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PERFECTIONISM AND CHILDREN

CHANCES are that you are reading this book because you are concerned about a child, either your own or one in your class, who has exhibited **perfectionistic behaviors**. It may be that you are concerned about the child's stress levels, the lack of joy the child takes in the process of creating, or the overly developed **self-criticism** he or she demonstrates. Perhaps your child has an obsession with mistakes and "flaws," sheds tears over small errors and perceived imperfections, or tends toward **procrastination** and **fear of failure**. When perfectionism becomes unhealthy, we, as adults, become concerned for our children and want to help them, but we often are at a loss for what to do.

In the roles of parent and teacher, we have struggled with how to help children use their **perfectionism** in a healthy way instead of becoming paralyzed, frustrated, anxious, and stressed. This book stemmed from a case study observing Jill's fourth graders and noting their perfectionistic behaviors (Adelson, 2007). From this case study, she identified five types of perfectionism. Between the two of us, we have worked with hundreds of children, including Hope's own child, and have had the opportunity to use the strategies we suggest. Of course, there is no one solution to helping your child

Note that words
in **bold** are
defined in the
glossary in the
back of the book!

use his or her perfectionism in a healthy way. Hopefully, this book will give you some ideas that will help you work with your child and create an environment that encourages risk-taking, acknowledges mistakes as learning experiences, supports short-term as well as long-term goal setting, and celebrates accomplishments, the process, and personal areas of strength. As a parent and/or

“Really, the only way to overcome perfectionism is to accept it and consistently tell yourself it doesn’t have to be perfect. . . .”

—Corinne, Newport News, VA

teacher, you can serve as a role model, support system, and a source of guidance to a child with perfectionism. With your help, your child can let go of unhealthy perfectionism. However, it will not happen overnight. This process takes time. As Corinne, one of Jill’s former fourth-grade students, said, “Really, the only way to overcome perfectionism is to accept it and

consistently tell yourself it doesn’t have to be perfect. Over time, with the maturity of growing up and the consistency of your corrections, it will level out.” To help the children we love, we must help them both to understand their perfectionistic tendencies and to learn to use their perfectionism in healthy ways.

If your child talks about suicide, seems depressed, or stops eating, be sure to seek professional help. The strategies in this book are meant as a guide for parents and teachers to help children who are struggling with unhealthy perfectionism. However, perfectionism can lead to more serious conditions, such as **suicide, eating disorders, depression, and anxiety disorders**. There are many resources concerning anxiety in children available to parents. Some of these are included in Chapters 11 and 12, which provide resources for parents and children. Perfectionism also can be a symptom of many of these underlying psychological issues. If you feel that your child, at any point, may be experiencing more serious signs of psychological distress, please seek the professional help of a licensed psychologist, psychiatrist, coun-

selor, or therapist. Signs for concern might include a change in mood, loss of appetite, change in eating habits, depression, talk of death or suicide, change in personality, or change in sleeping patterns.

HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY PERFECTIONISM

No one is a perfectionist in all parts of his or her life at all times. In general, we tend to refer to perfectionistic behaviors or **perfectionistic tendencies** rather than to perfectionists, recognizing that perfectionism can be exhibited under various circumstances throughout a person's life. Your decision to read this book suggests that you have recognized perfectionistic behaviors in a child you want to help. What many people do not realize is that perfectionism can be used in both healthy and unhealthy ways, often referred to as **adaptive perfectionism** and **maladaptive perfectionism**.

Instead, people often only refer to someone as a perfectionist in a negative way. They focus on the stress, anxiety, fear, and procrastination that can result from perfectionistic behaviors. However, when used in a healthy way, perfectionism can result in a focus on improvement through revision and practice, in goal setting, and in motivation to develop one's potential and abilities.



Your child might exhibit characteristics of more than one of the five types of perfectionists that we describe.

According to Hamachek (1978), who used the term "**normal**" to refer to healthy perfectionism and the term "**neurotic**" to refer to unhealthy perfectionism, children who use their perfectionism in healthy ways "derive a real sense of pleasure from the labors of a painstaking effort" and they "feel free to be less precise as the situation permits" (p. 27). This is the goal we want for children exhibiting

perfectionism. We hope the strategies suggested in this book will help you move children toward this type of orientation, taking pleasure in the process and recognizing that they do not need to strive for perfection at all times.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The next chapter of this book provides you more background information about perfectionism. We provide you an overview of the research on perfectionism by debunking seven myths about perfectionism. This chapter will help you understand some common misconceptions about perfectionism and how these myths might apply to your child.

Chapters 3 through 7 introduce each of the five types of perfectionists identified in the article “A ‘Perfect’ Case Study: Perfectionism in Academically Talented Fourth Graders,” published in *Gifted Child Today* (Adelson, 2007). The five types are the **Academic Achiever**, the **Aggravated Accuracy Assessor**, the **Risk Evader**, the **Controlling Image Manager**, and the **Procrastinating Perfectionist**. First, we present vignettes that describe children exhibiting behaviors characteristic of that type of perfectionist. These are based on the children we have worked with and have observed. Then, we describe the characteristics of that type of perfectionist. Following the description, we provide strategies for the classroom and for the home to help students who exhibit this type of perfectionism use it in a healthy manner.

After the five types of perfectionism, we help you identify healthy and unhealthy perfectionism. This chapter, Chapter 8, includes a list of behaviors characteristic of each of the five types of perfectionists, a list of signs of unhealthy perfectionism, a description of healthy perfectionists, and a list of tools you can use to identify perfectionistic tendencies in children.

