

THE SCHOLAR'S ASCENT

Scholar Family Vocabulary Guide

30+ Phrase Swaps to Build a Growth Mindset at
Home

FREE PARENT RESOURCE

thescholarsascent.org

Reminiscent Road Media LLC · Founded by Dr. Ijezie-Desbois, PharmD

WELCOME

Welcome, Scholar Family!

The words we use with our children shape how they see themselves as learners. This guide gives you 30+ ready-to-use phrase swaps that shift the conversation from fixed mindset to growth mindset -- no expertise required.

How to Use This Guide:

- Read through the swaps and pick 2-3 that feel natural
- Practice those for a week before adding more
- Print the Quick Reference Card on the last page
- Put it on your fridge, bathroom mirror, or car dashboard

CHAPTER 1: WHY LANGUAGE MATTERS

The Science of Growth Mindset

Research by Dr. Carol Dweck at Stanford University demonstrates that children who are praised for effort rather than innate ability develop stronger resilience, higher achievement, and greater love of learning over time.

Key Finding: When children hear "You're so smart," they learn to protect that label. They avoid challenges, hide mistakes, and give up faster. When they hear "You worked so hard," they learn that effort is the path to mastery.

Fixed vs. Growth Mindset Language

Fixed Mindset	Growth Mindset
"You're naturally talented"	"Your practice is paying off"
"Some kids just aren't math people"	"Math takes persistence -- keep going"
"This should be easy for you"	"I can see this is challenging -- good!"

40%

more likely to embrace challenges with growth language

2X

more persistence after failure with effort-based praise

3X

more likely to try new strategies when stuck

PHRASE SWAPS: PRAISING EFFORT

Praising Effort vs. Intelligence

INSTEAD OF: "You're so smart!"

TRY: "You worked really hard on that!"

Why: Praise the process, not the person. This teaches children that effort leads to success.

INSTEAD OF: "You're a natural!"

TRY: "I can see you've been practicing!"

Why: Connects success to effort rather than innate ability, encouraging continued practice.

INSTEAD OF: "You got an A -- I knew you were brilliant!"

TRY: "That A reflects all your studying. What strategy worked best?"

Why: Ties the result to a strategy, helping children replicate success in the future.

INSTEAD OF: "That was easy for you, right?"

TRY: "Tell me about what you found interesting in that assignment."

Why: Shifts focus from difficulty level to engagement and curiosity.

INSTEAD OF: "You're the best reader in your class!"

TRY: "You've grown so much as a reader this year. What book challenged you most?"

Why: Avoids comparison with peers and emphasizes personal growth over ranking.

PHRASE SWAPS: RESPONDING TO FAILURE

Responding to Failure & Setbacks

INSTEAD OF: "It's okay, you're still smart."

TRY: "What can you learn from this experience?"

Why: Reframes failure as a learning opportunity rather than something to be excused.

INSTEAD OF: "Maybe this just isn't your thing."

TRY: "You haven't mastered this YET. What's one thing you can try differently?"

Why: The word "yet" is transformative -- it implies growth is coming with continued effort.

INSTEAD OF: "Don't feel bad about it."

TRY: "It's okay to feel frustrated. That shows you care. Let's figure out the next step."

Why: Validates the emotion while redirecting toward action and problem-solving.

INSTEAD OF: "The teacher must not have taught it well."

TRY: "Let's look at what parts you do understand and build from there."

Why: Avoids blame and teaches the child to take ownership of their learning process.

INSTEAD OF: "Why did you get that wrong?"

TRY: "Walk me through your thinking on that problem."

Why: Shows interest in the process, not just the outcome. Helps identify where understanding broke down.

INSTEAD OF: "I was never good at math either."

TRY: "Math can be tough, but your brain gets stronger every time you work at it."

Why: Avoids passing down a fixed mindset. Your child doesn't inherit your limitations.

PHRASE SWAPS: ENCOURAGING PERSISTENCE

Encouraging Persistence

INSTEAD OF: "Just give up if it's too hard."

TRY: "Hard means your brain is growing. Let's break it into smaller steps."

Why: Reframes difficulty as a sign of learning, not a signal to stop.

INSTEAD OF: "Let me just do it for you."

TRY: "I'll watch you try first. If you get stuck, I'm right here."

Why: Builds confidence through supported independence rather than learned helplessness.

INSTEAD OF: "You should already know this."

TRY: "Everyone learns at their own pace. What part is tripping you up?"

