

“Perfectionism: Finding a Healthy Balance”

1. Do you see any perfectionism tendencies in your child or one you work with?
2. Do you agree or disagree with the article's statement, “For these children perfectionism seems to be an inborn temperament”?
3. As parents or teachers, do we model perfectionism?
4. Do you think any of the strategies mentioned would be effective with children?
Would any be effective for adults?

Add your own questions:



**SMPGs: The Heart of SENG
Perfectionism: Finding a Healthy Balance**

By Lori Comallie-Caplan

First Published in *The SENG Update* Newsletter, June 2010
http://www.sengifted.org/SMPG/smpg_june10_column.shtml

In 1981, SENG established guidelines for SENG Model Parent Support Groups (SMPGs). SMPGs bring together groups of interested parents of gifted and talented children to discuss such topics as motivation, discipline, stress management, and peer relationships. This column offers information and advice based on the experience of trained SMPG facilitators, both to apply in their own parent groups and for other parents to use and learn from. Learn more about the SMPG program at http://www.sengifted.org/smpg_parent_groups.shtml.

This month's column is about parents helping their gifted children with perfectionism. This topic speaks to my heart and is very important to me. For a time in my life, I had to introduce myself as, "My name is Lori, and I'm a recovering perfectionist." I was working hard to balance my perfectionism so it would be healthy for me. During childhood, all the way through my early thirties, perfectionism had invaded and influenced every facet of my life in an unhealthy manner. I had been diagnosed with diabetes, and the doctor was sure it was related to stress (stress that was much the result of unhealthy perfectionism). When I was in my unhealthy perfectionist stage, I was very isolated, because I wouldn't share any tasks (I couldn't trust others to do the task perfectly), or I would take on responsibilities that weren't mine, because I believed others couldn't do it as well as I could. I didn't enjoy leisure time because I always had to be "doing"; I was always the leader and never the follower, and it was important to me to be superwoman and for others to see me that way. I was a work-a-holic. Whew!!!!

As my son entered his elementary years, I knew I had to set a better example. I was worried that he may follow my example, and I didn't want him to struggle with the anxiety that I did. To my amusement, he was born as the most easy going, humorous, confident child I had ever known. Don't get me wrong: he is responsible, with an

incredible work ethic (without the unhealthy perfectionism), but he enjoys life with zest, passion, and an incredible sense of humor. He taught me how to balance wanting to be perfect with doing my best and enjoying the journey. The child teaches the parent.

In *A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children*, we read that "Parents of perfectionist gifted children may worry that they have created the perfectionism by expecting too much. Most often, they have not. Perfectionistic children show an inclination quite early in life to compare themselves against the high standards they set. For these children perfectionism seems to be an inborn temperament..." (p. 124). A child's inborn tendency towards perfectionism can be reinforced by parents who model perfectionism. As parents, we have great influence over whether our children's perfectionism will be healthy or unhealthy. I encourage you to read pages 136-148 of *A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children* for a number of strategies to help your child handle the stress and anxiety brought on by their perfectionism.

SENG Model Parent Group Facilitators from around the country have sent in the following tips for parents who are dealing with perfectionism in their children:

- Linda Collins says that she borrows from colleague, Linda Kapfer, who says, "Writing is

never done, it's due." Linda has expanded the idea for perfectionists: "I tell my children and my students that any kind of work (writing, art, rehearsals, studying, memorizing, practicing, planting a garden....apply the right word for the situation) is never done....it's just due. Work products, even what we consider to be an expression of an art form, usually come with a timeline and a deadline."

She adds, "Even adult professionals do not always feel the closure that a perfectionist desires, often craves to feel. We have deadlines. We realize that all work is a process and that we can work on something for one week or one year, and still not consider it our 'best' work. However, assignments or work, for all of us, comes with a due date. Our gifted students can come to grips with this uncomfortable, but practical, reality. Perfectionists may never relinquish a product as what they consider a completely finished piece, but they can relinquish it as it stands at the point in time that they are required to give it up. Work is never done; it is due. Just, due it."

