

SYLVIA RIMM

On Raising Kids



A Newsletter to Help Parents and Teachers

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WHAT'S WRONG WITH PERFECT?

Excellence is Excellent

We want our children to strive for excellence. It is attainable and provides a good sense of accomplishment. Furthermore, excellence is advantageous whether it involves children's school grades, ice skating, music, art, gymnastics, written work, or many other skills. It sets high standards and opens doors to opportunity for talented children.



*Good, better, best
Never let it rest,
'Til your good is better
And your better best.*

The Pressures of Perfectionism

The pressures of perfectionism may lead to high positive achievement motivation or to underachievement. In very important ways, perfectionism is slightly different than the motivation for excellence. That small dissimilarity prevents perfectionistic children from ever feeling good enough about themselves and precludes their taking risks when they fear the results will not be perfect.

*When perfectionism becomes
pervasive and compulsive, it goes
beyond excellence.*

Many talent areas demand excellence. Thus, the striving for perfection in an area of expertise may be a healthy development of talent. However, when perfectionism becomes pervasive and compulsive, it goes beyond excellence. It leaves no room for error. It provides little satisfaction and much self-criticism because the results never feel good enough to the doer. Perfection is impossible for children who apply impossibly high standards to too many activities too frequently.

They may procrastinate or feel anxious and fearful when they believe they cannot meet their high standards. They may experience stomachaches, headaches, and depression when they worry that they make mistakes or don't perform as well as their perfectionistic expectations. Sometimes they avoid accomplishing the most basic work and make excuses and blame others for their problems. They may even become defiant and rebellious to hide their fear of failure.

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Some children may only be specifically or partially perfectionistic. For example, some are perfectionistic about their grades and intellectual abilities; others may be perfectionistic about their clothes and their appearance; some are perfectionistic about their athletic prowess or their musical or artistic talent; some are perfectionistic about their room organization and cleanliness; and some children (and incidentally, also some adults) are perfectionistic in two or three areas, although there are some areas that apparently don't pressure or bother them at all. Those children who have not generalized perfectionism to all parts of their lives are more likely to be healthy perfectionists.

Perfectionism Affects Others

Unhealthy perfectionism not only affects the perfectionist but also affects those around them. In their efforts to feel very good about themselves, perfectionists may unconsciously cause others to feel less good. Spouses, siblings, or friends of



perfectionists may feel angry and oppositional and may not understand their own irrational feelings. Sometimes family members feel depressed and inadequate because they can't ever measure up to the impossibly high standards of their family perfectionist. Often times, there is an underachiever in the family to balance out

the perfectionist. The underachiever feels like they can never do as well as their perfect sibling so they say to themselves, "Why try?"

Perfectionists may unconsciously put others down and point out how imperfect they are.

In order for perfectionists to maintain their perfect status, they may unconsciously put others down and point out how imperfect they are, usually in a very "nice" way. For example, perfect sister Sally may say, "I don't understand why my brother isn't even trying to do his homework." Giving others continuous

unsolicited advice seems to reassure perfectionists of how intelligent they are. They are so determined to be impossibly perfect that causing others to feel bad has an unconsciously confirming effect on their own perfectionism. The perfectionistic spouse, in his or her effort to feel best, may also cause his or her partner to feel inadequate or less intelligent.

What Causes Perfectionism?

The pressures children feel to be perfect may originate from extreme praise they hear from the adults in their environment. The pressures may also come from watching their parents model perfectionistic characteristics, or they may simply stem from their own continuously successful experiences, which they then feel they must live up to. Genetics and temperament also make their contribution.

Particularly certain activities like ballet, gymnastics, and music encourage perfect performance, and children involved in these activities strive to meet the high standards expected of them. This may be healthy, or children may generalize these expectations of perfection to other parts of their lives, and perfectionism can become problematic.



See Jane Win Research

When we studied the childhoods of more than 1,000 successful women for our book *See Jane Win*, we found that thirty percent of the women viewed themselves as perfectionistic when they were in high school. For the most part, their perfectionism was positive. Approximately half of the women felt pressured in high school, but they typically liked feeling pressure and considered it to be a personal pressure.

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NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIPTIONS

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Charlotte Otto*, Vice President at Procter and Gamble, initially struggled with perfectionism in her career. At first she struggled with accepting criticism but realized how to improve with the constructive help she received instead of letting it debilitate her. She learned to affirm instead of blaming herself.

