

If at first you don't succeed...

Building Grit, a Growth-Based Mindset, and the Willingness to Fail and to Try Again

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Willingness to Fail as a Key to Success

The successful inventors, designers, engineers, artists, and entrepreneurs of the world know that the keys to success are hard work, sensible risk-taking, taking on challenges, failing, and trying again till you succeed. Thomas Edison was a prolific inventor, holding over 1000 patents. His inventions include the electric lightbulb, motion picture cameras, and the phonograph. These quotes give clues to the reasons for his success:

- I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.
- Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time.
- The essentials to achieve anything worthwhile are: Hard work, Stick-to-itiveness, and Common sense.

Grit (from the work of Angela Duckworth)

Duckworth believes grit is more important for success than intelligence is. "Grit is passion and perseverance for very long-term goals." "Grit is sticking with things over the very long term until you master them."

Duckworth developed a test which asks participants whether they work hard, if they stick to a goal until it's achieved, and how they respond to setbacks. Her research shows that those with higher grit scores are more successful, whether they're students at West Point, competitors in spelling bees, or college students.

Some argue that grit is a byproduct of other traits like confidence, courage and curiosity. Others argue a child is more likely to be "gritty" and persistent in areas where they are passionate. Duckworth agrees: "I don't think people can become truly gritty and great at things they don't love. So we also need to help [kids] cultivate their passions. That's as much a part of the equation as hard work and persistence."

The Growth-Based Mindset (from the work of Carol Dweck)

As a culture, Americans often talk about "talent" or "intelligence" as *fixed*: something you either have or you don't. ("I'm just bad at math.") Dweck and fellow researchers taught a group of low achieving students a *growth-based* mindset, teaching that intelligence, like a muscle, grows stronger with exercise. As students grew to believe that intelligence was something they could learn, their motivation increased. They worked harder. When they had difficulty, instead of saying "I'm just not smart enough", they would say that they needed to work harder or smarter. Their math scores improved, and continued to improve in the following years.

	Fixed Mindset	Growth-Based Mindset
Belief	Intelligence is static. You have it or you don't.	Intelligence develops with effort.
Goals	To look smart in every situation. Never fail.	To push myself and try new things.
Success	Proving I'm smart or talented.	Stretching to learn something new.
Attitude to challenges	I avoid challenges. I only try things I know I can do well.	I embrace challenges. I persist when things get tough.
Response to setbacks	I'm a failure. (identity) I give up.	I failed. (action) I learn from it and move on. I'll try harder next time
Effort	Why bother? It's pointless.	Effort is the key to mastery.
Criticism	Ignore criticism or deflect: "It's not my fault."	Learn from criticism: how can I improve?
I feel good	When it's perfect. When I win.	When I try hard. When I figure something out.
Results	They plateau early. Never reach full potential.	They achieve ever-higher levels of success.

Building Grit and a Growth-Based Mindset

Pay attention to how you talk to your kids about success and failure, and what you praise them for

- **Don't praise "Talent".** If every time your child succeeds at something, you say "wow, you're really smart", that implies that when they struggle with something else they're no longer smart. Or worthwhile. (Dweck found that if children were praised for intelligence and the final *product* of their work, they would then start avoiding challenging tasks, choosing only things they knew they could be successful at.)
- **Do praise effort and point out the rewards of hard work.** "Wow, you worked really hard at that, and it looks like it turned out just like you hoped." Or: "I can see you're frustrated that it's not working out like you hoped. But I'm so proud of how hard you've been working on it. What else could you try?" (Dweck found that if children were praised for effort – the *process* they had gone through, they'd then choose to take on challenging tasks where they knew they might fail but felt they could learn something important.)
- **Don't criticize by saying they lack talent.** "You're always so slow. You'll just never get to the ball before the other kids." Focus on what they have the potential to improve on: "It seems like you have a hard time out-running people to get to the ball. How can we work on building your running skills or how can we figure out mental strategies to help you anticipate things so you can get there faster?"
- **Don't just generically say "good job."** Do give specific information about what was good about it. Specific praise helps them know that you paid attention and you care. Give constructive feedback about how to improve. Ask them what *they* think they did well. And ask them how it could be even better.
- **Don't ask: did you win?** Do ask: What did you try hard at today? What did you do well? Did you make any mistakes you learned from? Did you ask someone how you could do better next time?

Create the culture

- Create a culture where struggle and risk-taking is valued more than getting the right answer.
- Instead of defining things as "pass" or "fail", try "mastered" and "not yet."
- Tell stories about successful people that illustrate how being gritty helped them succeed.
- Let them know that everyone, no matter how talented, runs up against things they can't do. The ones who succeed are the ones who fail, pick themselves up, fail again and persevere till they succeed.
- Talk about mistakes and failures as normal parts of learning – not reasons to quit.
- Let them see *you* fail and keep trying. Don't say "I'm just no good at this." Say "I need to try harder."
- Honor them for times when they set goals, face road blocks, and carry on to completion.
- Help them find their passions so they have that motivation to pursue skill and knowledge. When pursuing passion, work is fun! (Thomas Edison said: "I never did a day's work in my life. It was all fun.")

Tinker: Build Things Together

Work together to build something that you don't know how to build. (Or cook. Or do.) Figure it out together! Come up with an idea for what you want to accomplish. Draw it and plan it. Build it. Test it. Ask each other: what is working? What could be better? Make it better together. Celebrate your successes!

For more info. Look at www.gooddayswithkids.com for more details on all these topics. Other sources:

- Can we teach grit? www.npr.org/blogs/ed/2014/03/17/290089998/does-teaching-kids-to-get-gritty-help-them-get-ahead
- Watch Duckworth's TED talk on grit: www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_the_key_to_success_grit
- Read more about Dweck's work: http://alumni.stanford.edu/get/page/magazine/article/?article_id=32124
- Watch Dweck's TED talk on mindset: www.ted.com/talks/carol_dweck_the_power_of_believing_that_you_can_improve
- "The Myth of 'I'm bad at math'" at www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/10/the-myth-of-im-bad-at-math/280914/
- "Inverse Power of Praise" from *Nurture Shock*. <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Books/story?id=8433586&singlePage=true>