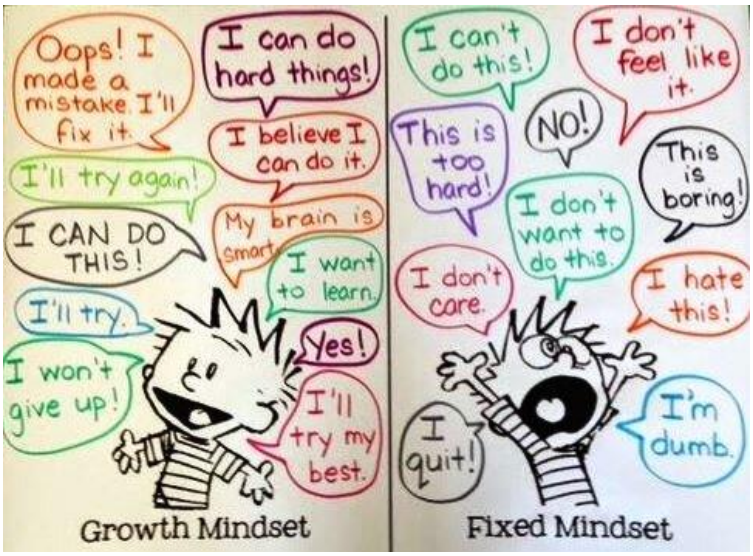
Addressing Negative Self-Talk

"I'm not good enough", "I'm going to fail", "everybody hates me", are examples of negative self-talk. Negative self-talk is when someone expresses something (verbal or written) about themselves or their lives in a negative sense. It is not uncommon for kids and teens to say negative things about themselves or engage in self-critical behavior from time to time. This can be a normal part of development as youth learn to navigate making mistakes, develop their sense of identity and experience ups and downs in self-esteem. While some of this may be harmless or simply a way for kids to seek reassurance, negative self-talk can also become an unhealthy pattern of behavior that might be reflective of a bigger problem such as a learning disability, low self-esteem, anxiety or depression.

When a caring adult hears a child or teen say something like, "I'm so stupid" or "nobody likes me", it may be tempting to respond with, "you're one of the smartest kids I know" or "you have lots of friends". This type of feedback may not be helpful for youth to hear if they don't believe it for themselves. Experts in the field of child and adolescent development offer the following alternatives to help reframe negative self-talk:



- **Listen, validate and empathize-** offer a safe place for children/teens to share difficult feelings and concerns.
- **Provide an alternative way of viewing themselves-** help the child or teen think of some examples that disprove the negative expression they have made. For example, if they are claiming to be stupid, remind them of an obstacle they have overcome or any other accomplishment.
- **Explore the statement-** ask probing questions such as, "what's happened that makes you feel that way?". Remain curious and get more information from the young person about what thoughts and emotions may be behind the negative expression.
- **Normalize mistakes and failure-** kids may engage in negative self-talk when they are frustrated or discouraged over doing something wrong or not doing something well enough. It is important to let youth know that mistakes and failures are a normal part of life. Guide kids to learn and grow from these experiences by offering supportive, constructive feedback and recognition of their effort.
- **Model a growth mindset**

It is important to pay attention to negative self-talk because it can be a symptom of a larger issue that a child/teen may be experiencing. If the behavior is persistent and negatively impacting the

child's life, or if it is linked to concerning shifts in mood and behavior, professional support can help. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is an effective approach that can help youth identify and reframe negative thinking patterns, while helping them to build confidence and learn problem solving skills. Talk to your family doctor or seek out help from a mental health professional to get extra guidance.

References: American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry; American Academy of Pediatrics; Child Mind Institute; Psychology Today