



Perfectionism in Children

By Leah Davies, M.Ed.

Children who have perfectionist tendencies exhibit a continuum of behaviors. On one end of the spectrum are children who take pleasure from doing difficult tasks, setting high standards for themselves, and putting forth the necessary energy for great achievement. On the other end of the continuum are those children who are unable to glean satisfaction from their efforts due to their preset, unrealistic goals. Since mistakes are unacceptable, perfectionism provides these students with little pleasure and much self-reproach.

Perfectionism appears to result from a combination of inborn tendencies and environmental factors. These can include excessive praise or demands from parents, teachers or trainers, observation of adults modeling perfectionist characteristics, and from parental love being conditional upon the child's exemplary achievement. Extreme perfectionism has been linked to performance and social anxiety, eating disorders, migraine headaches, obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, and suicide. When this behavior obstructs growth in the areas of achievement and social relationships, these children need assistance from educators.

Some characteristics of children who are extreme perfectionists:

- having exceptionally high expectations for themselves;
- being self-critical, self-conscious and easily embarrassed;
- having strong feelings of inadequacy and low self-confidence;
- exhibiting persistent anxiety about making mistakes;
- being highly sensitive to criticism;
- procrastinating and avoiding stressful situations or difficult tasks;
- being emotionally guarded and socially inhibited;
- having a tendency to be critical of others;
- exhibiting difficulty making decisions and prioritizing tasks;
- experiencing headaches or other physical ailments when they perform below the expectations of themselves or others.

Gifted children, who are accustomed to excelling, are often perfectionists. Problems occur if they refuse to attempt a new assignments or do not complete their work because it may not be done flawlessly. The result is gifted children who are underachievers. These students are also susceptible to burn-out if they attempt to display exemplary performance in every academic discipline (see Gifted Children).

Teachers and/or school counselors may help children who exhibit extreme perfectionism in the following ways:

1. Admit to making mistakes and model constructive coping skills.
2. Provide a calm, uncluttered, and structured environment.
3. Create opportunities for success that will enhance the student's self-confidence.
4. Comment on the child's strengths and accomplishments. Do this privately when deemed appropriate or write down constructive observations.
5. Avoid comparing students.
6. If possible, reduce the academic pressure on these children by altering the grading system.
7. Involve them in setting realistic standards for themselves.
8. Have frequent teacher/child meetings that include student evaluation of his or her work.
9. Use listening and other communication skills (see Effective Communication).
10. Challenge their belief that they are failures when they make a mistake and provide a more rational evaluation.
11. Give specific praise (see Effective Praise).

12. Help these students understand that it is impossible to complete every task without making mistakes.
13. Teach them to revise, start again, and learn from their errors.
14. Challenge them to be courageous and to try difficult tasks.
15. Provide support if they perform at a lower level than expected.
16. Provide opportunities for these children to become comfortable with ambiguous situations.
17. Use terms such as "admirable work" rather than "perfect" or "brilliant."
18. Emphasize the need to change the goal from perfection to completion for those students who procrastinate.
19. Teach them to prioritize tasks and to break assignments or projects down into manageable parts.
20. Assign biographies of successful people who overcame failure, persevered and achieved greatness; for example, Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, and Helen Keller.
21. Teach the children to develop and use positive "self-talk" (see Encouraging Thoughts).
22. Help them learn ways to cope with negative self-appraisal or criticism from others.
23. Promote relaxation techniques such as listening to soothing music, counting backward, walking, participating in a hobby or reading.
24. Teach the steps to problem-solving (See Building Character in Students) and strategies to deal with the pressure to excel.
25. Ask these students to identify areas of their life that they can control and those they cannot.
26. Have them examine the advantages and disadvantages of perfectionism in their lives.
27. Ask the children to keep a journal expressing their thoughts and feelings.
28. Help them understand that saying disparaging things about themselves is detrimental to their well-being, as well as to their social development.
29. Help these students learn how to be more generous in their comments toward peers, teachers and others.
30. Encourage constructive peer interaction through group work.

Counselors or teachers may assist the parents of these students by taking the following steps:

1. Stress that their child needs to experience unconditional love and respect.
2. Help them understand that too much pressure to be perfect is detrimental to their child's emotional well-being and self-confidence; for example, it says, "You are not good enough the way you are."
3. Support parental self-acceptance of their errors and acceptance of their child's mistakes.
4. Encourage them to acknowledge without judgment their child's negative emotions such as frustration and anxiety.
5. Stress that high standards are important, but that there is a difference between perfectionism and excellence.
6. Encourage them to model perseverance, as well as coping skills when dealing with disappointments.
7. Ask the parents to examine their competitiveness and, when necessary, to decrease their emphasis on winning.
8. Caution parents not to compare their children and thus instill rivalry among them.
9. Ask them to explore and agree on realistic goals for the child.
10. Suggest that a parent engage in a journal exchange if their child has difficulty expressing his or her concerns. For example, the parent writes a thought in a journal and puts it under the child's pillow. The

child responds in writing and puts it under the parent's pillow. The exchange of ideas continues. Since what is written is only discussed if the child is in danger of hurting him or herself or others, the child feels free to write down his or her deepest thoughts and fears. This method assists parents in discovering problems the child may have and serves to reinforce parent-child bonding.

Children who suffer from extreme perfectionism need assistance from the adults in their lives. They may also need help from a professional therapist. The goal would be to reduce their perfectionists tendencies to the point of having them become an asset rather than a liability.

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