

Five Ways To Parent A Perfectionist



By Signe Whitson, LSW

When I watch my seven-year old daughter agonize over handwriting homework and berate herself for missing one question on her 30-problem math test, I thank the gods of “good enough” that perfectionism was never my thing. And I ask those same gods for advice on how to help my child overcome her need to be flawless.

If you, too, are the parent of a perfectionist, here are some tips that I have found to be most effective:

1. Play up personal strengths and play down competitions

In school and at home, my daughter loves to win. My husband insists that this is a great quality and I know that in many ways, her desire for excellence will serve her well. Yet I also know that too much of a good thing can be rough, especially for young kids who hold themselves to impossibly high standards. When my daughter seems singularly focused on being the “best” reader in her class or getting the “highest” score in math, we try to re-focus her energies on achieving personal bests and celebrating individual accomplishments instead. She is visibly calmer and more confident when she attends to her own goals rather than comparing herself to others.

2. Encourage practice of new skills

I am a runner. Late last year, my daughter decided that she wanted to be one too. She asked to participate in a community running series, designed for kids her age. Leading up to the first event, she talked endlessly about her enthusiasm for the upcoming races. After the first one, in which she placed 5th out of 56 kids, I was sure I had gained a running companion. Instead, she said she was hanging up her running shoes. Not one to give up as easily, I helped her to re-frame the events as “fun runs” rather than as “races” and encouraged her to think about each event as running practice. While many perfectionistic kids believe that if they are not good at something right away, they might as well give up on it entirely, my daughter benefitted from learning that practice was the road to excellence.

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3. Provide opportunities to try out new things

The week after the “running incident,” my daughter told me that she didn’t want to participate in a Kid’s Art Workshop sponsored by the students at our local high school. I was initially surprised, since she loves art and would have been attending with her best friend. When I asked her about it, she admitted that she didn’t want to get there and feel embarrassed in front of the “big kids” if her project wasn’t good enough. As with many perfectionists, my little one was “evading risk.” My challenge was to encourage her to take a chance—to realize that the benefits of having fun with a friend and enjoying a creative outlet far outweighed the risks of an art project that was imperfect. It was a risk for me to push her along this path—what if some snarky high schooler did make fun of her efforts? Then how would I convince her to try out new things? Fortunately, we were both rewarded. My daughter had a great time at the workshop and experienced a “success” at trying something new.

4. Highlight mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow

My daughter looks at me like I’m crazy when I do this, but I tend to celebrate my mistakes. My silly happy dances are my way of conveying that it is only through making errors that I have had the opportunity to learn and grow. One of the best activities my daughter and I ever did together was searching the internet for facts and figures on how often Babe Ruth struck out. Yes, even the home run king made very public errors in front of huge crowds. For my little baseball fan, if the Babe can mess up and still be a champion, so can she!

5. Praise effort and hard work

Perhaps the most important thing I’ve learned about parenting my perfectionist is to gush over her hard work and efforts, rather than to focus my praise on outcomes and results. While it’s tempting to lay it on thick when her report card shows straight A’s or she wins a spelling bee, I have learned that my focus on results puts pressure on her to continue achieving perfection, while my praise for persistence and hard work fosters feelings of pride and a sense of self-control.