Perfectionism and the Gifted Child

Perfectionism is characterized by a person's striving for flawlessness and setting excessively high performance standards, accompanied by overly critical self-evaluations and concerns regarding others' evaluations. It's not uncommon for high-ability children to be perfectionists.

If you are a parent of a gifted child with perfectionist tendencies, you've probably seen your young child smash a Lego project suddenly to the floor because he couldn't get it to look exactly the way he wanted. You may have heard your daughter say she wants to quit gymnastics because there's no use in continuing since she's not going to make it to the Olympics. You may have observed your child worrying about getting a drawing exactly right or earning all A's in school. Perhaps your child is not even doing well in his school performance because he backs away from assignments he believes he will not be able to complete perfectly.

When perfectionism leads to a pursuit of excellence, it can be a positive trait, inspiring students to set high standards, seek challenges, and do their best work. However, perfectionism can become a destructive force when a child becomes preoccupied with creating a perfect end product, fearful of making mistakes, and disinterested in the process of learning. Extreme perfectionism can lead some students to make endless revisions of their work while others may refuse to attempt any challenging assignments. Perfectionism can also lead to intolerance for mistakes or imperfections in one's self and in others. As a result, these students can become self-critical, competitive, and rigid, which interferes with their performance at school as well as their interactions with teachers, parents, and peers. The desire to maintain perfect grades can also affect the choices students make in high school and college, when a fear of failure can drive them to choose unchallenging courses, avoid new experiences, and set low goals that they know they can easily exceed. Debilitating perfectionism can lead to many negative academic and emotional outcomes including underachievement, anxiety, depression, and withdrawal.

Healthy perfectionism can include:

• Doing the best you can with the time and tools you have--and then moving on
• Setting high personal standards with a gentle acceptance of self
• Managing behaviors to not interfere with daily life

Unhealthy perfectionism can include:

• Emphasizing and/or rewarding performance over other aspects of life
• Perceiving that one's work is never good enough
• Feeling continually dissatisfied about one's work--which can lead to depression, anxiety, and other physical symptoms
• Feeling guilty if not engaged in meaningful work at all times
• Having a compulsive drive to achieve, where personal value is based on what is produced or accomplished

* Approximately 20% of gifted children suffer from perfectionism to the degree it causes problems.
Consider the following suggestions to help your gifted perfectionist:

1. Try to make sure "parent perfectionists" are modeling "healthy" perfectionism, i.e., high standards for achievement, but acceptance of one's mistakes and willingness to learn and try again.

2. Teach your child the difference between excellence and perfection. Excellence can be achieved, but perfection cannot. Teach this concept first in a logical way that provides some distance from your child's own struggles, so that he or she can consider the example without feeling threatened.

   For example, parents might talk about foods the family enjoys. Pizza might be "excellent," because of its taste and the possibilities of many different toppings, but it's not a "perfect" food because it can be messy to eat and sometimes the crust is too thick or too thin, etc. Despite these "imperfections," we still eat pizza because its taste is "excellent."

   Try to come up with other examples that can logically distinguish "excellence" from "perfection," and invite your gifted child to come up with some as well.

3. Teach your child how to "evaluate" his or her perfectionism. Does he think it is healthy? If he could change his perfectionism, what would he change? Discussions regarding a child's evaluation of his perfectionism can help to teach about the concept of balance in life. Is a high level of achievement always the necessary outcome? Under which circumstances would your child allow herself to accept a "less than perfect" outcome? This could be an interesting exercise in having your child realize she is quite accepting of imperfection in many more areas of her life than she may realize.

4. If your child displays a perceived sense of pressure from others, try to find out about the source of that perceived pressure. Have him provide concrete examples of the pressure, and be ready to help him assess whether his perceived pressure is a real one.

5. When a problem is presented to gifted learners, often these children will immediately begin anticipating the "perfect" outcome or solution. Help your child to view a task, project, or assignment as a series of steps rather than a "perfect ending." Keeping the focus on each step, and how to achieve just that one alone, will allay anxiety about ultimate failure and prevent procrastination.

   Remember that some gifted children are underachievers because of their less than healthy perfectionism. They avoid tasks and assignments for fear they will fail and not live up to the "perceived" high standards of others. Encourage your child when she tries something new or is open to a new approach to a problem, it is only a "step" along the way.

6. As difficult as it may be, allow your high ability child to experience his mistakes and failures. Be there to support him when they occur, help him evaluate them, and encourage him to use his newfound knowledge to try again. Even when you don't fully understand the intensity of your child's feelings, a simple, "I know this is really hard for you," will at least convey to your child that you are on his side, understanding his difficulty.
7. Model for your child that many activities in life can simply be enjoyed without the need for high level of achievement. Let your child know that you enjoyed playing tennis with her because you liked being with her, not because of how she performed during the game. This discussion may lead to another about how friends also just like to be together, even if the activity involved is not everyone's favorite. The “excellence” in this case is well-spent time with friends, rather than the “perfection” of doing one's favorite activity.

8. Teach your child the difference between having high standards for himself, and unrealistically expecting the same high standards in others. An essential lesson in the life of a gifted individual is learning that not only do many others not have his same high level of ability, but many do not have the same high standards. Discuss with your child what this means to him, and how it affects his evaluations of his relationships with others.

9. While most individuals procrastinate from time to time, some gifted children develop a chronic pattern fraught with avoidance, disorganization and frantic efforts as deadlines loom. Some people might wait until the last-minute because they’re afraid to tackle something difficult.

Parents should clearly define project goals to avoid procrastination. Gifted children often become overwhelmed by the details and can’t focus on the task at hand. Gifted children often make the job so big they can never finish on time.

10. Finally, try to avoid “black and white” descriptors, such as “good” and “bad” when speaking with your child about his work, project, performance, etc. Remember that perfectionism that is closer to the “unhealthy” end of the continuum is marked by this kind of dichotomous thinking.

Parents in work environments in which they receive performance evaluations may be able to relate to what it would be like if your boss simply told you your performance during the past year was “good” or “bad.” It’s likely you’d want to know more of the details, and any quality evaluation would provide this information. Gifted children are their own “bosses,” often evaluating themselves with a “good” or “bad” rating.

Modeling greater detail has been proven to be effective. Many gifted individuals are very logical about improvements, so allowing your child to create strategies will help bring down the emotional intensity of the self-criticism and fear of failure.

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