



Attitudes of Mind

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Teaching students basic knowledge and skills is the goal of all schools and their parents. We want them to become "intelligent" people who can hold a good job, make intelligent decisions, solve problems, and think critically and creatively. But it is *productive thinking and action* that will eventually help the child to be a success in life. In other words, the outcomes and actions are as important as the basic knowledge.

So what does it take to be a successful, productive citizen? What is it that allows some students to excel, to perform, to be creative, and to love the learning process, while others simply can't quite get there? What is it that keeps some students going and enables them to get over the inevitable humps? What is it that helps them to think creatively? Certainly one's innate intelligence and personality do affect the development of the person one eventually becomes. But one's environment, including teachers and parents, can have a tremendous influence, as well.

Educator and researcher Maureen Neihart says, "psychological preparedness for high achievement may be the single most neglected component of talent development even though teachers, coaches, and parents agree that it is an essential and perhaps pivotal factor." (Gifted Education Communicator, Summer 2005) Psychological preparedness includes a variety of mental attitudes - "habits of mind" - that drive performance by helping to keep a sharp focus, sustain attention, and drive hard work that will result in a positive outcome. These include:

- Tolerance for stress - Competition intensifies and stakes rise as one moves up the success ladder; those who wish to succeed must learn strategies for controlling their anxiety.
- Willingness to take realistic risks - Capable students must be willing to work at the highest level of their competence as they reach for achievement.

Goal setting - Goals affect performance by focusing attention, influencing persistence, and energizing hard work. The most effective goals are those that are challenging but attainable. High goals tend to lead to higher performance.

- Mental rehearsal - Sports trainers have long known that mental visualization of positive outcomes combined with physical practice is essential in reaching one's goals, because it increases confidence and self control. If a student *believes* that he can succeed, he has a much greater likelihood of actually doing it.

- Positive explanatory style - Successful people see failure as a learning experience caused by something else besides a personality factor. They view a setback as a temporary problem which can be overcome through positive personal action.

- Mood management - Mood shapes our thoughts and our focus. A strict regimen of diet, exercise, rest, and self-talk helps one stay in an optimal mood for success. A generally positive outlook works wonders in getting one past the difficult spots in life and seeing the future possibilities.

- Ability to resolve affiliation and achievement conflicts - Students must be able to understand and resolve any conflicting messages they may receive from their family and peer groups that advocate against academic and social success. They need to want to succeed despite any adverse conditions and influences they may have to face to do it.

Ms. Neihart states: "Research concludes that the mental and emotional factors associated with high performance are not innate, but can be cultivated and shaped." As parents and teachers, it is our job to find out how we can best influence our children to become the productive and happy people we would like them to be. We must talk about how realizing one's dreams requires self management skills and positive psychological strategies. We must point out that creativity equals hard work and determination, that success requires taking risks, that independence of spirit is important, and that creative people rise to meet whatever challenges they may encounter. We must encourage our children to make use of these important psychological strategies, these habits of mind, especially when the going gets tough. As difficult as it may sometimes be to watch our children go through tough situations, we must also remember that it can be uncomfortable to learn these life lessons, and that sometimes we have to allow our children to fail in order to eventually succeed. The results far outweigh any temporary difficult situations, so if we can remain positive in our attitude and our expressions of the possibilities, he will have a much greater chance for success.