Okay. You got the first four steps of this problem correct. That was some good effort for getting that far. The last step is wrong because you forgot to subtract from both sides. Why don’t you try that step again?”  *In other words,* ***the student is already making progress****, and can continue to do so if they just* ***take one more step****.* |
| “Good job, you finished your entire practice sheet!”  *In other words,* ***the most important result of the student’s work was this filled-in piece of paper****. Student success is measured by work completion, not growth and improvement.* | “Good work! All your practice paid off. You got so much better at solving this kind of problem on the exit ticket!”  *In other words, the paper was just a byproduct.* ***The true end result of the student’s work was within the student****.* |