

The Difference between Perfection and Excellence

Many of us who got to view the film “Race to Nowhere” last Spring, were horrified by the depiction of the pressure and stress that children today face, and its effect on their emotional well being. But, why should we be surprised? For many children the message they send to themselves is not to be the best they can be, but simply to be the best – or to be “perfect”. As I unpeel the layers of stress and anxiety, for many of the children that I see, perfectionism lies at the core of the problem. The children are focused on wearing the “perfect” clothes, getting “perfect” grades, having the “perfect” social life, and maintaining the “perfect” weight. Some are even worried about getting into the “perfect” college instead of focusing on getting through grade school. Some children divide their time between worrying what they did wrong in the past and worrying about how they will do in the future. In essence, they are missing the “here and now”. The goal of being perfect is unattainable, and is almost guaranteed failure. One will always fall short of this goal and the end result will be a feeling of helplessness and anxiety. Extreme perfectionism has even been linked to performance and social anxiety, eating disorders, migraine headaches, obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, and suicide.

As I look down at the mouse pad that I am using as I type this posting, I am looking at a blue ribbon in which the words read, “Jericho Schools, Excellence in Education Begins Here”. Jericho is known for its excellence, and of course, we should continue to strive for excellence. However, we must recognize that perfection and excellence is not the same thing. Perfectionism is about the fear of failure, while striving for excellence is the urge for success. Excellence is superior performance, persistence, and the commitment to do something exceptionally well. Excellence requires risk, effort, spontaneity, hard work, and extending yourself to reach your full potential. Perfectionism interrupts a natural curiosity to learn, inquire, and invent. It causes frustration, pressure, doubt, and constant self criticism. It is a misconception that people succeed because they are perfectionists. Rather, some people excel despite their perfectionism. Often in my counseling groups, with children who struggle with perfectionism, I read stories about “World’s Greatest Mistakes”. These stories tell about discoveries and/or insights that were made through mistakes. This shifts the focus from end product to process and highlights that mistakes are sometimes the most valuable part of a learning experience.

What are the signs that your child is perfectionistic as opposed to focused on excellence? Often, perfectionistic children focus on mistakes rather than what they did well. Many find it hard to laugh at themselves. They focus on end products rather than on the process of learning. Many have exceptionally high, often unrealistic expectations for themselves. They can be self critical, self conscious, and easily embarrassed. Perfectionistic children tend to have strong feelings of inadequacy and low self confidence, despite evidence to the contrary. They tend to avoid taking risks for fear of making mistakes. The fear of failure can be so strong that they freeze up, and never get started. Other perfectionistic children may get started, but have trouble completing projects (it never looks perfect enough to be finished). Some perfectionistic children have difficulty making decisions (for fear of making the wrong decision) and prioritizing tasks. They tend to be sensitive to criticism and can be emotionally guarded. Some gifted children, who are accustomed to excelling, may be especially vulnerable to

perfectionism. Unfortunately, I have seen very bright and talented students that seem to be chronic underachievers because they don't take the risk required to excel and achieve.

Where does perfectionism come from? It can stem from a combination of internal and environmental factors. Some perfectionistic children come from families that tend to be perfectionistic. However, societal pressure may have created some of these ideals, even if you as parents have not. Some children seem to have their own internal drive to be perfect, regardless of any familial or environmental force. If you recognize any of the abovementioned signs of perfectionism in your child, consider the following suggestions (adapted from Dr. Thomas S. Greenspon in his book, Freeing Our Families from Perfectionism) to help focus your child on striving for excellence without promoting perfectionism:

- Show children that you value them for who they are not for what they can do.
- Help your child understand that mistakes are a normal part of learning and growing up. Let your child know that being imperfect is safe in your home.
- Help your child to set realistic goals and action plans. No one should be expected to display exemplary performance in every area.
- Applaud children's risk taking efforts, even if they are not highly successful. If your child's first attempts at something are unsuccessful, reinforce them for persistence and not giving up.
- Involve your child in activities that are not competitive, graded, or judged.
- Help develop a "worst case scenario" for anxiety producing events to avoid the inaction perfectionism usually creates. Then create a back up plan for any imagined situation.
- Encourage a sense of humor. When a child can laugh at themselves, it is a sign that they accept their mistakes and accept themselves for who they are.
- Celebrate creativity and originality. Avoid comparing siblings to each other, and likewise avoid comparing children to their peers. Celebrate your child's own unique talents.
- Examine your own competitiveness and your emphasis on winning. Talk about your own mistakes that you have made, large or small.
- Try to avoid reactions such as "This is great, except for..." or "You did a great job, but..." That's like giving a compliment and taking it away in the same breath. Give the true compliment and save the critique for another time.

It is natural for parents and schools to encourage excellence. But remember, excellence is not only about high grades, awards, and top athletic teams. Excellence comes from the development of talent, critical thinking, and creative imagination. We must be clear not to confuse excellence with perfection. Excellence is openness to being wrong, while perfection is having to be right. Make sure that your child does not avoid a challenge because of their fear of failure. Encourage your child to take risks and make discoveries. Emphasize process not outcome. Reward effort along with accomplishment. As a community, we can ban together to reduce the stress and anxiety that is placed upon our children and that they place upon themselves. Let's eliminate perfectionism, but continue to encourage excellence. Perfection has limits, while excellence has none. For more information on helping your child deal with perfectionism, feel free to contact the psychologist's office at 203-3600 ext. 5286.

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