

# Perfectionism

A number of the following negative feelings, thoughts, and beliefs may be associated with perfectionism:

- **Fear of failure.** Perfectionists often equate failure to achieve their goals with a lack of personal worth or value.
- **Fear of making mistakes.** Perfectionists often equate mistakes with failure. In orienting their lives around avoiding mistakes, perfectionists miss opportunities to learn and grow.
- **Fear of disapproval.** If they let others see their flaws, perfectionists often fear that they will no longer be accepted. Trying to be perfect is a way of trying to protect themselves from criticism, rejection, and disapproval.
- **All-or-none thinking.** Perfectionists frequently believe that they are worthless if their accomplishments are not perfect. Perfectionists have difficulty seeing situations in perspective.
- **Overemphasis on “shoulds.”** Perfectionists’ lives are often structured by an endless list of “shoulds” that serve as rigid rules for how their lives must be led. With such an overemphasis on shoulds, perfectionists rarely take into account their own wants and desires.
- **Believing that others are easily successful.** Perfectionists tend to perceive others as achieving success with a minimum of effort, few errors, emotional stress, and maximum self-confidence. At the same time, perfectionists view their own efforts as unending and forever inadequate.

## Teacher/Parent Tips

Keep the focus on the importance of learning new material or a new skill, rather than being the best or having the highest score or grade.

- “Wow, you worked so hard to learn that difficult information (or skill).”
- “If it’s not perfect, that’s okay.”

Focus on effort and persistence, even if the student didn’t complete a task.

- “You worked so hard on that.”
- “I can tell you put a lot of work into this.”

Encourage appropriate risk-taking: trying something new.

- “You showed a lot of confidence and courage out there!”

Have a mantra in your classroom.

- “Everyone makes mistakes. The important thing is what you learn for next time.”
- Come up for another word to use instead of “mistake,” such as “obstacle” or “detour.”

Set realistic goals for the students, which build on successful smaller steps. Do not give empty praise, but acknowledge the effort, persistence, and accomplishment.

- “You worked so hard on that task.”
- “I hope that you are proud of your efforts.”

Try to determine what the student is afraid of (fear of failure, fear of disapproval, fear of making mistakes).

- “If it’s not perfect, that’s okay.”
- “If you’re disappointed, that doesn’t mean that you are a failure.”
- “If I’m disappointed, that doesn’t mean that you are a failure or a bad person.”

Help students prioritize tasks on which they might persevere. Have them rank each task from 1 to 5. Help students “let go” on those tasks that they deem less critical.

Help student develop a healthy perspective. (Make sure that adults have a healthy perspective, as well!)

- Consider if the task will matter in 5 years? 2 years? 1 year? Tomorrow?

Encourage your student to replace self-critical or perfectionistic thoughts with more positive, helpful statements. You can model these:

- “Nobody’s perfect!”
- “All you can do is your best.”
- “Believe in yourself -- even when something is hard.”

Let students see you make mistakes and model how to deal with them.

- “Oops! No one’s perfect!”
- “Bummer! How can I learn from this?”

Let students see how making mistakes provides new, and often valuable, information. Using the guess and check strategy is a great way to show students how a “wrong” guess yields helpful information. Mastermind or “Pico, Fermi, Bagels” are other guess and check games.

Talk about famous people (or characters from books or movies) who made mistakes but still bounced back! Famous quotes might be helpful as the student gets older:

- “Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly.” (Robert Kennedy)
- “Whether you think that you can or that you can't, you are usually right.” (Henry Ford)
- “Take a chance and you may lose. Take not a chance and you have lost already.” (Soren Kierkegaard)
- “Failure is the opportunity to begin again more intelligently.” (Benjamin Disraeli)
- “Once you accept the fact that you’re not perfect, then you develop some confidence.” (Rosalynn Carter)

Talk about successful people who overcame failure, persevered and achieved greatness (Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, and Helen Keller).

Provide feedback privately and quietly. Comment on the child's strengths and accomplishments.

Other students will treat their classmates as they see you do. Pick your words carefully. Create opportunities for success that will enhance the student's self-confidence. Avoid comparing students.

Have the student evaluate his/her own work. Listen carefully for overly harsh self-assessments. Gently provide your feedback.

- "Boy, we disagree on how well you did that. I think your work was \*\*\*." (Be specific in your feedback.)
- "Your effort was impressive."

Remember that GT and HGT students may not excel at everything! Provide support if they perform at a lower level than expected, but do not point out any discrepancies.

Some students may be uncomfortable with ambiguous situations. Be proactive and warn them on what might be coming when situations are new, unfamiliar, and/or unstructured. Help them plan how they might react to differing scenarios.

Teach steps to problem-solving and encourage independence in your classroom.

Children are complex beings! **Try not to judge them harshly.** We don't **really** know what is happening for them.

**Information taken from:**

- <http://www.education.com/magazine/article/perfectionism/>
- <http://www.counselingcenter.illinois.edu/self-help-brochures/academic-difficulties/perfectionism/>
- <http://pty.vanderbilt.edu/cms/wp-content/uploads/perfectionism-SAVY-Parent.pdf>
- <http://www.anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/OvercomingPerfectionism.pdf>
- <http://www.kellybear.com/TeacherArticles/TeacherTip53.html>