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Helping Your Child Overcome Perfectionism



What Perfectionism Looks Like in Children and Teens:

- Tendency to become highly anxious, angry or upset about making mistakes
- Chronic procrastination and difficulty completing tasks
- Easily frustrated and gives up easily
- Chronic fear of embarrassment or humiliation
- Overly cautious and thorough in tasks (for example, spending 3 hours on homework that should take 20 minutes)
- Tries to improve things by rewriting
- Frequent catastrophic reactions or meltdowns when things don't go perfectly or as expected
- Refusal to try new things and risk making mistakes
- Helping Your Child Overcome Perfectionism: How to Do It!

Step 1: Educate your child about perfectionism

First, talk to your child about perfectionism. Help him or her understand that perfectionism makes us overly critical of ourselves and others. This may make us unhappy and anxious about trying new things. Perfectionism makes it difficult to finish tasks, and can be frustrating for everyone in the family! For younger children, you may not want to label it as "perfectionism", but instead say:

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Some adults and children have a little voice inside of them that tells them to do things perfectly. This voice says things such as: "If you don't get it perfect, you're a failure," or "Disappointing others means you are a terrible person." This voice makes it really scary to make mistakes! It also makes it hard to learn new things because it takes lots of practice and time to perform well. Trying to be perfect zaps the enjoyment out of a lot of activities and achievements. Do you think you hear this voice sometimes?

For teens, call it "perfectionism" in case they want to find out more about it on their own (on the internet or at the library).

Step 2: Teach positive statements

Perfectionistic children and teenagers often have rigid “black-and-white” thinking. Things are either right or wrong, good or bad, perfect or a failure. Help your child see the gray areas in-between. For example, something can have a flaw, and still be beautiful. Getting a B+ is still a great achievement, especially if you tried your best!

Encourage your child to replace self-critical or perfectionistic thoughts with more positive, helpful statements. Even if he or she doesn't believe these statements right away, enough repetition will turn positive thoughts into a habit, and help crowd-out the negative self-talk.

Some examples of positive statements:

- *“Nobody’s perfect!”*
- *“All I can do is my best”*
- *“Believing in myself -- even when I’m making mistakes -- will help me do better!”*

Have your child say these statements to him or herself whenever he or she starts to be self-critical or upset about not doing something perfectly. Suggest writing these statements down somewhere handy (e.g. a post-it note in a pencil case).

Step 3: Help Your Child Gain Perspective

Perfectionistic children and teens tend to “catastrophize”. Mistakes or imperfections are seen as more terrible than they really are. They focus on the possible negative consequences of failure. In most cases, these feared consequences are unlikely and much more drastic than the reality. Understandably, catastrophizing increases anxiety and interferes with performance. Help your child recognize that one mistake does not equal failure, and that one bad performance does not mean that he or she is worthless. Talk about famous people or characters from books or movies that your child admires who made mistakes but still bounced back! For example, Thomas Edison failed a thousand times before he found the right filament for his light bulb! Famous basketball player Michael Jordan didn't make his high school basketball team when he first tried out.

Helpful Hint: As a parent, say these statements out loud to yourself when you “goof up” or make a mistake, too. Your child will pay attention, and learn that it's okay to not take life so seriously all the time!

Helpful Hint: You and your child might want to find or invent another good quote about the value of mistakes. Have him or her write a favorite “failure” quote on a bookmark. For example:

The Value of Mistakes

“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)

Step 4: Praise!

It is important to praise effort regardless of whether or not your child was successful. This is especially true for a perfectionistic child or teen. Instead of praising the achievement, say “Wow, I can tell you put a lot of work into this” or “You showed a lot of confidence and courage out there!” Also, praise skills that are not directly related to achievement (e.g. sharing with others, remembering something important, playing well, or congratulating a winner).

Overcoming Procrastination

Perfectionistic children and teens often cope with their fear of mistakes by procrastinating. Help your child overcome procrastination by encouraging him or her to do the following:

Creating Realistic Schedules. Help your child by breaking down larger tasks into manageable steps. On a chart or calendar, write down the goal or deadline and work backwards, setting mini-goals along the way. Build in rewards for reaching these steps. Also, encourage him or her to decide in advance how much time to spend on a task. Remember, the goal is to complete the task, not to make it perfect!

Setting Priorities. Perfectionists sometimes have trouble deciding on what to devote their energy and effort. Encourage your child to prioritize by deciding which activities deserve maximum energy and which require less. Let him or her know it's okay not to give 100% to every task or activity.

Gaining Balance. Perfectionists tend to lead narrow lives because it's very difficult to be very good at a lot of things. The goal should be to NOT invest more effort than is necessary to do a "good enough" job. This will allow more time to enjoy with friends, and on other activities and hobbies – which are also important!

Other Helpful Hints

- Model and encourage saying "I don't know". Help your child become more comfortable with ambiguity and not knowing everything.
- Share your own mistakes and talk about what you learned. When you do make a mistake, say something like, "Whoops! I guess I goofed. Oh well, whatcha gonna do?!" Even try to laugh at your own mistakes in front of your child. Humor helps.
- Set reasonable standards for your child, such as reducing academic pressure, or scaling back extra-curricular activities or lessons. For example, your teen may need to be discouraged from taking all top-level classes.
- Encourage your child to spend energy learning to help others. This will help him or her see the many valuable ways they can contribute that don't require "perfection". Your child will feel better about him or herself, too. For example, get him or her involved in volunteer or charitable activities, such as dog-walking for an animal shelter, or helping tutor younger children.

Further reading on perfectionism (and overcoming procrastination):

Perfectionism: What's Bad about Being Too Good? by Miriam Adderholdt-Elliott, Miriam Elliott, & Jan Goldberg (Monarch Books)

When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism by Martin M. Antony & Richard P. Swinson (New Harbinger Publications)

What to Do When Good Enough Isn't Good Enough: The Real Deal on Perfectionism by Thomas S., Ph.D. Greenspon (Free Spirit Publishing)