

Six Ways to Help Your Perfectionist Child Find Balance

By Annabella Hagen, LCSW, RPT-S

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Four-year-old Max would crumple his paper when his drawing wasn't perfect. He would start over, and often grow angry and eventually give up. His parents noticed his rigidity, but hoped he would grow out of it. When he was seven, the demands on himself and others were still troubling him and his family. His parents were frustrated.

Are your children inflexible? Do they set high standards that overwhelm them? Do they complain of not having friends and feeling isolated? Do they procrastinate often? Do they go from one extreme to the other with certain behaviors, such as being studious and responsible academically to not caring at all? Do they beat themselves up and feel like a failure when things don't go their way?

When children are perfectionists, many parents get discouraged and desperately look for answers. Creating opportunities for your children to experience balance is essential, and your example is critical. You can help them moderate their unhealthy perfectionism. The following concepts are an excellent start:

Language and attitude. Your children watch the way you react to adversity. Statements such as, "If I don't get this project done, I'll never be happy. If my boss doesn't like my report, I'll just die!" imply absolute thinking and negativity. When something doesn't turn out the way you wished, say something like, "I worked hard and enjoyed making it. I'm pleased it's good enough; it doesn't have to be perfect." When your child creates something, instead of saying, "It looks perfect!," say, "I see you're pleased with your creation." Catch yourself being negative and find alternative and positive ways to express your frustrations, and help your children do the same.

Expectations. When Jenni brought her report card with mostly A's but one C, her parents said, "Good job Jenni! Hopefully you'll get that C to an A next term!" Jenni may interpret this and conclude, "I've got to get all A's to make my parents happy. They may not love me enough if I don't." Our children need to know that

we love them unconditionally and that we notice their efforts. We need to encourage them to do their best, but if “C” work is the best that they can do, then “C” work is the goal. Children need to understand that perfect scores are not critical and that they are loved no matter what.

Talents. When children have a talent and wish to develop it, it’s wonderful. Celebrate their successes, but don’t overdo it. That can lead to their becoming dependent on your praise to feel good about themselves. Also, they themselves may focus on a misplayed music note, a misstep during their dance recital, or a blotch on their painting. Don’t dismiss it by saying, “Oh, don’t worry. No one noticed it. It’s okay. You did great!” Trying to fix things or minimizing the situation won’t solve your child’s distress. When they are upset, acknowledge their feelings and validate them. Later on, you can talk about the positive sides of the situation and teach them how to cope. Model coping skills for them each day.

Opportunities to succeed and to fail. When children are perfectionists, what they resist the most is making mistakes for fear of being judged or [being rejected](#) by others. Through play and games, they can learn to have fun even when they lose. For instance, young Alice was a budding perfectionist and loved playing board games. When she lost, a meltdown was guaranteed. Her parents began to “randomly” let her win and lose as they played. They modeled positive language and attitude. They played often enough that she learned it was okay to lose sometimes. As your children get older, look for opportunities for them to succeed and prepare them to fail. Talk about people they admire and how despite appearing to be perfect, they also make mistakes. Read their stories about how these people learned to cope. Do your children see you laugh at your own mistakes and accept them? Model self-compassion and tolerance. They need to learn to be comfortable with being uncomfortable, because that’s part of life.

Connect with your children. Plato once said, “You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.” Playing and doing something your children enjoy and hanging out with them is an opportunity for you to enter their world, and for them to know you care and understand them. Listening to your teenagers talk about their stresses and fears is priceless. As you maintain the right emotional connection with your perfectionist child, things will go more smoothly in difficult times. Your unconditional love and genuine interest will help your children weather the storms because they’ll know there is an anchor.

Teach them to focus on the process, not the end result. I once met a young athlete who was very talented in his sport. Whenever his team lost, he would feel like a failure. He was experiencing some thinking errors as he attributed the losses to himself. He had forgotten his teammates were also responsible for losing. The pressure he was inflicting on himself caused him to be anxious, and prevented him from playing to his potential. Playing for this particular team had been his life dream; unfortunately, the sport had now become a burden. He learned to recognize and change his thinking errors. He focused on the things he could control such as his work ethic, his attitude, and his preparation for competition. He was able to love playing again and also began playing to his potential.

Help your children understand that doing their personal best is all they can do. Step by step, they'll learn that they can't win all the time. The sooner they learn this concept, the happier they'll be.

Remember that being driven and determined are helpful attributes; you have probably seen them benefit yourself. When your children are determined and prepared to accept failure, they will value their successes. When they can laugh and pick themselves up after a fall, you will know they are on their way to enjoying life despite imperfection.

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