



## TAKE-HOME SKILL: HELPING TEENS RECOGNIZE OUR POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

*"What you have to be committed to...is that evil is not the totality of who we are as persons, that people have the capacity, emotionally and rationally, to reflect on their life plans, their practices, their commitments, and change them, maybe not all of them, maybe not all at once, but that those things can be changed."*

—Brandon Terry on Martin Luther King, Jr.

### OVERVIEW

A series of discussions to help parents and caregivers explore with their teen different mindsets about people's ability to change.

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- When your teen experiences or witnesses prejudice
- To encourage your teen to consider the possible benefits of a mindset that embraces how people's attitudes can change to promote positive relations among cultural identity groups

#### TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 1 hour

#### LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School
- College

#### MATERIALS

- Videos
  - Neuroplasticity: How to Rewire Your Brain (<https://www.bbc.com/reel/video/p098v9zq/neuroplasticity-how-to-rewire-your-brain>)

- Could Your Brain Repair Itself? (<https://ed.ted.com/lessons/could-your-brain-repair-itself-ralitsa-petrova>)
- Articles
  - What Is Brain Plasticity and Why Is It So Important? (<https://theconversation.com/what-is-brain-plasticity-and-why-is-it-so-important-55967>)
  - Boy Recovers Normal Life after Losing Big Part of His Brain (<https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/boy-recovers-normal-life-after-losing-big-part-his-brain-n896341>)

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Understand that attitudes can change
- Learn that a changeable mindset can increase openness to meeting and interacting with people who seem different than them

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)

## CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Courage
- Compassion
- Empathy
- Growth Mindset
- Humility

## 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

- Before engaging your teen, take a moment for yourself to reflect on whether you think that people can change the kinds of attitudes they hold. For example, can people have shifts in their attitudes about technology, the environment, education, or economic systems? How about changes to attitudes about politics, gender, religion, ethnicity, or race?
- How much do you think the brain is fixed or set in stone? A lot? Somewhat? Not at all?
- Take a moment to learn about the brain's ability to change across a lifetime by watching this short video: "Neuroplasticity: How to Rewire Your Brain" (<https://www.bbc.com/reel/video/p0g8vg2g/neuroplasticity-how-to-rewire-your-brain>)
- How, if at all, has learning about the brain's ability to change affected your beliefs about how much some people can change the kinds of attitudes they have?
- How might this change your interaction with people who hold different beliefs than you?
- Does this shift how you feel about your ability to change? Think about a time when your attitude changed in a meaningful way about any of these topics like technology, the environment, ethnicity, or race when you might have held a prejudicial belief. What is a belief that you might be open to changing?

### INSTRUCTIONS

#### BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Having a mindset that people are mostly set in their ways can make us believe that it isn't worthwhile to meet or interact with people who might have attitudes that seem different from our own. This kind of unchangeable mindset can lead us to view all people who have negative attitudes about others as forever "bad." On the other hand, people who have a mindset that peoples' attitudes can change may be more open to interacting with people who seem different from them—even though it could be really difficult.

This kind of changeable mindset can help us recognize how people who have negative biases about others are capable of learning and overcoming their prejudiced beliefs sometimes. Of course, different circumstances might lead you to have one mindset or another, and that will be important to think through and discuss with your teen. For example, if you or your teen encounter people with prejudiced attitudes about your identity and who pose an imminent danger to you such as hateful violence because of your race, then you will want to provide your teen with guidance to ensure their safety. Threatening circumstances such as these will necessarily involve different kinds of discussions between you and your teen. This practice will mostly highlight the possible benefits that can come from having a mindset that explores how people can work to change their attitudes over time.

Having these conversations with your teen can be hard at first. With regular practice, these conversations can become much more comfortable. What's more, this activity is backed by research with evidence that it works.

#### ACTIVITY

##### The Brain's Ability to Change

Begin by enthusiastically inviting your teen to watch a video with you or read a news story about scientific discoveries on the brain's ability to change.

Video Examples:

- Neuroplasticity: How to Rewire Your Brain (<https://www.bbc.com/reel/video/p098v92g/neuroplasticity-how-to-rewire-your-brain>)
- Could Your Brain Repair Itself? (<https://ed.ted.com/lessons/could-your-brain-repair-itself-ralitsa-petrova>)

Article Examples:

- What Is Brain Plasticity and Why Is It So Important? (<https://theconversation.com/what-is-brain-plasticity-and-why-is-it-so-important-55967>)
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Then, model your thought process by sharing your reflections on how the science of brain development has led some people to think that attitudes can also change because attitudes spring from the mind.

You can discuss the following [reflections](#) with your teen:

- "Scientists have discovered that when you have a thought or a feeling, the pathways in your brain send signals to other parts of your brain that lead you to do one thing or another. By changing their brain's pathways, or their thoughts and feelings, people can actually change and improve how they behave after challenges and setbacks. So it's not that some people are 'rejects' or that other people are 'bad.' Everyone's brain is a 'work in progress.'"
- You can share with your teen a time when you changed your thoughts or feelings about something or someone, especially about a particular social or cultural identity.

### **Changing Our Attitudes About Prejudice**

You can later also discuss with your teen whether they think this brain research on changeable attitudes can also include prejudices people have about particular social or cultural identities like race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, religion, age, national origin, ability, or political orientation.

