**What Is the Mindset of Adults Who Nurture Motivation and Purpose in Children?**

**Part II**

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

Last month, I discussed an interview conducted by Youki Terada with David Yeager, a psychologist on the faculty of the University of Texas at Austin. Yeager, author of the book *10 to 25: The Science of Motivating Young People*, is well known for his research and insights about factors that reinforce intrinsic motivation in students. He proposed that a significant force in nurturing intrinsic motivation was when students believed that what they were learning and doing promoted a sense of purpose. One source of this sense of purpose occurred when students had the opportunity to engage in actions that enriched the lives of others.

At the end of my April article, I wrote that given my decades-long interest in the concept of "mindsets," another detail that drew me to Yeager's work was his identification of three different teacher (or other adult) mindsets, only one of which impacts positively on student motivation and purpose. I noted that I would describe the three in my May article. Identifying the components of different mindsets represents more than an academic exercise. Mindsets play a significant role in shaping our behaviors, including the quality of our interactions with others. As an example, if a teacher believes a student is lazy and unmotivated and could do the work if they "wanted" to, they will treat that student much differently from a teacher who sees that student as "struggling" and asks, "What can we do differently to help this struggling student learn more effectively?"

In turn, a student will likely perceive the first teacher as accusatory and judgmental. As a result, the student's mindset may be dominated by the thought, "This teacher doesn't care about me. This teacher is probably happy when I'm absent. They already see me as a failure, so why should I do any work?" Dominated by this belief, the student may cope by withdrawing from and/or disturbing class discussions and not doing any of the work. Unfortunately, these behaviors confirm the teacher's negative perception of the student, reinforcing a negative cycle.

In contrast, a student taught by the second teacher is likely to develop the view that the teacher cares about and believes in them. Within such a positive relationship, it is not surprising that the student becomes more hopeful and more motivated to learn. They feel safe knowing that

the teacher will be encouraging rather than judgmental, especially when they make mistakes. In this situation, a positive cycle is set in motion.

In many of our books and publications, my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein and I have highlighted the power of mindsets in influencing our actions and relationships. For this reason, we have written about the mindset of effective teachers, students, parents, therapists, and leaders. We also introduced the concept of a "resilient mindset" that identifies the components associated with leading a resilient life.

**Three Mindsets Impacting Children**

In his book and in his interview with Tereda, Yeager highlighted the following three mindsets, and although he focused on adult relationships with teens, these mindsets are relevant for any age group or setting:

***Enforcer mindset.*** Yeager noted, "That's where you're setting impossible standards, and when teens don't live up to those standards, you're yelling and telling or blaming and shaming. This approach ends up making them feel humiliated and disrespected—it's the opposite of respect and status, and it switches off motivation."

I'm relatively certain that most, if not all, of us at some point in our lives have encountered people with an enforcer mindset. It could have been in school, at home, or in the workplace. They deprive us of our dignity. As a participant in one of my workshops described, "They suck the energy out of you and constantly put you down." In keeping with this article's theme of purpose as a key ingredient of intrinsic motivation and resilience, an enforcer robs people of opportunities to experience purpose in their lives.

***Protector mindset.*** Although "protector" may suggest a positive tone, it is not used that way by Yeager, who expressed, "Another bad approach is lowering standards to the point that it's clear to teens that we're not really expecting anything of them—a kind of soft bigotry of low expectations." Very importantly, Yeager emphasized, "That also comes across as really disrespectful."

In my clinical practice, I have frequently witnessed the harm that occurs when expectations are lowered. As one of my very perceptive teenage patients said to me, "They (teachers) think that they're being nice to me, but what they're doing is 'dumbing' down what they're trying to teach me. How will I ever learn if I'm not given more difficult work? They must

really think I'll fall apart if I get harder work." His perception of teachers "dumbing" down the work intensified his feelings of resentment and reinforced his sense of inadequacy.

A 13-year-old girl I saw in therapy was very upset when her mother went to her middle school to ask her teacher to raise her grade from a C to a B so that her daughter "would be more encouraged about school." The teacher told the mother that she would help her daughter in whatever way possible to improve her grade but not by giving her a higher grade than she deserved. This girl said to me, "When my mother told me that she had asked the teacher to change the grade, I was really upset. It proved to me that my mother thought I couldn't get a better grade on my own."

***Mentor mindset.*** The behaviors associated with this mindset are most in keeping with nurturing a child or teen's sense of purpose as well as fostering a genuine feeling of self-worth. Yeager remarked, "The thing that does seem to work really well is finding a way to communicate that teens can make a real contribution, that their opinions actually matter, and that you, as the adult, are going to walk that journey with them."

Yeager also discussed the "mentor's dilemma," a term introduced by psychologist Geoff Cohen. The seeming dilemma involves the idea that it's difficult to criticize someone and motivate them at the same time. It was perceived as a dilemma since there did not seem to be a clear solution. "On the one hand, you could be hyper-demanding and critical and crush their motivation. On the other hand, you could withhold your feedback and not say anything—but that doesn't help them get better."

