

Lifting the Burden of Perfectionism in Children

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By Thomas S. Greenspon, Ph.D., author of [What to Do When Good Enough Isn't Good Enough: The Real Deal on Perfectionism: A Guide for Kids](#)

If you are reading this blog post, you're probably well aware that we live in a society steeped in performance pressures. For our kids, the competition to be at the top of the class in school, to make it into the best colleges, to have the best shot at prestigious careers, and to be outstanding in those careers is intense. Their A game must be brought to every encounter.

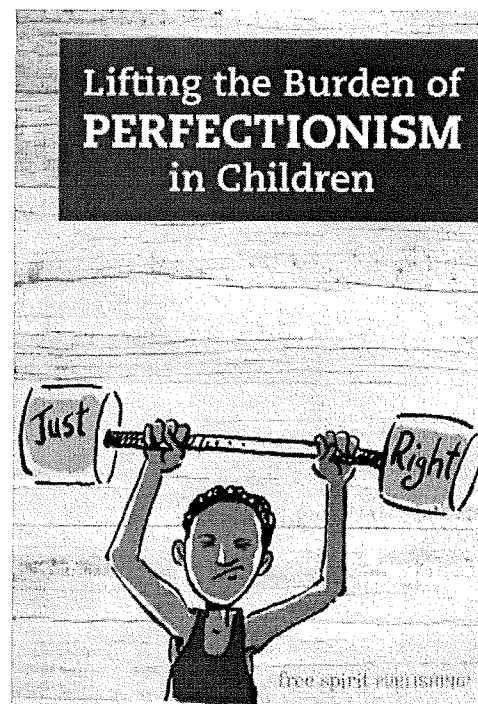
The anxiety attendant to all of this pressure is visible everywhere, and it's one horn of a major dilemma: We worry that our children won't make the grade, and we worry that the pressure to make the grade is too great. All of this creates a social context in which perfectionism—the desire to be perfect, plus the fear of imperfection—can blossom. How can we help our kids strive for excellence without seeming to demand perfection? To answer this question, it helps to understand what perfectionism is.

In all of the research that has been done on perfectionistic behaviors and the personality

makeup of perfectionistic people, it is clear that anxiety plays a central role. The irony is that worrying about how well you're doing actually interferes with your level of success. In various fields of endeavor—athletics, professional pursuits, academics, among others—people who are perfectionistic are less likely to be successful than people who are not perfectionist. And those burdensome worries and anxieties can even have worse outcomes; research shows that perfectionism puts a strain on relationships, makes depression and eating disorders harder to treat, and plays a major role in amplifying suicidal thoughts.

It's important to distinguish between striving for excellence, no matter how intensely, and perfectionism. Many people take whatever they are doing seriously. They put in great effort and are disappointed if they don't succeed. For perfectionistic people, though, lack of success is shattering. In fact, failure arouses a sense of shame. Perfectionism is actually a self-esteem issue, since mistakes are viewed as evidence of personal defectiveness and potential rejection by others. It cannot be considered "healthy" or "adaptive."

Perfectionism is like a wing: it has a leading and a trailing edge. The leading edge is all of the energy,



effort, seriousness of purpose, and conscientiousness that goes into striving to do well. The trailing edge is what researchers call “concern over mistakes”—fear of failing, worries about how one is doing, and great amounts of anxiety. If making a mistake is disappointing but taken as a learning experience or as just a fact of life, perfectionism is probably not in the picture. If mistakes feel like signs of personal flaws, then perfectionism, and shame, are present.

How does all of this happen? The answer involves three basic facets of human psychology.

1. **Human beings are meaning makers.** We continuously make sense of our world so that we can maintain a sense of self-consistency and purposefulness. Our sense of who we are and how others view us is shaped by our relationships with essential others as we grow up. The result is a set of emotional convictions, which become our sense of reality. For perfectionistic people, this reality is that mistakes reflect personal flaws, which make one less personally acceptable.
2. **Emotional regulation is central to human motivation.** Emotional states are complex and nuanced, but, put simply, we attempt to enhance what is pleasurable and reduce what is painful or threatening. The intensity of a perfectionist’s struggle reflects the attempt to manage his or her fears of failure.
3. **Human connections are essential to us.** Not only are we critically dependent on others for physical survival when we are very young, we are also dependent on affirmation and validation from significant others for our emotional security throughout our lives. The anxiety that motivates perfectionistic people is the fear of disconnection or rejection.

With this understanding of the psychological basis of perfectionism, what can be done to help? If perfectionism is fueled by fears of defectiveness and unacceptability, then creating a sense of acceptance—specifically a sense of acceptance for who one is rather than for what one can achieve—is the antidote. Building an environment of acceptance is a process that takes time; there is no instant fix. The good news is that it is a process that strengthens both self-esteem and family bonds. Here are four essential elements of this process.

1. **Empathic understanding.** From the outside, perfectionistic behavior seems pointless or even crazy. Why would people beat themselves up trying to be perfect? It’s important to understand the perfectionistic person’s own experience of things, though. If mistakes seem to reflect personal flaws, which threaten acceptance by others, then we can see why the struggle for perfection is so intense.

Ask what your child might be afraid of when he or she makes a mistake.

2. **Self-reflection.** Kids’ emotional convictions arise from their understanding of what they hear and see.

Think about—and then ask your kids or students about—anything you might be saying that makes it seem like you want them to be perfect. Do you routinely judge other people? Are you a “push/pull”

person (“This is great, but it could have been better!”)? Have you said things like, “What happened—how come you didn’t get an A?” These are things we all say at times, and kids can easily interpret these comments to mean that you would prefer it—and maybe even like them better—if their performance were flawless.

3. Encouragement. Remember to point out to your kids what you like and appreciate about them, no strings attached.

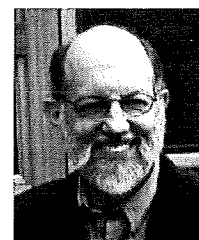
“I’m really glad to see you put so much effort into your work.” “Thanks for cleaning up the dishes—that’s really helpful to me!” When you comment positively on things you appreciate about your children, as opposed to what they do or don’t achieve, you are saying what you think of them as people. The self-esteem boost from this is an antidote to perfectionism. When kids feel appreciated for who they are, rather than for what they do, they can take mistakes in stride and not see them as confirmation of personal flaws. There is certainly nothing wrong with celebrating success! It’s important to mention, though, that you will always love your kids even if they don’t do well.

4. Dialogue. If you notice your children struggling to get something just right or being upset when their efforts don’t produce a perfect outcome, ask what they are feeling right then. Angry? Afraid? Talk about their fears—what do they think it means when they make a mistake, and what scares them about that? Ask if you, or someone else, might be saying something that leads them to feel this way.

Is your child’s behavior something you recognize in yourself from when you were younger? Talk about that. Your experience gives you some expertise on the subject, even if your experience isn’t exactly like your child’s.

The idea in all of this is to stay curious about what is distressing to your child or student and to explore together what the solutions might be. Keep talking!

Thomas S. Greenspon, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist and licensed marriage and family therapist in private practice. He earned his B.A. from Yale and his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Illinois. Tom lectures and writes on a variety of topics, including perfectionism and the emotional needs of gifted children and adults.



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