There were some exceptions. For example, television news anchor Donna Draves quit many childhood activities shortly after starting them. She would tell her parents that the activity was “boring.” Donna admitted in her interview that she would drop out if she was not “best” in the activity. She would never attempt activities like sports and math because she considered her brother “best” at those. Fortunately, she was “best” at speech, and she carried excellence in speech to her career. Donna’s perfectionism even affected her eating habits. Although she was a size three, she continuously compared herself to two other girls in her class who were “skinnier” than her. She felt unattractive unless she was the thinnest. Donna is successful today, but the near pitfalls of perfectionism could easily have derailed her and prevented her from “making the mark” she so wished to make.



Violinist Pamela Frank* described herself as perfectionistic, but her parents taught her how to deal with her mistakes with a sense of humor. When eight-year-old Pamela made a mistake while performing for her grandparents at their home, she retreated to a backroom to pout. Her parents broke into her pouting by saying, “So who do you think you are, Itzhak Perlman?” Laughter often dispels the most serious perfectionism.



* From *How Jane Won* by Sylvia B. Rimm, Ph.D., 2001, Crown Publishing.

How Parents and Teachers Can Help Perfectionists

- ➔ Help kids to understand that they can feel satisfied when they’ve done *their* best; not necessarily *the* best. Praise statements that are enthusiastic but more moderate convey values that children can achieve; for example, “excellent” is better than “perfect,” and “You’re a good thinker” is better than “You’re brilliant.” Also, avoid comparative praise; “You’re the best” makes kids think they must be the best to satisfy you.
- ➔ Explain to children that they may not be learning if all of their work in school is perfect. Help them understand that mistakes are an important part of challenge.
- ➔ Teach appropriate self-evaluation and encourage children to learn to accept criticism from adults and other students. Explain that they can learn from the recommendations of others.
- ➔ Read biographies together that demonstrate how successful people experienced and learned from failures. Emphasize their failure and rejection experiences as well as their successes. Help children to identify with the feelings of those eminent persons as they must have felt when they experienced their rejections. Stories from *How Jane Won* will be helpful to discuss.
- ➔ Share your own mistakes and model the lessons you learned from your mistakes. Talk to yourself aloud about learning from your mistakes so children understand your thinking.
- ➔ Humor helps perfectionists. (Remember Pamela Frank’s story.) Help children to laugh at their mistakes.
- ➔ Teach children empathy and how bragging affects others. Help them to put themselves in the position of others. Say, “Suppose you messed up on your piano recital and Jennifer, the winner, told you that she had her best performance ever. How would you feel?”

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➔ Show children how to congratulate others on their successes. They will feel they are coping better as they congratulate others.

➔ Teach children routines, habits, and organization, but help them to understand that their habits should not be so rigid that they can't change them. Purposefully break routines so your children are not enslaved by them. For example, if they make their beds daily, permit them to skip a chore on a day when you're in a hurry. If you read to them at night and it's late, insist they go to sleep without reading. Occasional breaks in routines will model flexibility and prevent them from feeling compulsive about habits.



➔ Teach children creative problem-solving strategies and how to brainstorm for ideas that will keep their self-criticism from interfering with their productivity.

➔ Explain to children that there is more than one correct way to do most everything.

➔ If your child is an underachiever and avoids effort because he fears not achieving perfection, help him to gradually increase his effort and show him how that relates to his progress. Emphasize that effort counts.

➔ If your child is a high achiever, but overstudies for fear of not receiving an A+, help her to gradually study a little less to show her it has only a little effect on her grade. Help her to feel satisfied with her excellent grades with the reasonable amount of study involved. She needs to balance work with fun.



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➔ Be a role model of healthy excellence. Take pride in the quality of your work but don't hide your mistakes or criticize yourself constantly. Congratulate yourself when you've done a good job, and let your children know that your own accomplishments give you satisfaction. Don't overwork. You, too, need to have some fun and relaxation.

➔ If your child's perfectionism is preventing accomplishment, or if your child shows symptoms of anxiety related to perfectionism, like stomachaches, headaches, or eating disorders, get professional psychological help for your child and your family.

The dilemma for parents and teachers is to balance helping children to be successful and "good kids" without also causing them to be burdened by the negative side effects of too much pressure to be the best. The childhood rhyme in the introduction of this article summarizes the problem well. We want our children to grow up to work hard and take pride in their work, but if they "never let it rest," they will never feel the satisfaction they have earned.

