

The Gift of a Growth Mindset

Adventist Education is on a Journey to Excellence in North America: setting high standards spiritually and intellectually. Yet many children (and parents) believe that having to work hard or finding something difficult is a sign of lack of intelligence instead of an opportunity to learn and grow. There is great pressure to make things easy so children can get easy grades. One of the basic ideas in Adventist education is that, “Every youth should be taught the necessity and the power of application. Upon this, far more than upon genius or talent, does success depend. Without application the most brilliant talents avail little, while with rightly directed effort persons of very ordinary natural abilities have accomplished wonders. And genius, at whose achievements we marvel, is almost invariably united with untiring, concentrated effort.”¹ Paul’s counsel in *Colossians 3:23-24* encourages hard work in true perspective: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.”

Today there is ample research that demonstrates that effort and the ability to meet challenges are more important indicators of success than natural talent. According to scientific research shared by Stanford psychology researcher Carol Dweck, in her book titled *Mindset*², there are two basic ways that people think about intelligence. “Students who hold a *fixed* theory are mainly concerned with how smart they are—they prefer tasks they can already do well and avoid ones on which they may make mistakes and not look smart. In contrast ... people who believe in an *expandable* or *growth* theory of intelligence want to challenge themselves to increase their abilities, even if they fail at first.”³ When toddlers learn to walk it takes lots of practice and they fall a lot. But we don’t look at those falls as failure, instead we encourage the child to keep practicing and we praise them for trying. It should be the same with learning. In fact if your child finds everything easy and can produce A grades without much effort, they are probably not being challenged enough and may not be developing the study skills and work ethic that will help them face challenges in the future. These children are often praised and told they are smart because getting the A was easy but then when faced with a subject or topic that is challenging they don’t know how to study and they give up. As Dweck observes, “We don’t want to make something done

quickly and easily the basis for our admiration.”⁴ White notes that each person has the opportunity to become whatever he/she chooses.⁵ We are not bound by genetics, natural talent or natural weakness. Instead of avoiding areas of weakness, students can work to strengthen those areas.⁶ Students are not stuck with whatever level of intelligence they start with; intelligence can be changed.

So how can we help our children understand that challenges help them become better people and help them actually become smarter?

1. In school work and other responsibilities, encourage your child to stick with a task and persevere. Don’t make excuses or blame teachers, curriculum, genetics, etc.
2. Get the resources or tools your child needs. Extra tutoring (from you, a tutor, or their teacher); glasses, a good breakfast, adequate sleep, assessment for a learning disability, and showing an interest in what they are actually learning (not just look at grades), can all help.

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QUOTES TO CONSIDER

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.
Philippians 4:13

[Children] may take hold of several things, meet with a little discouragement, and give them up; and so they pass from one thing to another, perfecting nothing. ... A few words of encouragement, or a little help at the right time, may carry them over their trouble and discouragement; and the satisfaction they will derive from seeing the task completed that they undertook will stimulate them to greater exertion. Ellen White, *Child Guidance*, p 128

Praise the children when they do well, for judicious commendation is as great a help to them as it is to those older in years and understanding. Ellen White, *Child Guidance*, p 260

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3. Praise hard work, motivation, process, and practice instead of only the final product. Avoid linking smartness to grades. "Instead of saying, you got an A, you're so smart", say "I am so proud that you worked so hard to learn this material. I know you did your best."
4. Model tenacity in the way you solve problems together, saying no to distractions yet remaining flexible in considering alternate solutions and praising creative effort to independent learning and success.
5. Discuss what excellence looks like for a particular responsibility or assignment in a way that inspires effort to achieve what is envisioned now. A checklist developed together can provide structure that helps your child work smarter and experience success that builds positive attitudes to tackling future challenges.

1&6. *Education* by Ellen White, page 232

2. *Mindset* website mindsetonline.com

3. New study yields instructive results on how mindset affects learning by Lisa Trei, 2007 tinyurl.com/csdav8

4. *Counsels on Diet and Foods* by Ellen White, page 15

5. *The Perils and Promises of Praise* by Carol Dweck, Educational Leadership, 2007, Vol 65:2 pp 34-39 tinyurl.com/7mg6snq

IN NATURE

Ants are a lesson in perseverance. They are so small but they carry loads that are bigger and heavier than they are and heft these loads for long distances over many obstacles. Go outside and watch some ants. Follow their trail. Drop some shelled sunflower seeds or bits of bread and watch them carry the giant pieces. They don't give up.

There are thousands of kinds of ants, and each of them is a great demonstration of perseverance. As with any wild creature, you must be careful while observing ants. Many ants can bite and sting, some have stings that are very painful. Know the ants in your region, don't pick them up, and make sure you are not standing in their trail or on a nest so they don't start climbing on you!

There are many great videos about ants online. Here's one on leafcutter ants:
tinyurl.com/kjnzcp

FOR FURTHER STUDY

- *Mindset* by Carol Dweck, Ballantine Books, 2007
- *Education* by Ellen White, chapter 26
- *Help your child learn to work hard and persevere*, tinyurl.com/6rktclld
- *Teach your child to work hard without complaining*, <http://tinyurl.com/7kgvm8o>
- *Ten Christian values every kids should know* by Donna Habenicht, chapter 17 on Patience and Perseverance