



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

PEOPLE CAN CHANGE: RECOGNIZING OUR POTENTIAL FOR GROWTH

"It is not a radical thing to want to be seen as fully human."

—Bettina Love

OVERVIEW

Students practice using a more flexible, open-minded “growth mindset” when considering others’ behaviors and personalities—including those who harass or exclude others and/or are themselves harassed or excluded.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To cultivate a positive classroom climate
- When students are struggling to find a sense of belonging in class or at school
- When a situation arises that involves exclusion and/or victimization
- When students are making assumptions about each other and/or engaging in stereotyping

TIME REQUIRED

- 45 minutes

LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School

MATERIALS

- Video clip on [Growth Mindset](#) (5 minutes)
- A [worksheet](#) for each pair of students
- Board and markers or chalk
- Three small sticky notes per student (optional)

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Understand that people’s beliefs and behaviors can change
- Learn that a more flexible (rather than “fixed”) mindset about others can lessen social anxiety and help us to approach each other with greater openness.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)
- [Facilitating Bridging Discussions: Preparing Your Classroom](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Understanding & Compassion
- Growth Mindset

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open Awareness
- Non-Judgment

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- **Think of a fixed mindset belief you have about another person that might affect how you interact with them. For example:**
 - “_____ [fill in name of person] never listens to me!”
 - “We always disagree.”
 - “I will never get along with _____ [fill in name of person]”
- [Research](#) suggests that when we have a “growth” mindset (rather than a “fixed” mindset) about ourselves and others’ capacity for change, that mindset (or belief) can lessen interpersonal stressors and anxieties.
- With this in mind, turn your fixed mindset belief into a growth mindset one. For example:

- “_____ doesn’t appear to be listening to me right now, but sometimes they do.”
- “Sometimes we disagree, but sometimes we agree.”
- “Although it feels like we’ll never get along, it is possible that we will learn to relate to one another better over time.”
- Notice whether this new belief eases any stress you might feel about interacting with that person. Does this shift affect your openness and willingness to engage with that person?

INSTRUCTIONS

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before students arrive, write the following statements on the whiteboard:

- *People who bully or harass others really can’t change.*
- *Victims who are excluded always bring it on themselves.*
- *Some people are just jerks and can’t change.*

PART 1 (10 MINUTES)

- When students walk into the classroom, ask them to rate their agreement with the phrases written on the whiteboard (1-5: 1 = Disagree strongly; 5 = Agree Strongly).
- Ask for a few volunteers to share their ratings, or post students’ ratings next to each statement on the board using sticky notes.
- Hold a short discussion with students using the questions below. The purpose of this discussion is to challenge students’ possible black-and-white views (or stereotypes) of people who may be considered bullies and/or victims, and to begin prompting students to understand the following: “(a) if you are excluded or victimized, it is not due to a fixed, personal shortcoming on your part; and (b) people who exclude, bully, or harass you are not necessarily bad people. They may have complicated motivations or are in situations that can shift or change.” [Note: This practice may be challenging for students who have experienced bullying or exclusion because it asks them to assume another student’s potential for change after they have experienced harm.]
 - *Why do people exclude others?*
 - *Are victims always victims?*
 - *What qualities or circumstances do those who exclude and their victims share?*
 - *Can people who exclude or their victims change?*
- Tell students:
 - *Today we are going to learn about how our beliefs about ourselves and our peers affect the way we view conflicts at school that can happen because of stereotyping, harassing, and excluding others.*
- Ask:
 - *How is this topic relevant to your lives at school? Your future lives?*

PART 2 (15 MINUTES)

- Watch this “[Growth Mindset](#)” video to introduce (or remind) students of the basic differences between a growth and a fixed mindset (5:03).

- Ask:
 - *How can we apply the information from this video on growth versus fixed mindset to people's personalities, behaviors—and the assumptions we make about them? Do you think we can actually change our behaviors and personalities?*
 - *Do you believe the following statement from the video: "A simple switch in how one views a situation can make a world of difference." Why or why not? Provide an example.*
 - After discussing these questions with students, explain that researchers claim that we can change—and that a growth mindset about our capacity for change can help lessen our anxiety while freeing us up to be more open and accepting of others (and ourselves).
- Ask:
 - *What "fixed" negative beliefs do you think people might have about themselves or others? How could they reframe these beliefs to reflect a more open-minded, growth mindset? [Consider using the examples below as a guide.]*

Fixed Mindset Beliefs	Growth Mindset Beliefs
No one likes people like me.	I have a lot of good qualities, and I can make new friends.
I don't belong here.	A lot of people worry that they don't belong, and that can change over time.
He is a bad person.	He did something that I don't like, but it doesn't mean he can't change.

- As a class, choose one item from the "growth mindset" belief column above and discuss ways a student could put this belief into action.

PART 3 (10-15 MINUTES)

- Create heterogeneous pairings of the students (based on gender, race, academic performance) and hand out [one worksheet](#) to each pair.
- Ask student pairs to fill in the growth mindset column for each fixed mindset belief.
- Ask several pairs to share their growth mindset column ideas with the whole class.

CLOSURE (5 MINUTES)

- In their journals, ask students to write a short piece (a paragraph or two) summarizing what they learned from this lesson and what they might say to convince other students that personalities and behaviors aren't "fixed."

EXTENSION

- In pairs, have students create a mini-lesson for younger students that teaches them about how a growth mindset can be useful in our social interactions.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Do students use more “growth mindset” language when talking about their peers’ personalities, traits, or behaviors? Do they use more open, flexible language when describing themselves—and their own capacity for change? How do you know? What do they say?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

A diverse group of adolescents who were taught to believe that people have the [ability to change](#) exhibited less stress during social interactions. They were able to cope better, keep their bodies calmer, and even performed better in school—as much as seven months later.

[Studies](#) also demonstrate that people with a fixed mindset tend to gravitate to others who share similarities with them, yet those with a “growth” mindset tend to build more connections with people who appear to be different than they are. Individuals with a [growth mindset](#) are also open to forging new connections with people who seem to have different beliefs or values.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

If students believe everyone (including themselves) has the capacity to grow and change, then it’s more likely that they will be able to see social challenges (like harassment, bullying, and exclusion) as potentially surmountable too. A more flexible, “growth” mindset can release some of the anxieties and pressures students might experience, so they can think more clearly about a social problem as a challenge to solve rather than a threat to fear.

Bottom line, if we have limiting beliefs about ourselves or others, those beliefs can shut down our openness to learn, grow, and change. Furthermore, a [growth mindset](#) can help us look beyond any of our immediate assumptions so that we can build more meaningful connections with others.