Family Achievement Clinic **Sylvia B. Rimm, Ph.D., Director**

Family Achievement Clinic specializes in working with capable children who are not performing to their abilities in school. Gifted children are the clinic's specialty. The clinic also offers a comprehensive range of psychological services centered on children, adolescents, and their families. Services include therapy for underachievement syndrome, attention deficit disorders, anxieties, and oppositional problems; as well as parenting and marriage therapy, divorce counseling, and career planning.

For appointments,
Cleveland, OH 216-839-2273
Hartland, WI 800-795-7466

HELPING YOUR CHILDREN COPE WITH DIVORCE

Divorce is never easy on children or their parents. Although there are some differences in research on the permanent impact of divorce on children, all would agree that growing up in a two-parent, positive and happy family increases the likelihood that children will develop into healthy adults. A bad marriage is always stressful for BOTH adults and children, and research can't



prove with certainty whether a good divorce is better or worse than a bad marriage. Divorcing parents usually wish to know how to support their children through a divorce and help them adjust as well as possible afterwards. If you're considering a divorce or have already divorced, here are some guidelines that may help you and your children during this difficult time:

- If there's even a small chance that your marriage may improve with counseling, make the attempt. All marriages go through crises, and many marriages improve with outside help.
- Even if you conclude that it's impossible to save your marriage, seek counseling for a smoother divorce. Definitely provide your children with at least some brief counseling. They'll want a safe person to talk to, and talking to either of their parents during this stressful time may cause them to feel "caught in the middle."
- Both parents should assure the children of their love and explain that the divorce was not caused by any of the children. Parents should also assure the children that they can continue to love both parents and don't have to take sides.
- Even if you believe the divorce was the fault of the other parent, don't blame the divorce on that parent when speaking to your children. Know that this is difficult to do when you feel angry or rejected.
- Don't confide in your children about intimate details of the divorce. Your oldest children, particularly, will often wish to take the role of confidant. Your children want the status of adults, but in the long run, treating them like an adult too soon will cause them to feel insecure. They often turn on the confiding parent and become more rebellious than typical during adolescence.
- Don't encourage your children to say negative things to you about their other parent. They may be tempted to do that in hopes of getting in your good graces. Don't say negative things to your children about their other parent.
- Emphasize positive achieving aspects of the other parent so that he or she can be a constructive role model. Children will see that person as a role model even if you describe the parent negatively. The more emphasis you put on the negative characteristics of the other parent, the more likely it is that your children will feel helpless to do anything about their own similar negative characteristics. If it's difficult to find positive characteristics about the other parent, don't say anything at all.
- Children who live with and visit parents in separate homes should have two places where they can learn about work and play. Avoid the image of one work parent and one play parent. Try to make their two home lives as consistent as possible.
- When you feel angry at your children's behavior, don't remind them that they're like the other parent. That will not help the children with any problem but will probably cause the children to believe they have no other choice but to be like that parent.

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- Don't get your children involved in your financial crises. That will either cause them to feel very anxious, blame the other parent, or see the other parent as the more powerful parent.

- Don't feel guilty about the divorce. No one is perfect. Guilt has never helped improve parenting skills. Time will heal the feelings of hurt and will put problems into perspective for your children if you and their other parent adjust to living in a reasonable relationship.



- Try to keep your life going forward. When you adjust well after a divorce, your children will look to you as a role model and will develop confidence in their ability to succeed in life. Bad divorces cause more stress for children. Adolescents whose parents have difficult divorces are more likely to become oppositional and abuse illegal substances.

- If the other parent is abusive or reluctant to keep a relationship going with the children, don't force or encourage that negative relationship. It will only result in your children being abused or feeling rejected by the other parent. It's better to move forward and help the children develop positive relationships with other important adults in their lives, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and close friends.

STEPPARENTING

Stepparenting can be a difficult role for most families. Think of the "wicked" image of Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters. Children have rarely or never been exposed to any stories of wonderful stepmothers or stepfathers. In their unconscious is only the expectation of a negative and feared relationship. Children don't want an adult who expects to displace a parent they love. It's probably a good idea to come into the family viewing yourself in a relationship similar to what an aunt or uncle might have with the child. Children are accustomed to both respecting and loving aunts and uncles, and if you describe your relationship to them that way, it may help them to accept you. Here are some other tips for stepparents that may help along the way:

- ☺ Don't begin as the disciplinarian. Discuss discipline issues privately with the children's parent.
- ☺ Change children's lives gradually. If you plan to marry their parent, join them for some, but not all, activities at first.
- ☺ Try a one-on-one excursion with the children to get to know them privately.
- ☺ Leave some time alone for the other parent and the children until you've been accepted.