Having established what perfectionism is, noting the differences between healthy and unhealthy perfections and examining the five types of perfectionism, we then provide what many teachers and parents are wanting—an overview of strategies to help children use perfectionism in a healthy way in the classroom (Chapter 9) and in the home (Chapter 10). Each of these chapters begins with a table reviewing the strategies we recommend for each of the five types of perfectionism. Although we encourage you to read the individual chapters for more detailed descriptions, this provides a summary of those strategies. In Chapter 9, we share general strategies for the classroom, which are followed by specific activities for the classroom. These include suggestions to be used within existing classroom activities like pretesting and posttesting, and they also include specific activities addressing perfectionism. In Chapter 10, we review the strategies for the five types of perfectionism with methods to be used in “**crisis moments.**” Next, we provided general strategies and discussion suggestions for you and your child as well as suggestions for family time. This chapter ends by addressing a time during which many parents struggle to help their child with perfectionism—homework time.

We hope you will find this book helpful for creating a positive environment and supporting your young child who is experiencing perfectionism. However, there are other resources to help you further. In Chapter 11, we provide some suggested resources for children, including books, Web sites, games, and programs. Then in Chapter 12, we provide resources for adults, including books, articles, Web sites, and organizations.



Our goal is not to eliminate having high goals and standards but to help children take pleasure in the process, appreciate their strengths, see their mistakes as learning experiences, and recognize that they should not expect perfection at all times.

At the end of this book you will find a glossary and a list of references. We have provided definitions for each of the bold words in the book. The references are a good resource if you want to read more about research on perfectionism, especially in **gifted children**.

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DEBUNKING MYTHS ABOUT PERFECTIONISM

MANY teachers and parents have misconceptions about perfectionism, especially in gifted children. This chapter will outline seven of the most common beliefs about perfectionism and what researchers have found to support or to debunk them. Researchers in this field have used **scientific** and **observational techniques** to learn about perfectionism among both adults and children. To give you an understanding of this research, we will share with you how it applies to commonly held beliefs about perfectionism. In addition, we will provide practical applications for each myth, showing how it applies to the children in your life. Table 1 provides the seven myths about perfectionism.

MYTH 1: PERFECTIONISM IS ALWAYS BAD FOR CHILDREN

Parents and teachers tend to talk about perfectionism as a negative trait among their children. The words, “That Julia, she is such a perfectionist. Why can’t she just let go of those mistakes?” or “I just wish that I could stop Marcos from being such a perfectionist” often

TABLE 1
The Seven Myths About Perfectionism

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Perfectionism is always bad for children. 2. Only gifted children are perfectionists. 3. No one knows why some children are perfectionists. 4. There are no ways to identify perfectionism. 5. Adults cannot do anything to help young perfectionists. 6. There is only one type of perfectionist. 7. Perfectionism is not really that harmful for children. |
|---|

are heard in teachers' lounges and at parent meetings. Certainly, these parents and teachers never discuss the positive aspects of perfectionism. However, the children being discussed often are some of the highest achieving and motivated students in the class. So, perhaps there also are positive qualities to perfectionism.

What the Research Says

In fact, researchers emphasize two aspects of perfectionism: healthy and unhealthy. Basically, the characteristics of perfectionism either can enhance a child's achievement and well-being or can be damaging to self-esteem and success. **Healthy perfectionism**, sometimes called *normal* or *adaptive perfectionism*, represents the characteristics that are positive for students, including gaining a sense of pride from achievements and a drive for success. **Unhealthy perfectionism**, sometimes called *neurotic* or *maladaptive perfectionism*, is the type of perfectionism that most often comes to mind when parents and teachers think of their children. It represents the perfectionism that causes concern about a student's behavior and well-being. Table 2 provides a look at the differences between healthy and unhealthy perfectionism.

Table 2
Differences Between Healthy and Unhealthy Perfectionism

Healthy Perfectionism	Unhealthy Perfectionism
High, yet realistic standards	Unrealistic standards
Gains pleasure from working hard at difficult tasks	Often unsatisfied with high levels of effort
Capable of choosing to relax standards depending on task	Unable to relax standards
Motivation based on personal standards concerning work effort	Motivation based on external evaluations of product
Mastery-oriented	Performance-oriented
Conscientious	Low self-esteem

Note. From Blankstein, Dunkley, and Wilson (2008); Hamachek (1978); Stumpf and Parker (2000).

Other researchers classify these types of perfectionists in terms of their **motivation**. Healthy perfectionists seem to derive their motivation from personal standards for effort and work, while unhealthy perfectionists tend to base their motivation on evaluative concerns. Thus, healthy perfectionists may be more concerned with obtaining mastery of a given skill, while unhealthy perfectionists are more concerned with how they perform that skill.

In addition, some researchers classify healthy and unhealthy perfectionism as dichotomous characteristics, meaning that a student is one or the other (Hamachek, 1978; Hawkins, Watt, & Sinclair, 2006; Parker, 1997; Parker, Flett, & Hewitt, 2002). However, other researchers conceptualize these as two ends of a continuum in which most perfectionists lie somewhere in the middle (Schuler, 2000). The

Healthy perfectionism can enhance a child's achievement and well-being, but unhealthy perfectionism can damage a child's self-esteem and success.