Upon reading about this dilemma, I did not think it needed to be seen as a dilemma. I believe the reason the description was used is that it was cast in polar terms, featuring words such as "hyper-demanding" and "critical." It reminded me of the numerous times I have been asked, "If you're too empathic with kids, won't they take advantage of you?" I respond by expressing my belief that the most effective disciplinarians are often the most empathic, as they strive to see the world from their child's or student's perspective. In doing so, they are guided by the following question: "How do I discipline my child in a way that they will learn and grow from me rather than become very angry and resentful of what I have to say?" I often add, "Discipline is most effective when housed within a positive relationship."

Yeager shared his views on resolving the mentor's dilemma. "Be honest and tough and critical, but make sure that your supports are high enough to help students live up to the standard

of performance you just demanded. The mentor mindset is saying, 'This is hard, but it's hard for a reason.' The approach works because it comes across as respectful. I, the adult in this situation, view you, the young person, as independent and able to determine your own future."

**Different Parenting Styles**

Interestingly, the three mindsets proposed by Yeager closely align with the late psychologist Diana Baumrind's seminal work on parenting styles. In the 1960s, she described three main types: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. Later, psychologists Eleanor Maccoby and John Martin added a fourth style that they labeled uninvolved or neglectful.

***Authoritative parenting.*** Paralleling the attributes of Yeager's mentor mindset, the authoritative parent embodies a style that is most conducive to raising resilient children. They convey empathy, warmth, and love, establish realistic limits, and help their children grow increasingly responsible. They model compassion and provide opportunities for their children to do the same, fostering a sense of purpose. They empower their children by seeking their input and, when their children make mistakes, they use these moments as opportunities to teach problem-solving skills.

***Authoritarian parenting.*** These parents are similar to Yeager's enforcer. They are overly strict, often lack warmth and empathy, and convey the message, "You'll do what I say because I'm your parent!" When their child makes a mistake, rather than engaging them in a problem-solving task, they're quick to reprimand and humiliate their child with comments such as, "You never use your brain, what's the matter with you?" They rob their child of any sense of compassion, dignity, and purpose.

***Permissive parenting.*** These parents most closely resemble Yeager's description of the protector. They display warmth and love but are hesitant to set limits or hold their children accountable. In my clinical practice, I have worked with many permissive parents and often heard them say, "I don't want my child to be angry with me. I want them to like me." They avoid conflict that they believe may rupture their relationship with their child. Given their anxiety about their child not loving them, what these parents fail to see is that setting limits and teaching children right from wrong is an essential task of parenting and, if anything, communicates that they care about and love their child.

This situation was vividly described to me by a 14-year-old girl. She was referred for therapy after becoming pregnant a few months earlier and having an abortion. It took several

sessions for her to become comfortable speaking with me, but once she did, she described in a very insightful way her parents' reluctance to set limits, explaining that she was allowed to do as she pleased, including staying out late. I asked what would have happened if her parents had enforced a curfew. She began by saying she would have fought them. Then her mood abruptly changed, and she began to cry as she uttered, "At least I would have known they cared about me." This comment reinforced my belief that children do not want to grow up feeling more powerful than their parents.

***Uninvolved or Neglectful parenting.*** These parents display little, if any, interaction with their children. One adult I saw in therapy who grew up with neglectful parents said, "It was as if I didn't exist. They rarely spoke with me or showed me any affection." A teenage boy growing up in a single-parent home said, "If I disappeared tomorrow, I'm not certain my mother would even know I'm gone."

Research has been conducted to examine the various outcomes that occur when children grow up in these settings. Certainly, many interacting, complex factors play a role in determining how children turn out as adults, including not only parenting styles but also factors such as a child's temperament. In an article authored by psychologist Thomas Lickona that examined how children fared in these four parental environments, those with neglectful parents had the worst outcomes Likona reported, "Most did not do well in school and had problems with peer relationships. By the time they were teens, they had the lowest achievement scores of all the youth in the study and the highest levels of anxiety, depression, and drug use."

Perhaps not surprisingly, children with authoritative parents "showed the highest levels of confidence, respect for others, self-control, and school achievement." Additionally, I believe that authoritative parents are more likely to help children develop intrinsic motivation and a sense of purpose.

Although many parenting styles have been identified in addition to the four I've listed (e.g., free-range, lighthouse, helicopter, and lawnmower to name just a few), I've found Baumrind, Maccoby, and Martin's to be very helpful in my clinical work and parenting presentations. I believe that the more we can identify and understand mindsets and the impact they have on our parenting (teaching, leadership) styles, the greater the probability that we can adopt mindsets and behaviors that are beneficial not only to ourselves but also to our children, teens, students, colleagues, and employees.

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

In last month's column, I wrote that my May article would focus on Yeager's description of three different adult mindsets associated with our interactions with children and teens, as well as the significance of a sense of purpose in the workplace. As I expanded this article to include parenting styles, I decided to devote a separate article to purpose in the workplace. That will be my topic for next month.

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