- ☺ If stepchildren are joining you, recognize both the benefits of new friendships and the potential for new rivalries.
- ☺ Give children opportunities to express their fears and worries.



- ☺ Don't speak negatively about the children's other parent. If you can manage to, describe the other parent positively and respectfully. If you can't, say nothing.
- ☺ Be respectful and positive about the children's grandparents. You need them on your side, and the children should be allowed to enjoy their grandparents.
- ☺ Be patient. You're not the Brady Bunch yet, but there is potential for a good family life ahead.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SINGLE PARENTS

Thirty percent of children are brought up in single-parent homes. For the most part, single-parent homes are lead by women, although some are also lead by men. As a single parent, you may wonder if you're destined to have problem, underachieving children. Of course not, but your job is more difficult, and there are greater risks for your children. Here are some simple rules to guide you—simple only in that they're few and straightforward. In reality, they're terribly difficult for single parents to negotiate. Pat yourself on the back for each successful day; you deserve it.



✓ Find a career direction for your life to give you a sense of purpose and to build your personal self-confidence. Making your children your only purpose gives them power and causes them pressure that will be too stressful for them to manage.



✓ Find some adult social outlets for yourself. Don't feel guilty about enjoying yourself as an adult away from your children. Single-parent support groups can be helpful.

✓ Find a reliable childcare provider or day-care facility for your children. Consistency in care givers and surroundings is very important for young children.

✓ Treat your child as a child, not a toy to be played with nor an adult to be depended upon. Do not share your bed with your child (except during thunderstorms or in the morning). That is an adult status that you should maintain should you wish to have another adult partner.

✓ If your children come home from visitation and are unruly, don't blame that poor behavior on the other parent. Instead, tell them you're pleased they had a nice time, and if you can manage a nice comment about the other parent, they'll settle down more easily. They need to know they can love you both.



✓ Don't tell your children you will love them more than anyone else forever, or a new partner will cause them to believe you deceived them. They will feel rejected.

✓ Take time (you have little) to enjoy your children's achievements, keep them involved in activities, and encourage them to share home responsibilities.

✓ Have family meals together at least a few times a week instead of just nibbling food when people are hungry.

✓ As a single parent, you are a very important role model to your children. Be aware of what you say and do. They are imitating you.

✓ Stay close to extended family, if possible. Aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents help your children feel surrounded by love.

✓ Remember, many successful and happy children have been brought up in single-parent families.



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Single Parents (cont'd)

Below are three special rules for single mothers who are parenting boys:

- ✓ Boys should have adult males to serve them as role models. Find effective role models for your boys. Uncles, grandfathers, teachers, Boy Scout leaders, sports coaches, and Big Brothers may all be helpful to your sons in learning to be comfortable with their masculinity.
- ✓ If you don't view your children's natural father as an effective role model, absolutely don't tell your boys how much they look like and remind you of their father, especially when you're angry.
- ✓ Avoid power struggles with your children's father. If their father mistreats you and shows open disrespect toward you, your sons are likely to imitate this powerful but disrespectful behavior.



Columns in this newsletter are from Sylvia Rimm On Raising Kids newspaper column. If the column is not in your local paper, suggest it to the editor.

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Sylvia Rimm On Raising Kids Newspaper Column
online at www.creators.com/lifestylefeatures.html
(next, click Dr. Rimm's picture)

Student Stepping Stones

HOW TO PLAN A LONG-TERM ASSIGNMENT AND FIGHT PROCRASTINATION



- ◆ Determine how many study days remain between today and your due date for the assignment; for example, fifteen days.
- ◆ Divide the assignment into fifteen parts (or the number of days remaining). You may need some parent or teacher help in dividing the assignment, but here's an example:

FIVE DAYS	—	doing library research and note cards
ONE DAY	—	organizing note cards
TWO DAYS	—	forming an outline, three sections to outline
THREE DAYS	—	writing one section a day
TWO DAYS	—	revising and changing
ONE DAY	—	preparing final draft
ONE DAY	—	extra day in case needed

- ◆ Note each part of the assignment in your planner for each day it is to be accomplished.
- ◆ Leave one or two extra days at the end should any part of the assignment take more time than you expect.