

A Tipsheet for Parents and Professionals Managing Perfectionism

Children and young people that have a perfectionist trait to their personality have higher expectations about certain events. They may experience frustration when things don't turn out the way they want. These children can be very hard on themselves (as well as hard on others) as they expect to do things perfectly. Managing perfectionism can be hard work! It may underlie tantrums and outbursts and can make it hard for children to positively interact with others or make friends. However, it is also important to acknowledge that perfectionist personality traits aren't all bad and can have some benefits for children as they grow up such as giving them an inner motivation to do things correctly, a great ability to attend to detail in certain areas and a willingness to work hard at things.

As a parent or teacher the goal is to 'soften' or provide balance to the extremes of these traits and over time help the child tolerate a range of outcomes and emotions and to be less hard on themselves.



In helping the child, the first thing to do is to try and be patient. It is easy to get frustrated with the child's frustration or to dismiss his/her feelings when they are getting upset at not being able to do something. However, doing this you might be expecting too much and indeed showing the child a perfectionist trait in your own personality! As a result, it can really help if you can take a **pause** and make sure to first acknowledge how the child is thinking and feeling as well as gently balancing this.

For example, if the child has become frustrated when making a mistake in a drawing you can **acknowledge** **"I know you wanted to get it all done quickly . . . but you did the first bit really well and you tried really hard."**

Parents or teachers can also inadvertently reinforce perfectionism by over praising a child when they are successful or when they finish something. It is far more important to **notice and praise when the child makes a great effort, or does his/her best or persists even though it is hard, and especially if he/she shows good cheer in the face of setbacks.** Rather than simply focusing on when things are done 'correctly' or the 'right way', you want to encourage the child in doing it his/her own way or help the child realise that there are often many ways to complete things.

The Praise Makeover	
Before	After
"Great job!"	<i>"I like the way you kept trying even when the problems became harder."</i>
"I'm proud of you!"	<i>"You went back to check your work-- that extra step was a great idea."</i>
"You got an A!"	<i>"Those extra practice problems you did really made a difference!"</i>
"You're so smart!"	<i>"The ideas you thought of are unique. Where did you learn about that?"</i>



When a child begins to go down the route of a tantrum as a result of frustration, consider:

Distraction-simply moving on from the original frustrating task and doing something else

Soothing or coaching, saying you understand in a sympathetic voice and supporting him having another go.

Discipline strategies such as reminding the child to be polite even though he/she is upset – “I know you are upset at the game, but you must speak politely to your brother.”

Consequence to help the child behave such as **“If you don’t calm down now, you will have to go outside for a minute”**. The key message to get across is that while you understand the child’s feelings of frustration, **he/she has to learn to express them in a more positive way**. Sometimes being a perfectionist is aggravated by being exposed to many activities that are hard for you or that require a lot of learning. In these cases it can help to **make sure the child regularly completes activities which allow him to use his/her individual talents**, when they feel particularly skilled and masterful. Counterbalance the need to be ‘perfect’ by making sure there are plenty of other times during the day when the child/young person can just enjoy doing things where there are no specific goals or rules. This can be as simple as having a daily messy play time with water or paints or physical exercise and wrestling where the emphasis is simply on having fun with people rather than winning the game or doing the job correctly. Setting up daily play times between the child and a significant adult are important. When you simply enjoy each other’s company, can really help.



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!

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?



Step 2: Teach positive statements.

Perfectionistic children often have rigid “black-and-white” thinking. Things are either right or wrong, good or bad, perfect or a failure. Help your child to see the grey 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, e.g. *“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 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!

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. 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).

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, *“Oh well, whatcha gonna do?!”* Even try to laugh at your own mistakes in front of your child. Humour helps. 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 (e.g. get him or her involved in volunteer or charitable activities, such as dog-walking, or helping younger children).



Book recommendations

Some children's TV programmes/books communicate the message of – keep trying and don't give up – in song and story. Reading these books and watching some of these programmes with the child can help them feel understood and identify strategies for dealing with frustration.

Nobody's Perfect: A Story for Children about Perfectionism by Ellen Flanagan Burns approx €10 from <https://www.bookdepository.com/Nobodys-Perfect-Ellen-Flanagan-Burns/9781433803802>

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