- Terry Bradley lends out the book *Perfectionism: What's So Bad about Being Too Good?* (by Adderholdt and Goldberg) many times to both parents and students. She states, "It's very reader-friendly, and middle and high school students, especially, can get a lot of valuable information out of reading it. I've had students say, 'This book is written about ME.' The authors share the 'whys' of perfectionism, and also great strategies for coping with perfectionism. I think it's always important to stress to parents and students that it's not entirely reasonable to think they can 'get rid of' perfectionistic tendencies, but once they identify what is causing these tendencies, they can hopefully learn to manage them better."

Terry makes another important distinction to parents and students: "Perfectionism isn't always bad. If you are facing major surgery, you are hoping and praying that the surgeon is a perfectionist. Brainstorming what is 'positive' about perfectionism validates that it does have merit and immense value at times in our lives. I've always thought it was good advice to say, 'What one or two areas in your life would you like to try and seek perfection?' That allows validation in striving for

perfectionism in a specific area or two that individuals are most passionate about. There has to be a balance, though.

"Nobody should try to seek perfection in all areas of his/her life, but for perfectionists, allowing an area or two to at least focus the majority of their energy and passion, is not always a bad thing. Most of the discoveries, inventions, and breakthroughs we've had in our society have been as a result of the creator's persistence, passion, intensity, and perfectionism. Take the product 409 as an example: According to Wikipedia, it was named 409 because it took the inventors 409 tries to get the formula right. There are many other such examples like this in our country's history. Thomas Edison must have been thinking about his many failed attempts at producing an effective light bulb when he said, 'Genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration.' So, if we are to criticize perfectionism all together, we might be holding back the next original creation that could move our society forward," relays Terry.

- Annette Harrison shares this advice to assist with perfectionism: "Small failures beginning at early ages in safe and supportive environments, so these kiddos learn that failure is something that can be overcome, and, in fact, can be an opportunity for learning and growth."
- Jerry Schecter states, "When working with perfectionists, it's very important not to focus on the end product (e.g., the grade), but to focus on the effort or risk taken. Also, avoid being too strong with your comments (e.g., avoid words like "fantastic," "sensational," etc.), as these words tend to make children feel they need always to reach that level, thus increasing the perfectionism instead of decreasing those tendencies."
- Amy Price adds, "To reduce meltdowns and anxiety in our kindergarten aged son, we all adopted a family 'tradition' where every day we all told everyone what mistakes we made each day - our motto was you had a really great day if you made at least three mistakes! At the same time, we read stories about famous people that showed their failures and mistakes as well as their successes."
- Arlene DeVries shares the following tips for perfectionism: "Acknowledge that mistakes are opportunities for learning. Parents can

model discussing what they would do differently next time after they experience a 'mistake' or 'failure.' Students might read biographies of famous persons, such as Thomas Edison or Leonardo da Vinci, who had many failed experiments. Consider the sticky note pads or penicillin discovered by mistake. Know that good things can come from disappointments. When one thing doesn't work out, it allows time and opportunity to try another activity."

Arlene tells us, "It is important to set realistic goals and prioritize activities. Divide the goals into small, manageable parts. Celebrate the process and each step accomplished rather than taking pride only in the finished product. Set aside time for family activities. Some might be competitive, such as

board games, where students learn to take turns and experience winning and losing. Other events, such as hikes or picnics, provide opportunities to relax, laugh, and have fun."

Finally, "Three questions perfectionists can ask themselves:

1. What is the worst thing that could happen?
2. In the long run will it really matter?
3. Is this good enough?"

"Good enough" means that I gave my best effort and enjoyed the process. Children who enjoy and celebrate the process can be healthy perfectionists who live life with passion, creativity, and accomplishment.