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Helping Gifted Students Cope with Perfectionism

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Written by Michael Pyryt, this article provides advice on how to help your gifted child handle perfectionism.

Perfectionism

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 perfectionist tendencies become disabling. Others use perfectionism only when referring to the negative aspects of the syndrome. In schools, perfectionism can lead to underachievement. Outside of school, serious health problems are associated with perfectionism including abdominal pain, alcoholism, anorexia, bulimia, chronic depression, and obsessive-compulsive personality disorders. The problem of perfectionism is so prevalent among university students that many university counseling centers offer workshops in "Overcoming Perfectionism."

Perfectionism can also be thought of as a way of thinking. One aspect of perfectionist thinking is *dichotomous (all-or-none) thinking*, in which a child believes that a project is either perfect or it is worthless. Sally, a ten year old, creates a science fair report that is among the best in her class. She comes home crying and tears the report up because the teacher found one typo in a six page report. Another component of perfectionist thinking is *transforming desires (Wants) into demands (Musts)*. Joe, an 11th grader wants to do well on mathematics portion of the SAT. This desire gets changed into believing that he must make an 800 (a perfect score) or he will feel like a failure. A third element of perfectionist thinking is *focusing on unmet goals and challenges* rather than savoring successes. Ann, a sixth grader has read 9 of 10 short stories for her language arts project. Ann is likely to complete the project before anyone else in the class and two weeks before the project is due. Rather than feeling good about her excellent progress, Ann remains highly anxious because she still has one short story to read.

Perfectionists tend to come in many packages. Some perfectionists are intense and demanding from birth. They are never satisfied with their accomplishments and feel inadequate because there is room for improvement. For others, perfectionism is a learned behavior influenced by critical parents or teachers who verbalize when a child makes a 90%, "That's nice, what happened on the other 10%?" Some children expect everything they do to be perfect and everyone around them to treat them perfectly. These children want to have perfect breakfasts, perfect interactions on the playground, perfect feedback from teachers, and perfect performance on assignments and tests. Unless everything is perfect, they are disappointed. Others may only demand perfection when it comes to school work. Generally, the first signs of perfectionism will be evident in how children respond to competition ("I must be the best!") and how they respond to compliments ("It's nice of you to say that but I should have done much better."). For those who struggle with perfectionism, it is a life-long challenge. I believe that people can learn to cope effectively with perfectionist tendencies, however.

As children struggle with perfectionism, parents may wonder, "Should I get professional help from a counselor or psychologist?" It really depends on the degree of perfectionism and the extent to which perfectionist tendencies are leading to other problems: obsessive-compulsive, panic attacks, eating disorders, or depression. Parents might want to begin by discussing their observations about their child's perfectionist tendencies with the child's teacher. They might say, "Paul seems to be having a hard time doing your science fair project because it's not going to be perfect. Is there a way that we can work together to support him and help him move forward?"

Perfectionism and Giftedness

Among educators of the gifted, the link between giftedness and perfectionism is clearly established. The tendency toward perfectionism commonly appears as an item on rating scales and checklists used by parents and teachers to nominate potentially gifted students. Articles on counseling needs of the gifted routinely mention perfectionism as a risk for gifted students. There are two major concerns about perfectionism for gifted students: underachievement and emotional turmoil. Perfectionist 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 or failing marks. 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.

Recent research suggests that the relationship between perfectionism and giftedness may not be as strong as the gifted education community believes. Few differences were found between academic talent search participants and average-ability comparison groups. Talent search participants tended to exhibit healthy perfectionism marked by high personal standards and organization. There is enough evidence from case study research, however, to suggest that some gifted students may be prone to perfectionism.

Coping with Perfectionism

Coping with perfectionism involves changing your thinking from "It's never going to be good enough so why bother" to "I'm happy that I took the opportunity to challenge myself and learn new things. My next project will be even better." The following sections highlight some key concepts that perfectionist students need to internalize. Suggestions for helping parents instill these ideas in gifted students follow.

1. Don't Take it Personally

From Kindergarten upward, children tend to equate the evaluations they receive on their assignments as indications of their self-worth. The grade of A may become a stamp of approval for the student. A poor grade represents a disconfirmation of a child's brightness. (For a perfectionist, a grade of A- might be perceived as a poor grade). Each test, assignment, project becomes another situation that puts the self-concept at risk. Some children avoid this threat to their self-worth by procrastinating. The work that is eventually submitted only reflects a small commitment of their time. The evaluation of their work, even if negative, has little impact on their feelings of self-worth since the children can rationalize the poor evaluation with lack of effort. Parents may reinforce this equating of self-worth with achievement by spending time criticizing children for their mistakes rather than acknowledging their successes ("I see that you made a 95 on the spelling quiz. What happened on the other 5 words?")

Students need to learn to separate their self-worth from their products. They need to learn that the evaluation simply reflects the extent to which their work matches the criteria used for grading. If students are frustrated when they don't receive the highest marks on a project, parents should allow their children to express these feelings. After a "cooling period" a parent might begin a discussion by asking to see the "rubric" or evaluation criteria used. (Students should be able to produce the rubric since it is now common practice to for teachers to provide the rubric as part of the assignment). With the rubric in hand, parents can discuss with their children how the content of their project matched the evaluation criteria. Parents can support their children by focusing first on the content that meets the criteria. Children might identify one thing to improve upon when a new project is assigned.

