



## Opportunity or Setback? Parents' Views on Failure Influences Children's Mindsets About Intelligence

BY JESS HENNESSEY

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How do parent practices affect children's mindsets? Kyla Haimovitz and Mindset Scholar [Carol Dweck](#) designed multiple studies to explore how the way parents view failure influences their children's views on intelligence.

Viewing intelligence as malleable benefits children and adults, increasing motivation, persistence on challenging tasks, and academic achievement.<sup>1,2</sup> Many things can influence the beliefs people develop about intelligence, but studies have shown no clear link between parents' mindsets about intelligence and the mindsets their children hold.

Why is there no relationship between parents' and children's mindsets? If parents' views of intelligence do not affect those of their children, what other signals do children receive from parents that foster their perceptions about the nature of ability? And if simply possessing a growth mindset isn't enough to affect their children's perspectives, how can parents help their children develop a more malleable view of intelligence?

Kyla Haimovitz and Mindset Scholar [Carol Dweck](#) designed multiple studies to explore these questions. The researchers predicted that parents' views of failure, or their *failure mindset*, might be more easily perceived by children through recurring parenting practices than parents' intelligence mindset, and could thus influence children's own views on intelligence.

This research summary highlights findings from the following paper: Haimovitz, K., & Dweck, C. S. (2016). What predicts children's fixed and growth intelligence mind-sets? Not their parents' views of intelligence but their parents' views of failure. *Psychological Science*, 27, 859-869.

### MAIN FINDINGS:

- Parents who perceived failures as debilitating worried about their child's abilities and focused on their child's performance rather than what they learned from the failure
- Parents' beliefs about failure affected parenting practices and predicted their children's mindset about intelligence
- Parents' behavioral responses to their children's failures can be influenced

Haimovitz and Dweck defined two potential mindsets about failure: *failure-is-enhancing* or *failure-is-debilitating*. Parents with a *failure-is-enhancing* view believe that struggles are a helpful experience, one that is vital for facilitating learning and growth. Meanwhile, parents with a *failure-is-debilitating* perspective believe that failure inhibits learning and is a roadblock on the pathway to improved performance.

## IS THERE A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS' FAILURE MINDSETS AND CHILDREN'S MINDSETS ABOUT INTELLIGENCE?

In the first study, the researchers explored whether there was a relationship between parents' failure mindsets and children's beliefs about intelligence.

73 pairs of parents and their fourth- or fifth-grade children were surveyed about their respective intelligence mindsets. Parents also reported on their failure mindsets and perceptions about their children's competency in school. Children answered questions about their parents' learning and performance orientations (e.g., "My parents would be pleased if I could show that school is easy for me"; "My parents think how hard I work in school is more important than the grades I get").

### ***Parents with a failure-is-debilitating mindset had children who were more likely to hold a fixed view of intelligence.***

Their children were also more likely to label their parents as concerned about performance and grades rather than learning and improvement. Similar to findings from previous studies, no relationship was found between parents' and children's intelligence mindsets. These results suggest that there is a relationship between parent's views of failure and children's views of intelligence. But what is the underlying cause of this trend?

## HOW DO PARENTS' VIEWS OF FAILURE AFFECT THEIR CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES ON INTELLIGENCE?

In order to better understand *how* parents' mindsets about failure influence their children, the researchers next examined whether a parent's view of failure affected parenting practices in the face of setbacks.

160 parents completed a survey about their failure mindsets, intelligence mindsets, and their perception of their child's competence. They were also asked to respond to a hypothetical scenario in which their child came home with a failing grade.

### ***Parents' beliefs about failure predicted their responses to the failing grade scenario.***

Parents with failure-is-debilitating mindsets were more likely to express concerns about their child's abilities and less likely to focus on their child's learning and improvement. This suggests a connection between the way parents view failure and behavioral patterns they display when their children face setbacks.

## CAN PARENTS' FAILURE MINDSETS AND RELATED PRACTICES BE CHANGED?

The researchers' third study focused on whether parents' perspectives on failure could be influenced.

A group of 132 parents were randomly assigned to receive different versions of an online survey. Half the parents received a survey that asked them questions designed to put them into a *failure-is-debilitating* mindset (e.g., "Experiencing failure can lead to negative feelings, like shame or sadness, that interfere with learning"). The other half received a survey designed to foster a *failure-is-enhancing* mindset (e.g., "Experiencing failure can improve performance in the long run if you learn from it"). Participants then answered an open-ended response question about how they would think, feel, and what actions they would take after their child received a failing grade on a math test.

### ***Parents in the failure-is-debilitating condition were more likely to voice concerns about their child's ability and performance after taking the survey.***

This finding suggests that a short, biased survey was enough to influence the way parents would react to their child's behavior in a hypothetical failure situation, providing evidence that both parents' views *and* practices can be changed.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

These studies provide evidence on the importance of the way that parents view failure. Their perspectives on failure affect the ways they respond to difficulties their children face, and these behavioral differences influence their children's beliefs about ability. Fortunately, this self-reinforcing relationship can be influenced. Finding ways of targeting parents' failure mindsets could be beneficial, helping their children to adopt a growth mindset. Further research can continue to explore the relationships found in these studies while also testing approaches that may change parents' mindsets about failure.

Failing is unavoidable and essential to learning. However, the way individuals respond to these experiences is something that can be controlled. The ability to positively frame setbacks, viewing them as opportunities to improve and grow is an imperative skill that will be beneficial throughout life—and a valuable lesson parents can pass on to their children.

This brief was edited by Lisa Quay, Managing Director of the Mindset Scholars Network.

<sup>1</sup> Blackwell, L. S., Trzesniewski, K. H., & Dweck, C. S. (2007). Implicit theories of intelligence predict achievement across an adolescent transition: A longitudinal study and an intervention. *Child Development, 78*, 246–263.

<sup>2</sup> Paunesku, D., Walton, G. M., Romero, C., Smith, E. N., Yeager, D. S., & Dweck, C. S. (2015). Mind-set interventions are a scalable treatment for academic underachievement. *Psychological Science, 26*, 784–793.