

PEAK Fact Sheet

Perfectionism

What is perfectionism?

Perfectionism is not a good thing. It is often thought of as a good thing and it has been described as a good thing, but it is not. What is good is the *pursuit of excellence* which is something quite different.

Perfectionism means that you can never fail, you always need approval and if you come in second, you are a loser. **The pursuit of excellence** means taking risks, trying new things, growing, changing and sometimes failing. Perfectionism is *not* about doing your best or striving for high goals. Instead, it can block your ability to do well. Because perfection isn't possible, deciding that is what you want and that you won't be satisfied with anything less is a recipe for disappointment. (*Delisle and Galbraith*)

What are some of the characteristics of perfectionism?

Having exceptionally high expectations for themselves	Being self-critical, self-conscious, and easily embarrassed
Having strong feelings of inadequacy and low self-confidence	Exhibiting persistent anxiety about making mistakes
Being highly sensitive to criticism	Procrastinating and avoiding stressful situations or difficult tasks
Being emotionally guarded and socially inhibited	Having a tendency to be critical of others
Half-finished school work or avoiding it altogether	Exhibiting difficulty making decisions and prioritizing tasks
Slow meticulous completion of homework	Procrastination
Headaches, stomach aches, depression or other physical ailments when they perform below the expectations of themselves or others	

Who's to blame if you have a child who is a perfectionist?

We have all seen parents who push their kids too hard, whether in sports, in school, or somewhere else. Mothers tend to blame fathers, fathers blame the school, the school blames the family and so on. None of this blaming helps. And most of the time, perfectionism comes from within the gifted child.

Why are gifted children more prone to be perfectionists?

It may be rooted in the awareness of quality. Most gifted children know the difference between mediocre and superior work. Once they see what ought to be done, then they want to do it that way and will settle for nothing less.

Bright and capable children get accustomed to easy success academically and in other places in their lives. They get praised for a modest effort, which makes it hard for them to discriminate or to learn to meet a challenge.

How can I help my young perfectionist?

1. Use moderate but sincere praise. (“That was good thinking” instead of “You are a genius!”)
2. Praise the effort and the work, not the child. (“You worked so hard!” instead of “You are so smart!” in cases where the child did indeed work hard and do well.)
3. Don’t focus excessively on grades.
4. Let children know that if all their work is perfect, they may not be learning. Mistakes are an important part of challenge and we like to see their mistakes.
5. Talk about appropriate self-evaluation and teach them how to criticize others gently and with sensitivity.
6. Point out successful people who first failed and then persevered. Read biographies together.
7. Laugh at your mistakes with them. Help them develop the ability to laugh at their own mistakes also. Since humor is often a strength of the gifted, help them learn how to use it to help themselves.
8. Teach them how bragging affects others. Teach them how to congratulate others for their successes.
9. Teach kids routines, but also teach flexibility.
10. Talk about how there is more than one way to do almost everything.
11. Look for a creative outlet for your child, something that can be done without competition or self-criticism.
12. Are you a perfectionist too? Learn out to healthily temper your own perfectionism.

Want to learn more about perfectionism in gifted children?

Dr. Jim Delisle and Dr. Silvia Rimm have both written extensively on the topic. The first chapter of Nurture Shock is a must read for all parents but especially parents of gifted children. SENG website www.sengifted.org has a wealth of articles on the topic as does a quick search of Hoagies’ Gifted Education Page www.hoagiesgifted.org/perfectionism .

Sources used in this fact sheet include:

When gifted kids don’t have all the answers by James Delisle and Judy Galbraith
Nurture shock by Po Branson and Ashley Merryman