

## PERFECTIONISM

DR. Sylvia Rimm; from *Keys To Parenting the Gifted Child*

Gifted children are at risk of becoming perfectionist. You want your children to strive for excellence. Quality work is a reasonable goal, but perfectionism goes beyond excellence: it leaves no room for error. The outcome must be the best. Perfectionism provides little satisfaction and much self-criticism because the results never feel good enough to the doer. Excellence is attainable and provides a good sense of accomplishment. Perfection feels impossible and is impossible for the doer to attain.

The pressures of perfectionism may lead to high- achievement motivation or may just as easily lead to problems of underachievement. The pressures children feel to be perfect may originate from extreme praise that they hear from the adults in their environment. They may also come from seeing adults model perfectionist characteristics, or they may stem from the children's own continuously successful experiences that they then feel they must live up to or exceed. These pressures are only slightly different from the motivation for excellence. This small dissimilarity prevents these children from ever feeling good enough about themselves and precludes their taking risks when they fear the results will not be perfect. They avoid and procrastinate and feel anxious when they fear they cannot be good enough. They may experience stomachaches, headaches, and depression when they make mistakes or if their performance does not meet their perfectionist expectations.

In most ways perfectionists are all-or-nothing people. They see themselves as either perfectly successful or total failures. On the other hand, some children may be only specifically or partially perfectionist. For example, rationally gifted children tend to be perfectionist about their grades and abilities; others may be perfectionist about their clothes and their appearance; some children are perfectionist about their athletic prowess or their musical or artistic talent; some are perfectionist about their room organization and cleanliness; and some children (and incidentally, also some adults) are perfectionist in two or three areas, although there are some areas that apparently don't pressure or bother them at all.

Perfectionism not only affects perfectionists but also affects those around them. In their efforts to feel very good about themselves, perfectionists may unconsciously cause others to feel less good. Siblings or friends may feel angry, although they often don't know why. Sometimes they feel depressed and inadequate because they can't ever measure up to the impossible standards of the perfectionist. For perfectionists to maintain their perfect status, they may unconsciously put others down. Giving others unsolicited advice seems to reassure perfectionists of how intelligent they are. They're so determined to be impossibly perfect that causing others to feel bad has an unconscious confirming effect on their own self-concept. So, to balance the perfectionist child in the family, there always seems to be a "bad kid" or an underachiever.

Here are some ways that you can help your children to avoid perfectionism:

- Help your children to understand that they can feel satisfied when they feel they've done their best; not necessarily *the* best. Praise statements that are enthusiastic but more moderate convey values that children can achieve; for example, "excellent" is better than "perfect," and "You're a good thinker" is better than "You're brilliant."
- Explain that children may not be learning if all of their work is perfect — that mistakes are an important part of challenge.
- Teach appropriate self-evaluation, and encourage children to learn to take criticism from adults and other students. Teach them how to criticize others sensitively and constructively.
- Read biographies that demonstrate how successful people experienced and learned from failures. Emphasize their failure and rejection experiences as well as their successes. Help children to identify with the feelings of those eminent persons as they must have felt when they experienced their rejections.
- Share your own mistakes, and model the lessons learned from mistakes. Try to laugh at your own mistakes. Humor helps.
- Teach children how bragging affects others and how to congratulate others on their successes.
- Teach children routines, habits, and organization, but help them to understand that their habits should not be so rigid that they can't be changed. Purposefully break routines so your children are not enslaved by them. For example, if they make their beds daily, insist that they skip this chore on days when you're in a hurry. If you read to them at night and it's late, insist they go to sleep without reading. Occasional breaks in routines model flexibility.
- Teach kids creative problem-solving strategies and how to brainstorm for ideas that keep their self-criticism from interfering with their productivity.
- Explain to children that there is more than one correct way to do almost everything.
- Be a model of healthy excellence. Take pride in the quality of your work, but don't hide your mistakes or be constantly self-critical. Congratulate yourself when you've done a good job by letting children know that your own accomplishments give you satisfaction.

The dilemma for parents is to balance helping children to be successful and "good kids" without also causing them to be burdened by the negative side effects of too much pres-

sure to be the best. We want our children to grow up to work hard and take pride in their work but also to feel the satisfaction they have earned.