2. Know When to Quit

I just did an Internet search using the term perfectionism and the Google™ search engine. There were 98,700 links to the term. If I explored the information in each link for only 10 minutes per link before attempting to write this paper, I might be ready to begin in seven years. I need to be selective in my choice of sources. Gifted students need to know that whatever topic they pick for a project, they will find more possible references available than they can possibly manage to acquire and read in the time allotted. Parents can help gifted students develop skills in determining which available resources will be the most useful and accessible for them.

This simple example highlights only one of the steps in completing a project. Perfectionist students may need assistance getting closure at each step of the project. Parents can help children become more effective in making progress towards program completion by routinely having discussions on the expectations for the

project; Parents can assist their children by asking questions about the parameters of the project (minimum and maximum length, number of references, expected financial costs). Parents can also help children develop monitoring skills to check that their projects fall within the expected parameters.

3. Match the Time Commitment to the Value of Assignments

Perfectionist students need to learn that if they want to earn the highest grades they should put the most effort into the assignments or components that count the most. In my courses, I might give five 5-page essay assignments worth 10% each and one 25-page research paper worth 50% of the term grade. I hope that my students are spending five times the amount of their course effort on their research paper than on any one of the essay assignments. Perfectionist students have a hard time grasping this concept and often spend inordinate amounts of time on simple projects by greatly extending the scope of the project. Within any given project, the various components often have unequal weightings. Parents can help children express their understanding of the weightings of the different parts of the assignment and how they have addressed each part.

4. Set Goals and Focus on Improvement

The attainment of excellence typically occurs as a result of small incremental improvements over time rather than quantum leaps. It's helpful to set goals and work towards their achievement. An excellent example of the successful use of goal setting is the story of John Naber. In 1972, Naber watched Mark Spitz triumph at the Munich Olympics winning seven gold medals, one of which was in the 100-meter backstroke, Naber's specialty. Naber envisioned himself winning gold at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal. Naber believed that he would have to improve his time by four seconds to achieve this feat. Given the brevity of the 100-meter race, a four second improvement would be a remarkable accomplishment. Through goal setting, Naber realized that he had four years to achieve his goal, so only needed to improve one second per year. Since Naber swam every day, he only needed to improve $1/365$ of a second per day. Since Naber swam twice a day, he only needed to improve $1/730$ of a second per workout. Naber dedicated himself to such incremental improvements in performance each day and stood on the podium as the gold medalist in the 100-meter backstroke in the 1976 Olympics.

Parents can help students generate goals, determine the steps needed to accomplish the goals, develop an action plan for achieving their goals, and monitoring attainment toward the goal. The acronym SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timeframe-provided) can be used to facilitate the goal-setting process.

5. Study the Lives of Eminent People

A 12-year-old perfectionist student might win a state science fair and still be disappointed that the project is not the theory of relativity. The 12-year-old student needs to know that Einstein didn't produce the theory of relativity at twelve, either. In fact at twelve, Einstein's potential greatness was masked by poor school performance. It took Einstein twenty theories to properly formulate the equations for the theory of relativity.

Gifted students can learn many lessons from studying the lives of eminent people by reading biographies and autobiographies, or simply watching television shows such as *Biography*. One basic lesson to learn is that the path to success is not a simple linear, one. Barriers such as rejection, illness, economic misfortunes, and relationship issues can make it difficult for an individual to achieve success and maintain it. One of the key factors is being able to persevere in the face of obstacles. Another lesson is that great effort is required. Edison observed that genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. The image of Michelangelo, lying on his back for several years painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, is a testament to his commitment. A third lesson is that revision/refinement is part of the process. Books that can be found in bookstores and libraries have undergone revisions and re-writing before publication. It's unrealistic to think that the first draft will be perfect or publishable. Parents can encourage students to share their first draft with peers, siblings, and themselves so that the students can get feedback for potential revisions. A fourth lesson to be learned is that failure can be constructive. Jonathan Salk's polio vaccine was not perfect in its first distillation. Medicines undergo a rigorous process of experimentation and refinement before they are put on the market. Rather than viewing the poor performance of a potential drug in a clinical trial as a cause for despair, the successful scientist will try another compound in hopes of success. Parents might help students organize their biographical investigations by examining the barriers (physical, economic, cultural, psychological, and sociological) that eminent people faced and the strategies and qualities they used to overcome the barriers.

6. Enjoy the Journey

Some perfectionist students are going to expect everything in their life to be perfect every day. This is a very unrealistic expectation that will inevitably lead to frustration when it is not met. Daily frustration can

lead to depression, which in turn may lead to counseling and perhaps treatment with drugs. An alternative is to take a different perspective. If your child is constantly frustrated by the way the world is compared to the ideal of how it ought to be, celebrate the fact that your child has high ideals. Your child will experience life as an existential struggle to reconcile this discrepancy. Try to help your child move forward each day to reduce the discrepancy. A first step is to help your child find an activity that will help the child feel as if he or she is making a difference in the world (for example volunteering with a United Way agency, running and collecting pledges for a charitable cause, or writing persuasive editorials about injustices in the community).

Perfectionists may also decrease their enjoyment in life by focusing on unmet goals, things that still need to be accomplished, rather than savoring accomplishments. An Olympic swimmer should be satisfied winning the gold medal and not be crushed if the time didn't merit a world record. Another swimmer who achieves a personal best should enjoy the accomplishment even if he or she does not win a medal.

Since the perfectionist's life can be very stressful, perfectionist individuals need to find hobbies and pursuits that can bring joy. Whether it's jogging or Tai Chi, playing bridge or solitaire, or listening to symphonies or rock bands, active engagement can be psychologically and physically rewarding. Parents can help students identify and nurture their extra-curricular interests that can serve as positive forces in their lifelong journeys.

Recommended Readings

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