Why: Removes shame and opens a productive conversation about the specific challenge.

INSTEAD OF: "Stop complaining and just finish."

TRY: "I hear you -- it's frustrating. Let's take a 5-minute break, then tackle it fresh."

Why: Acknowledges the emotion, teaches self-regulation, and models healthy coping strategies.

INSTEAD OF: "If you can't do it, I'll call the teacher."

TRY: "What resources do you have? Could you re-read the chapter, check your notes, or ask a classmate?"

Why: Teaches resourcefulness and self-advocacy before relying on adults to solve problems.

PHRASE SWAPS: HOMEWORK & STUDY TIME

Homework Help & Study Time

INSTEAD OF: "Did you finish your homework?"

TRY: "What did you learn today that surprised you?"

Why: Opens a conversation about learning rather than making homework feel like a chore to check off.

INSTEAD OF: "Here's the answer."

TRY: "What do you think the first step would be?"

Why: Guides thinking without stealing the learning moment. The struggle IS the education.

INSTEAD OF: "You need to study harder."

TRY: "Let's look at your study plan together. What could we adjust?"

Why: Shifts from vague criticism to collaborative problem-solving with a concrete next step.

INSTEAD OF: "You're taking too long on this."

TRY: "I notice you're spending a lot of time here. Is this a spot where you need a different approach?"

Why: Replaces time pressure with strategic thinking about when to shift approaches.

INSTEAD OF: "Why didn't you pay attention in class?"

TRY: "What part of today's lesson made the most sense? Let's start there."

Why: Builds on strengths rather than dwelling on gaps. Starting from what they know builds confidence.

PHRASE SWAPS: TEST RESULTS & REPORT CARDS

Test Results & Report Cards

INSTEAD OF: "What did you get?"

TRY: "How do you feel about the test? Did it match the effort you put in?"

Why: Focuses on self-assessment and effort-outcome connection rather than the grade alone.

INSTEAD OF: "Why didn't you get an A?"

TRY: "What are you most proud of this semester? What's one area for growth?"

Why: Balances celebration with forward-looking improvement. Both matter.

INSTEAD OF: "Your sister got straight A's at your age."

TRY: "Compared to last semester, I can see real improvement in ___."

Why: Compares the child to their past self -- the only comparison that motivates growth.

INSTEAD OF: "You're grounded until your grades come up."

TRY: "Let's make a plan together. What support do you need to improve?"

Why: Punishment rarely improves grades. Collaborative planning gives children agency over their success.

INSTEAD OF: "I'll give you \$20 for every A."

TRY: "Let's celebrate your growth this semester with a special family activity."

Why: Intrinsic motivation lasts longer than external rewards. Celebrate effort and growth, not just outcomes.

PHRASE SWAPS: CONFIDENCE & IDENTITY

Building Confidence & Identity

INSTEAD OF: "You're the smart one in the family."

TRY: "I love watching how curious you are about new things."

Why: Celebrates a character trait (curiosity) rather than a fixed label (smart) that creates pressure.

INSTEAD OF: "I'm proud of you for getting an A."

TRY: "You should be proud of yourself. You earned that through dedication."

Why: Shifts pride from parent to child. Internal pride is more sustainable than seeking external approval.

INSTEAD OF: "You can be anything you want."

TRY: "With effort and the right strategies, you can learn to do hard things."

Why: Grounds aspiration in reality -- effort and strategy matter more than wishful thinking.

INSTEAD OF: "Good job!"

TRY: "I noticed you [specific observation]. That took real [effort/creativity/patience]."

Why: Specific praise is 10x more powerful than generic praise. It shows you're paying attention.

QUICK REFERENCE CARD

Growth Mindset Phrase Swaps -- Cut & Post!

Stop Saying	Start Saying
"You're so smart!"	"You worked really hard on that!"
"It's okay, you're still smart."	"What can you learn from this?"
"This isn't your thing."	"You haven't mastered this YET."
"Let me do it for you."	"I'll watch you try first."
"Here's the answer."	"What's the first step?"
"What did you get?"	"How do you feel about the test?"
"Why didn't you get an A?"	"What are you most proud of?"
"Good job!"	"I noticed you [specific effort]."
"Study harder."	"Let's adjust your study plan."
"You're grounded."	"Let's make a plan together."

Remember: Praise effort, not ability. Ask questions, don't lecture.

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The Guide's Handbook (Grade 6)

The Coach's Playbook (Grades 7-8)

The Launch Pad Manual (Grades 9-12)

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