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## Promoting a Growth Mindset in Players

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As an educator and coach, I find more and more that one of the key skills the young players I come into contact with need to learn is resilience, and the ability to respond to challenges. The pressure on youths who play AFL comes from many angles, especially those who have been identified to be part of elite training squads and teams such as the Vic Metro and Vic Country AFL Academies. Whether the pressure is from parents, friends, school mates, teachers, coaches, team mates or themselves, they are expected to perform at the highest level at all times. There is nothing wrong with this and having people wanting to help you on your football journey is a positive thing.

However, what happens when things don't go as planned for these players? What happens when they don't make the state academy? What happens when the young player who has always played in the centre is asked to play in the back pocket for the Metro team? What happens when the players are asked to work on deficiencies?

A question I have posed to myself as a coach now involved in the Vic Metro Academy is how we prepare these youths for change, challenges and improving themselves both as players and people. Over the past few years I have used the research findings of Dr Carol Dweck and her investigations into 'Growth and Fixed Mindset' to help with this. A great by-product of reviewing this research and its findings is that I have found myself approaching challenging and new situations with a growth mindset with some fantastic personal results!

### What Is 'Growth and Fixed Mindset'?

Carol Dweck states "In a fixed mindset students believe their basic abilities, their intelligence, their talents, are just fixed traits. They have a certain amount and that's that, and then their goal becomes to look smart all the time and never look dumb. In a growth mindset students understand that their talents and abilities can be developed through effort, good teaching and persistence. They don't necessarily think everyone's the same or anyone can be Einstein, but they believe everyone can get smarter if they work at it."

"In the fixed mindset it's not enough just to succeed. It's not enough just to look smart and talented. You have to be pretty much flawless. And you have to be flawless right away... After all, if you have it you have it, and if you don't you don't..."

In football terms, a player with a fixed mindset believes if they play a bad game, they are a bad player. If they don't make a certain team or squad, then they are hopeless. A player with a growth mindset would approach these challenges in a different way. If they play a bad game, they would look for feedback to find out why and work on their deficiencies to become a better player. If they didn't make the Vic Metro squad for example, they would look to this as a challenge and work harder to become the best player they can.

### Developing a Growth Mindset

Now that we know what growth and fixed mindsets are, how do we promote a growth mindset in our elite youth players, and players in general? In my opinion it has to do with how we praise our players and allow them to see that challenges and adversity is a good thing that makes them a better player and ultimately a better person.

Dr Dweck's most famous study, conducted with Claudia Mueller, examined 400 fifth graders in 12 different New York City schools. She gave them a relatively easy test of nonverbal puzzles. Half the students received their scores with the praise: "you must be smart at this" (praised for smarts). The other half of students received their scores with the praise: "you must have worked really hard" (praised for effort).

These students were then offered a choice of an easier or more challenging puzzle:

Nearly 90% of students praised for effort chose the harder set of puzzles for the next test, worked hard to figure out the puzzles, were interested in understanding their mistakes, and on a subsequent test showed an average 30% improvement.

Those praised for smarts mostly chose the easier set of puzzles and were easily discouraged. On a subsequent test they saw their scores drop by an average of almost 20%.

Praising players for smarts encourages them to avoid the most useful kind of learning activities, those in which we learn from our mistakes. Without experiencing and focusing attention on mistakes, a mind will not revise its models. Mistakes are repeated and challenges avoided. Those with fixed-mindsets seek self-confidence at the expense of self-improvement.

What we can do as coaches is think about the praise we give our elite youth players. How we praise and give feedback to these players can have a massive impact long term when they are placed in situations where they are challenged and asked to work on their deficiencies.

### Influencing Mindsets through Praise

Let's use the example below to illustrate how praise can influence a growth or fixed mindset in our elite youth players.

Fifteen year old Bailey was on his way to his first trial game representing Vic Metro against Vic Country. Tall, with good aerobic capacity and very good skills, he had just the right capacities to play AFL, and he loved it. Of course, he was a little nervous about the game, but he has proved himself at local and interleague level and felt confident of doing well. He had even thought about making the final squad of 25 and what number he may be.

In the first quarter, Bailey was playing at Full Back. Although he played okay, he found himself on the bench in the second quarter. He came back on at Centre Half Back. Even though he played forward and ruck at local level, he was not able to play there. By the end of the game, Bailey had only touched the ball a couple of times and was informed the next week that he had not made the next cut.

What would you do if you were Bailey's coach or parent?

1. Tell him that you thought he was the best player.

2. Tell him that he was robbed of a position of the team that was rightfully his.
3. Reassure him that in the grand scheme of things football is not that important.
4. Tell him that he has the best skills and ability in the team.
5. Tell him that he tried his hardest and that he made mistakes, but if he continues to work hard, listen and learn from today he may be a chance to make the team next time.

There is a strong message in our society about how to boost youth's self-esteem, and a main part of that message is: Protect them from failure! While this may help with the immediate problem of their disappointment, it can be harmful in the long run. Why?

Let's look at the five possible reactions from a mindset point of view [and listen to the messages]

The first (you thought he was the best) is basically insincere. He was not the best – you know it, and he does too. This offers him no recipe for how to recover or how to improve.

The second (he was robbed) places blame on others, when in fact the problem was mostly with his performance. Do you want him to grow up blaming others for his deficiencies?

The third (reassure him that football doesn't really matter) teaches him to devalue something if he doesn't do well in it right away. Is this really the message you want to send?

The fourth (he has the ability) may be the most dangerous message of all. Does ability automatically take you where you want to go? If Bailey didn't make the team this time, why should he make the next one?

The last option (respond to the challenge and learn from mistakes) praises Bailey for the effort he put in, while reminding him that the ability to listen and learn from challenges will make him a better player.

As you can see the last option uses the language of a growth mindset, whereas the first four are directed in a way that leads to a fixed mindset.

We as coaches have a responsibility to ensure that our elite youth AFL players are prepared with skills both on and off the field to become the best player and person they can be. The way that we deliver our messages and praise them can have a long term effect on players, either positively or negatively as discussed. Do we want our players to have a growth mindset or a fixed mindset?

I will leave you with a quote from Michael Jordan, who is universally recognised as being the best basketball player of all time. He also has a growth mindset that helped him to learn and succeed from the challenges and setbacks he had during his career. Jordan said "I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."

Let's hope we can help not only our elite youth footballers, but all players to have the same mindset in the future!

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*This article was written as part of the requirements for AFL High Performance Coach Accreditation.*

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