NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

Perfectionist Children: Strategies for Parents

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Does your child often criticize his or her work? Think that every detail of a task needs to be done perfectly or not at all? Hold unrealistic expectations? Become embarrassed by small mistakes? If so, your child has several characteristics of *perfectionism.*

Although perfectionism can be unhealthy and interfere with normal functioning at home and school, parents can help their children overcome these tendencies. The purpose of this handout is to provide parents with (a) an introduction to the characteristics, causes, and results of perfectionist behaviors; (b) strategies to reduce perfectionist behavior; and (c) intervention resources.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PERFECTIONIST CHILD

Most parents want their children to strive for excellence. It is healthy and productive for children to try their best and feel good about their efforts. Children with healthy levels of ambition try to achieve realistic goals, yet they are also willing to accept and learn from mistakes. These children understand that learning and growing require mistakes to be made along the way.

Yet for some children the pursuit of excellence becomes unhealthy. These children set unrealistic goals for themselves and are satisfied only when they perform without mistakes. Fear of failure, rather than the desire for success, motivates them. This fear causes them to work tirelessly toward perfection in some activities, while avoiding other activities. We call these children *perfectionists.*

Perfectionist Children Think:

- They must perform better than everyone else
- They are never good enough
- There is only one correct way to complete a task
- Other people are always judging them

Perfectionist Children Feel:

- Embarrassed by small mistakes
- Scared of being wrong
- Disappointed in their abilities
- Tired or overwhelmed by their never-ending pursuit for perfection

Perfectionist Children's Behavior Frequently Includes:

- Criticizing themselves and others
- Comparing their work to that of others
- Procrastinating (due to fear of failure)
- Checking and rechecking their work
- Overcommitting themselves
- Avoiding group activities and assignments

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERFECTIONISM

Although perfectionism may present itself at any age, it tends to be most obvious during two developmental periods. First, young children (e.g., preschool) are more likely to experience the "just right" phenomenon, characterized by a need to complete tasks correctly. Perfectionism can also become intense

during adolescence, when children perceive greater social pressure to perform without error. Parental support during these two periods is important.

Parents often wonder what causes their child to become a perfectionist. Unfortunately, there is no simple answer. However, three factors share a role in creating and maintaining perfectionism: (a) parenting practices, (b) cultural circumstances, and (c) individual child characteristics.

Parenting Practices

Children who are often criticized or compared to others (particularly to siblings) are more likely to develop performance-related fears and a negative self-view. This can drive children to believe they must be perfect to gain parental approval. In addition, some parents are themselves perfectionists. Children of such parents learn these patterns by watching their parents.

Cultural Circumstances

Children receive messages from their culture that may encourage perfectionism. For example, images in the media may cause children to feel worthless if they do not achieve a perfect appearance. In addition, cultures that overly stress the importance of competition and individual achievement may promote unhealthy thoughts and feelings that contribute to perfectionism.

Individual Child Characteristics

Factors within the child may contribute to the development of perfectionism. For example, a child's temperament and genes may play a role. In addition, a child's interpretation of others' messages can have an impact on perfectionist tendencies. Some research also suggests that intellectually gifted children experience perfectionism at higher rates than their peers.

THE IMPACT OF PERFECTIONIST BEHAVIOR

Perfectionist behaviors present themselves in both home and school settings and may impact individuals as they move into adulthood.

Impact at Home

At home, perfectionist children may avoid certain tasks. Due to a fear of not completing the task perfectly, a child may postpone cleaning his room or lie about having completed his homework. Chores may also take longer for perfectionist children to complete due to the time spent checking and rechecking their work. Perfectionist children also have difficulty developing social relationships. For example, a child may be critical of how a sibling does a chore or may refuse to play a game with neighborhood children for fear of losing.

Impact at School

Many of these same tendencies also impact a child in the school setting. The perfectionist student may avoid starting assignments, have difficulty working on group projects, become overly worried about a grade, spend too much time maintaining a tidy desk or preparing for a test, and have an extreme fear of public speaking. Together, these tendencies—and the many others that characterize perfectionists—promote academic underachievement and disciplinary problems at school.

