
Dancing in the Rain

“Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass, it’s about learning to dance in the rain.”
–Vivian Greene

In the busy week between Joan’s daughter Sarah’s high school graduation and a family trip to Hawaii, Sarah was in a car accident. There were no injuries but the car was totaled. Surprisingly, Joan’s reaction was not frustration, but gratitude. She was thankful no one was injured and for the opportunity for Sarah to learn how to handle a car accident, deal with the insurance company and make decisions about fixing or replacing the car. Joan was grateful to have this learning experience before Sarah moved out of state for college.

Joan’s reaction to the car accident exemplifies what Stanford University professor Carol Dweck calls a “growth mindset” versus a “fixed mindset” in how we view difficult events. Dweck’s research on children has focused on the effects of praising intelligence, which fosters a fixed mindset, compared to praising effort, which encourages a growth mindset. In one experiment, 5th graders were given a set of easy puzzles to solve. Upon successfully solving a puzzle, one group was told, “You did really well. You must be *really smart*.” The other group was told, “You did really well. You must have *tried really hard at this*.” When the children were given harder puzzles and struggled, those praised for being smart stopped liking them and asked to go back to easy puzzles. They lacked confidence and motivation because harder puzzles made them feel less smart. Faced with more challenging puzzles, they concluded

they just weren’t good at them after all. A fixed mindset stems from a belief that intelligence is innate and can’t be changed. Difficulty means you’re not smart or good at the task. Meanwhile, the other group of children praised for effort enjoyed the difficult puzzles and wanted more. They enjoyed learning from difficult problems and felt smart when they were working on something hard and making progress. These kids demonstrated a growth mindset which believes no matter who you are, you can always become a great deal smarter and more capable.

Children, like adults, are very sensitive to what they feel they are being judged on. With a fixed mindset, we internally warn ourselves, “You’d better not make a mistake, you better look smart.” With a growth mindset, we encourage ourselves: “Here’s an opportunity. Here’s a mistake I can learn from. I feel smart when I do something difficult.” When facing challenges, it’s discouraging to feel you must know the answer or it means you’re not good enough. With a growth mentality, a challenge can be embraced because success is defined by how much effort you make and whether or not you learn something. The difference between a fixed and growth mindset is the difference between feeling discouraged and ill-equipped compared to seeing life as the series of learning opportunities and tiny miracles it really is.