For example, you can discuss the following [reflections](#) with your teen:

- "People's and our own attitudes change all the time. Prejudice is an attitude and prejudice does not have to be permanent because even after it develops, it, too, can be changed."

Invite your teen to discuss with you what you know about leaders from social movements—recent and past—who had the civil courage to work to change negative, biased attitudes. For example, you can discuss the women's rights movement, African American civil rights movement, disability rights movement, Chicano and farmworkers movement, Asian American civil rights movement, Indigenous civil rights, and LGBTQ rights movement.

### **Responding to Prejudice**

During your conversation, as an option, you can model the way you are thinking about the answers to some of the questions below as a way to invite them to share back-and-forth with you their thoughts. You can take inspiration from and adapt the following prompts using a familiar conversational style that feels natural for you.

- Was there ever a time when you were with another teen who expressed prejudiced attitudes? What can be helpful about having a changeable mindset when you're with another teen who is expressing a prejudiced attitude? What can be hard and risky about it?
- Did a changeable mindset ever lead you to speak to another teen or adult who was saying something prejudiced? Was it easy or hard? What did you say? How did they respond? How did you feel?
- Have your friends or other teens ever spoken to you about something prejudiced that you've said? Did they approach you with a changeable mindset or an unchangeable mindset? What did they say to you? How did you respond? How did you feel?
- Have you had any prejudiced attitudes that you've changed?
- Does a changeable mindset mean that *all* people will change into completely different people overnight? Why does changing attitudes take such a long time and a lot of effort?
- When would it not be OK or safe to interact with someone who has prejudiced attitudes? What are some other things you could do when you learn that someone has prejudiced attitudes? When would it be important for teens to come to parents, caregivers, teachers, or other trusted adults when they encounter someone with prejudiced attitudes?

Share your own or your family's stories about resisting and overcoming biased attitudes to show your teen that someone close to them has been able to do this. What's more, invite your teen to watch movies about people who overcome prejudices and develop friendships with people from different cultural and social identities. For example, [Accidental Courtesy](#) is a documentary about a Black musician who tries to meet and become friends with members of the KKK, many of whom have never met a Black person. [Purple Mountains](#) is a documentary about a professional snowboarder and mountaineer who goes on a journey to find common ground with people across political backgrounds to protect our world. [CODA](#) is a coming-of-age comedy-drama film whose name comes from the protagonist, a child of deaf adults (C.O.D.A.) who is the only hearing member in her working-class, fisherman's family. The film provides a perspective of one family's communication struggles and victories, and disconnection and connection.

Also consider sharing stories about people not resisting and overcoming biased attitudes. What is at stake in that refusal? What emotions and thoughts arise from these stories of refusal? How do these stories make you feel about the people involved?

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## CLOSURE

Express encouragement and gratitude to your teen for sharing with you their thoughts about mindsets, prejudice, and possibilities for interacting with people with prejudiced attitudes. Make a plan to continue the conversation and invite them to share ideas for other questions to discuss together.

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

What surprised you about your teen's thoughts about mindsets? How, if at all, have your thoughts about mindsets, attitudes, and prejudice changed after your discussion with your teen? What other questions about mindsets and prejudice might you want to discuss with your teen next time to build on this initial conversation?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In a [study](#), over 200 teens in ninth and tenth grade (57% Latino, 10% Asian American, 9% African American, 17% White, non-Latino, and 7% another race or ethnicity) were randomly assigned to one of two six-session programs. In the mindset program, teens learned about how attitudes and skills can change with effort over time, and included discussion about brain development science. The other program had lessons about coping skills teens could use when they had social problems. Compared to the teens in the coping skills program, teens in the mindset program were more kind and less aggressive (making fun of others, hitting, slapping, pushing, threatening, excluding, spreading rumors, insulting) immediately after completing the program and even three months later.

In another [study](#), 150 children between 10 and 12 years old (64% White, 11% Asian, 11% Latinx, and 14% Black) were randomly assigned to hear a story about students putting on a play that presented prejudiced attitudes as either unchangeable or changeable. Later, children in the study had live video chats with a child they didn't know from another school. The study found that White children who heard the story that prejudice is changeable and talked with non-White kids had more interest in future interactions across race. What's more, their video chat partners who hadn't received a lesson about prejudice had more interest in future interactions across race, too.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Teens' mindsets can influence how they [understand and respond](#) to personal and social challenges including when they or their peers have prejudiced attitudes. A changeable mindset can help your teen [respond with openness](#) to situations or people rather than rely on stereotypes. It can also help your teen recognize that people can learn from their experiences and challenges, encouraging them to meet and interact with people from different groups.

On the other hand, when your teen believes prejudice is permanent, they may [tend to have](#) negative expectations for their interactions with others and even avoid them. A changeable mindset can instead help them view another person's negative biases about others as potential for growth and transformation rather than evidence that the person is "hopeless" and unworthy.

You can [influence](#) your teen's mindset about prejudice simply by the way you and their teachers speak about our ability to change. This perspective can lead your teen [to act with](#) courage and compassion rather than despair, vengeance, or retaliation when they encounter prejudice in other teens and adults. However, be sure to caution your teen to be aware of their circumstances as not every person is interested in changing their attitudes.