

Perfectionism: Helping Handout for School and Home

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INTRODUCTION

Perfectionism means that students set high, rigid standards and often feel upset when those standards are not met. Sometimes this trait can be healthy and help students achieve their goals and perform well in school and other activities. Other times perfectionism can be unhealthy and cause students to become too critical of themselves and others and to have meltdowns over small mistakes. It can even lead to mental health difficulties such as anxiety and depression (Affrunti & Woodruff-Borden, 2014).

Students can display many different perfectionistic behaviors. For example, some perfectionistic students may check and change their work a number of times before turning in an assignment. Other perfectionistic students may find a mistake, give up on that assignment, and turn in uncompleted work. Both groups of students are perfectionistic but the perfectionistic behaviors they show are different and may lead to different problems (Adelson & Wilson, 2009). Common problems that perfectionistic children struggle with are procrastination, emotional explosiveness, stress and anxiety, headaches, low self-esteem, fatigue, and shyness. If unhealthy perfectionism is left untreated it may get worse over time (Herman, Wang, Trotter, Reinke, & Jalongo, 2013). However, with appropriate intervention, perfectionism can be changed.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

The strategies used to address perfectionism will depend on where problems are observed. For example, in addition to academic concerns, perfectionists may also be concerned with social

situations, organizing of materials, or body image (Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). Although there is no strict rule to determine when perfectionism becomes problematic, it can be helpful to look at a child's emotions. That is, if a child enjoys the process of applying effort and is able to flexibly solve problems, then perfectionism may not be problematic. However, if a child is overly anxious about making mistakes, is unsatisfied by hard work, and engages in black-and-white thinking (i.e., either the effort was perfect or it was worthless), then perfectionism may be problematic. When wanting to do well is more important than all other aspects of an activity (e.g., enjoyment), or when it causes a child to avoid activities for fear of failure, intervention may be needed.

Selecting an intervention will depend on a child's age and development. For example, young children may not have the self-awareness to understand their perfectionism and discuss how it affects them. Older children and adolescents may be better able to focus on long-term goals, whereas younger children will likely need short-term goals.

Practical considerations should also be taken into account. For example, some interventions may require parents, peers, teachers, and the school working together. The coordination required here may limit how, when, and where certain interventions can be implemented. Some interventions require daily, weekly, and monthly follow-up over a longer term while other interventions work in the short term. It may not be practical to implement multiple long-term interventions, which may work slowly, without associated short-term interventions. Matching the intervention selection to practical considerations allows the student to make optimal progress.

The following are four steps to use when considering which intervention to select:

- Identify the perfectionistic behaviors to target.
- Identify what areas of life the child is perfectionistic about.
- Consider the appropriate skills to target for the child's age and development.
- Consider the practicalities of specific recommendations.

Two sets of recommendations are provided— one primarily for teachers and the other for parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND SCHOOLS

These recommendations depend on a number of factors, reviewed above, and should be used as part of a clear plan with specific goals in mind. The recommendations are separated into three groups: teacher behaviors, activity recommendations, and opportunity recommendations.

Teacher Behaviors

1. **Praise effort over results.** Perfectionistic students often believe that results are all that matters. When they do well, they are rewarded for being perfectionistic and thus believe more strongly that results are all that matters. Communicate to perfectionistic students that effort, how hard they try, is as important as the results they get.
2. **Emphasize realistic goals.** Perfectionistic students may set unrealistic goals and then stick to those goals. When possible, refocus students to more realistic goals that they can accomplish. Make sure these goals are specific and within the control of the student. For example, instead of having the goal of getting an A on a test, use the goal of studying for 60 minutes that night. Students may not control how difficult the test is for them, but they can control how long they study for it. By teaching students how to set specific and realistic goals, students learn to keep their expectations grounded.
3. **Break down long-term goals.** Breaking down long-term goals into intermediate and short-term goals decreases the likelihood that a student will procrastinate. Identify daily and weekly goals and support the completion of these goals through regular check-ins with the student.

4. **Encourage appropriate risk-taking.** Perfectionistic students often become very nervous about taking risks for fear of making mistakes. Helping students to take an appropriate risk (e.g., answering questions when they aren't sure of the answer) can allow them to see that making mistakes is not as scary as they think.
5. **Focus on process.** *Process* refers to all the steps required to complete something. Perfectionistic students tend to focus only on the finished product and the outcome and overlook the process that gets them to that point. By engaging students in the process of completing something, you help reduce their focus on the outcome.
6. **Use rubrics.** Using rubrics to evaluate academic work allows students to know exactly what is expected of them and where they can improve. Perfectionistic students may misinterpret errors they make, become critical of themselves, and become upset. Rubrics lessen this problem by showing perfectionistic students how they can effectively address errors.

