



## Perfectionism and the Gifted Child

Webster's dictionary defines perfectionism as a disposition to regard anything short of perfection as unacceptable; especially: the setting of unrealistically demanding goals accompanied by a disposition to regard failure to achieve them as unacceptable and a sign of personal worthlessness.

"There is a fine line between striving to reach high standards of excellence and feeling self-defeated through the inability to reach unrealistic expectations of perfection. When that line is crossed, the perfectionistic tendencies become disabling" (Pyryt, 2004).

Perfectionists can be found in any arena. Some are born with the idea of perfectionism at birth. From infancy, the child is intense and demanding. For other children, the idea of perfectionism is a learned behavior. These perfectionists have been influenced by very critical parents, family members, or educators who demand and regularly verbalize dissatisfaction when the child is "less than perfect." Often, perfectionism shows up when a child first experiences competition. This child responds to the competition with only the one possible outcome of "I must be the best." For others, perfectionism is displayed in the way the child responds to compliments. They may respond with, "An A- is good for some kids, but it is unacceptable for me, I must do better." For some children (and adults), struggling with perfectionism can be a life-long struggle.

Educators often see a link between giftedness and perfectionism. "There are two major concerns about perfectionism for gifted students: underachievement and emotional turmoil. Perfectionistic tendencies make some gifted students vulnerable for underachievement because they do not submit work unless it is perfect. As a result, they may receive poor [grades]. In terms of emotional stress, perfectionism is seen to cause feelings of worthlessness and depression when gifted individuals fail to live up to unrealistic expectations" (Pyryt, 2004).

Some researchers believe there are two types of perfectionism: healthy or normal perfectionism and unhealthy or neurotic perfectionism. Healthy perfectionists want to do their best, enjoy challenges, and welcome opportunities to stretch thinking and learning. They complete their work, practice, study to please themselves, and are delighted when their efforts are successful. They attempt to learn from their mistakes and seldom give in to disappointment. Experts believe that normal perfectionism is a healthy part of striving for excellence and can lead to positive competition with like-minded peers.

By contrast, neurotic or unhealthy perfectionists often set unrealistic goals. They work hard, not to please or to challenge themselves but to avoid failure. Instead of delighting in challenges, they feel drained or depressed when they attempt new ones. Frequently, they have low self-esteem, and are sensitive to criticism from parents and teachers. They believe their parents expect them to be perfect, even if the parents have never expressed this expectation. Mistakes or failures humiliate and embarrass neurotic perfectionists. Fear of making mistakes causes anxiety and stress, which can lead to additional emotional and social challenges. On these occasions, professional counseling can be beneficial for assisting the perfectionist with coping with the phenomenon.

### **Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism.**

- Discuss perfectionism openly with the child - its symptoms, causes, and misconceptions.
- Share stories that show mistakes can be used as learning tools. Study the lives of eminent people by reading biographies, autobiographies, or watching them on T.V.
- Help students determine the areas of their lives they can control and those that are controlled by others or by chance.
- Incorporate goal setting and student evaluation into important learning experiences.
- Help students to self-evaluate, draw attention to their strengths and accomplishments, and reinforce progress they make toward goals.
- Be a good role model. Demonstrate that learning is a process of trial and error. Stay with problems for a reasonable amount of time, even if the problems are difficult. Admit your mistakes as an adult. Model imperfect behavior, personal evaluation, goal setting, reasonable risk taking, and self-acceptance of your own imperfections.
- Encourage and expect children to try new things.
- Help your child look for realistic standards.
- If a child perceives they have failed at something, wait until after the emotional tension is reduced before discussing the matter. This may help avoid defensive behaviors. Don't expect rational thinking during the immediate stressful event.
- Teach admiration as a strategy for handling jealousy. Notice, admire, and communicate admiration towards others. Acknowledge a family member or peer when they treat another in a positive manner. When playing games together, encourage the child to voice appreciation for the skill used in a particular move, rather than being upset when another person is winning or succeeding.

*(Excerpted from Fertig, 2005 & Galbraith, Delisle, 1987 & Greenspon, 2001.)*