Impact Beyond Childhood

As children grow into adulthood, other life domains may be affected. Perfectionists often have difficulty completing tasks in the work setting. In addition, perfectionists add stress to intimate relationships and family responsibilities. These outcomes vary depending on the severity and type of perfectionist behaviors.

IS PERFECTIONISM A MENTAL ILLNESS?

Parents often wonder whether perfectionism is a form of mental illness. The simple answer is no. Although perfectionist behaviors are generally unhealthy and atypical, perfectionism itself describes a set of personality traits rather than a mental illness. However, perfectionism may occur along with a mental illness and one can aggravate the other. Several mental illnesses, including anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, and eating disorders, seem to be strongly associated with perfectionist behaviors or thoughts. However, perfectionism itself is not a mental illness.

If your child's perfectionist tendencies seriously limit his or her happiness or if there is a history of mental illness in your family, consider discussing your concerns with a pediatrician or qualified mental health professional to rule out the possibility of mental illness. Speaking with your child's school psychologist is a good first step to bringing some peace of mind and a referral.

ADDRESSING PERFECTIONIST BEHAVIORS

Parents can take several steps to reduce the negative effects of perfectionism.

Don't Expect Perfection

First and foremost, it is important to avoid sending the message that perfection is expected. Perfectionist children only become more nervous when their performance is criticized or compared to others. Rather than being evaluated for their performance, these children should be praised for attempting new activities and giving their best effort. Also, it is important to help perfectionists recognize that mistakes are an expected, normal part of improvement. Encourage your child to

read about famous characters that faced and later overcame setbacks and mistakes. For very young children, dolls and puppets can be used to demonstrate that everyone makes mistakes and no one is perfect.

Teach Coping Strategies

Perfectionist children need to learn strategies for coping with their unhealthy thoughts and feelings. Upper-elementary-age children can use journaling to write about their worries, reflect on activities they do well, ponder circumstances where good enough is sufficient, and consider the ways that perfectionist thoughts interfere with their lives. Through cognitive behavioral therapy, mental health professionals can help children to identify and challenge irrational thoughts related to their perfectionist behaviors (e.g., learning that their parents will not become angry if they get a B on a test).

Work With School Personnel to Support Your Child

When perfectionist behaviors impact your child's educational performance, consider arranging a conference to discuss ways to support your child at school. Perfectionist students may benefit from a reduced focus on grading, assignments separated into smaller components, realistic schedules for work completion, and a limited time frame for homework. Students can be taught to check their work only once before submitting it in order to avoid unproductive checking.

Encourage Healthy Activities

Perfectionist children benefit from engaging in activities that cannot be judged or evaluated. Such activities can include taking a daily walk, practicing meditation, or visiting relatives. These activities may help children relax. They are especially healthy for children who are exhausted as a result of overcommitting themselves to structured activities.

SUMMARY

Perfectionist children have unrealistic goals and are satisfied only when they perform without mistakes. Fortunately, parents can help children address perfectionism and its negative consequences. However, overcoming perfectionism is never a quick and easy fix. It may be a long journey with frequent setbacks along the way. Parents should avoid expecting perfection in the process of helping their children to redirect their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Also, parents should try to celebrate successes often, no matter how small they may seem.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Anxiety Disorder Association of British Columbia (Anxiety BC), *Helping your child overcome perfectionism*. Available: http://anxietybc.com/parent/pdfs/howto/OvercomingPerfectionism.pdf

Greenspon, T. S. (2002). *Freeing our families from perfectionism*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

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

Krain, A. & New York University Child Study Center. (2004, November). Perfectionism: When straight A's are not good enough. *The Parent Letter: About Our Kids, 3*(3). Available: http://www.aboutourkids.org/files/articles/english_parent_letter_nov_04.pdf

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