Activity Recommendations

7. **Practice test-taking.** Allow perfectionistic students to practice the skill of taking tests. Tests can seem overwhelming and be the source of much anxiety for perfectionistic students. By practicing this skill, students can become more confident in their ability to take tests, lessening their anxiety about them.
8. **Use cooperative activities.** Perfectionistic students are often competitive with others in the class or school. Provide cooperative activities in which students compete against time or a common problem, rather than against each other. Such activities allow perfectionistic students to learn how to interact with others without having to compete with them.
9. **Outline group member responsibilities.** When perfectionistic students work in groups, they may feel the need to control the whole group. By outlining specific responsibilities for the group members, you can help students feel less compelled to control others in the group and work more collaboratively with them.
10. **Use peer-based activities.** Perfectionistic students may misinterpret what peers think of them and may be shy around peers for fear of making mistakes. By setting up activities that are run by

and engage peers, you allow students to test these thoughts. For example, have students say one thing they did well in class that day and one thing they noticed someone else did well in class that day, going through the whole class.

11. **Use creative assignments.** Creative assignments such as art and writing tend to have looser rules around what is correct and what is wrong. These assignments reduce perfectionistic students' focus on outcomes (e.g., getting an A) and increase focus on their work.
12. **Encourage flexible problem-solving.** Perfectionistic students often get stuck on a certain way of thinking about and responding to problems. Use riddles, logic puzzles, and ambiguous problems to help students think in new ways and get unstuck.

Opportunity Recommendations

13. **Provide opportunities for rough drafts and extra chances.** Perfectionistic students can take a long time to complete an assignment or a test. Instead of forcing them to finish before they are ready, which can increase feelings of anxiety and stress, build in time for a rough draft or an extra chance. You can reduce anxiety by allowing students time to practice or to formulate thoughts before they experience the stress of an assignment or test.
14. **Provide opportunities for new challenges.** Giving perfectionistic students new challenges helps them learn to face their fears of trying things they may not excel at. This can help these students see that making errors is part of learning and not cause for distress. The type of challenge will depend on the child but can include reading aloud in class or guessing answers about unfamiliar subjects. For example, ask the student about something new he or she would like to do and to report back to the class on it.
15. **Provide opportunities to discuss mistakes.** Perfectionistic students need to learn not to feel judged for the mistakes they make. One way to do this is by fostering opportunities for discussing mistakes. Building this into classroom routines removes some of the stigma in making mistakes that a perfectionistic student may assume. It can also show the student that mistakes are common and can be corrected.
16. **Provide opportunities to externalize perfectionism.** This recommendation may be more appropriate for younger children, but it can help students to

see perfectionism as something they have to push against. By making that a tangible thing (e.g., the "perfectionism monster"), students can fight against something. Allow students to write how they combat their perfectionism monster and how they are able to beat it.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE HOME

Recommendations for parents to implement at home are detailed here. Some recommendations focus on strategies for parents and others focus on students' coping strategies.

Recommendations for Parents

17. **Promote a growth mind-set.** A growth mind-set values effort and intention over results and outcomes. You can help promote this by saying "Good job trying your best to solve that problem," rather than "I can't believe you solved that problem. You're so smart." When children are praised for their effort, rather than just for the results, they begin to deemphasize the end results and put more emphasis on the process it takes to achieve something.
18. **Support making mistakes.** Perfectionistic students can see mistakes as a threat that they are unable to cope with. To change this, parents can be supportive when mistakes are made. Instead of punishing mistakes, discuss with your child what went wrong, why it happened, what your child learned from the mistake, and how to fix it in the future.
19. **Set priorities and help make plans.** Setting priorities and plans allows perfectionistic students to feel less overwhelmed by large projects and can help reduce procrastination. Make sure plans for completing a project are realistic and check in with your child to see if the plans are being followed. Don't be afraid to be flexible and make changes to the plan if your child is struggling to keep up.
20. **Reward work immediately.** Emphasize completing work, and reinforce your child immediately after the work is completed. Do not wait for a grade or an evaluation. Rewards can include extra screen time, choice of dessert, selection of a movie to watch or game to play, or specific praise (e.g., "Great job completing your assignment. You worked really hard on it!"). By rewarding immediately after completing work, you are helping your child learn the importance of valuing effort over results.

21. **Reward new activities.** Getting perfectionistic students to try new things can be difficult. To make this easier, provide chances for your child to earn rewards for doing new activities. Often activities can be rewarding in themselves, but children may need extra motivation to engage in these activities for the first time.
22. **Support, do not control.** When perfectionistic children struggle with an assignment or activity, they may seek someone to step in and take over for them. Instead of solving the problem for them, support them in finding their own solution. Help your child explore the problem, come up with solutions, and then try those solutions, even if they don't all work. Practicing this process of problem solving creates a sense of confidence in children that they can solve their own problems.

Recommendations for Supporting Students

23. **Discuss perfectionistic thoughts and behaviors.** Perfectionism can be confusing to some students. They are told to achieve highly and may see perfectionism as helpful in allowing them to achieve their goals. By discussing healthy and unhealthy perfectionism, students can learn that they can still achieve their goals even without having the negative outcomes of unhealthy perfectionism. For example, healthy perfectionists might try their best but enjoy learning from mistakes, but unhealthy perfectionists will become upset or be scared of making mistakes.
24. **Use perfectionism diaries.** Perfectionism diaries are written accounts of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors around perfectionism. For children who are able to write, set aside 10 minutes every day for them to write about situations in which they felt perfectionistic. Have them describe the thoughts they had and what they did during that time. This makes students better able to identify and cope with situations that produce perfectionism.
25. **Review coping strategies.** Set a time every week to discuss how to cope with perfectionism when it comes up. Present examples from real life. For example, if a child struggles with perfectionism in social situations, have the child plan how to cope with those feelings during lunch (e.g., I'll use some relaxation skills and talk to one new person at lunch).
26. **Structure homework time.** For perfectionistic children who spend too long on assignments, set aside a specific time for homework to be

completed. Use a timer and let them know when time is up. Discuss your child's feelings of anxiety and of stress about stopping work early. This approach allows students to practice working in shorter intervals and to process negative feelings they may have when doing so.

27. **Discuss movies, shows, and books with flawed characters.** Perfectionistic students may see flaws, errors, and mistakes as things that need to be avoided at all costs. By discussing characters who are flawed, you can help the student gain perspective on how others cope with not being perfect. Focus on achievements the character is able to accomplish despite having flaws.
28. **Play cooperative games.** Competitive games often reward perfectionistic behaviors. Cooperative games teach students to work with others to meet goals, rather than trying to win at any cost. For example, have children pass an object from one side of the room to another without letting it touch the floor and without moving or using their hands. Such games can also help students see novel solutions to problems and help them learn new problem-solving strategies.
29. **Try new activities.** Perfectionistic students may be fearful of attempting new activities because they have a fear of failure. Make a list of new activities your child might like to try without being concerned about how the child will perform. Using that list, make a plan to try some of those activities, starting with those that might be easiest.
30. **Teach relaxation strategies.** With perfectionism comes stress and anxiety. Find and regularly practice relaxation strategies such as progressive muscle relaxation or deep breathing exercises. Learning to do these well takes time. Start by trying these during less stressful times until the student is familiar and confident with them, then use them during stressful periods.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

youth.anxietybc.com

The Anxiety Disorders Association of British Columbia (AnxietyBC) provides evidence-based resources for children who struggle with perfectionism focusing on step-by-step instructions for parents and additional resources for children with anxiety.

Books

Adelson, J. L., & Wilson, H. E. (2009). *Letting go of perfect: Overcoming perfectionism in kids*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

This detailed book provides an overview of different types of perfectionism kids experience and different strategies to manage them. Written for parents, it is a valuable and comprehensive book for helping all sorts of perfectionistic children.

Antony, M. M., & Swinson, R. P. (2009). *When perfect isn't good enough: Strategies for coping with perfectionism*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

This book provides a systematic approach to overcome perfectionistic thinking and behaviors. Appropriate for adolescents and parents, it provides a number of strategies to address perfectionism and explains how and why they will work.

Greenspon, T. S. (2007). *What to do when good enough isn't good enough: The real deal on perfectionism. A guide for kids*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.

This book is written for kids (9–13 years but appropriate for most ages) and focuses on perfectionism and its impact on school. It provides a number of exercises to help kids understand and cope with perfectionism and includes a section for parents.

Related Helping Handouts

Test and Performance Anxiety: Helping Handout for School and Home

Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

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