Helping Your Child Deal With Perfectionism

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Two Types of Perfectionism

- **Normal perfectionists**—derive pleasure from doing well something that is difficult.
- **Neurotic perfectionists**—are those unable to experience pleasure as a result of their efforts, because they never feel their accomplishments are good enough.
- **Normal perfectionism** is not only nonpathological but is also desirable, for it is a component of the need for achievement.


Outline

- Brief Background on Perfectionism and Giftedness – Research base
- Types of Perfectionism
- Assessment
- Behaviors & Beliefs of Perfectionists
- Strategies

Possible Reasons for the Association of Giftedness & Perfectionism

- Lofty goals requiring conceptual thinking
- Setting standards appropriate to mental age
- Relationships with older friends
- Failure-avoidance as a consequence of lack of challenge because everything has always come easy (fear of failure)
- Striving for perfect performance and artificial rewards (grades) due to unchallenging curriculum (game – only way to find reward)
- (Owens, 2000)
- Perceptions or expectations of teachers and competitive peers
- Introversion (over gifted population)
- Asynchrony – uneven development
- *Parent expectations, modeling, rewards for doing instead of being (esp. at early ages)

- Schuler, 2000

Question

Are gifted students more likely than nongifted students to exhibit perfectionistic tendencies?

Two Types of Perfectionism

Healthy Perfectionists in Pursuit of Excellence

- Self-accepting
- Set goals and standards—accept strengths and weaknesses
- Focus on strengths
- Try new ventures and take risks
- Relaxed and careful
- Open to direction and constructive criticism
- Sense of satisfaction
- Lead balanced lives

Differences Between Healthy and Unhealthy Perfectionism

Unhealthy Perfectionists

- Self absorbed
- Demand higher level performance (them and others)
- Focus on deficiencies
- Avoid new experiences and rarely take risks
- Tense and deliberate
- Take criticism as a personal attack
- Little satisfaction
- Single-minded

* Elliott & Metalic, 1991
**Behaviors of Unhealthy Perfectionism**
- depression
- nagging "I should"
- shame and guilt
- face-saving
- shyness/procrastination
- self-deprecation (others)
- If... and only if...statements

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**Common ANTS**
- I’m not smart. I missed one on my social studies test.
- You always.... (I never...) (I always....)
- Everyone will laugh at me if...
- Anyone could have done that...
- The teacher doesn’t like me....
- It’s my fault the teacher yelled at the class
- You don’t think I’m...
- I should have....
- They are so stupid....they’ll probably....
- They will think I’m....

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**Beliefs of Perfectionists**

**ANTS: Automatic Negative Thoughts**
1. All or nothing thinking
2. "Always" Thinking
3. Focusing on the Negative (find the only negative)
4. Fortune telling (predicting worst outcome)
5. Mind reading (determining what others will think)
6. Thinking with your feelings
7. Guilt beatings (should, ought, must, never)
8. Labeling (attaching a negative label)
9. Blaming

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**Consequences of Neurotic Perfectionism**
- Underachievement (Whitmore, 1980)
- Procrastination
- Fear of failure
- Emotional Turmoil (Delisle, 1990)
- Depression or suicide
- Lower self esteem
- Peer Relationship Problems
- Health issues (Pacht, 1984)
  - Anorexia, cutting, ulcers, stomach aches, OCD

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**Families of Gifted and Perfectionism**
- Parent achievement related goals and student self-assessment of perfectionistic traits
  - (6th grade students)
  - The majority of parents of gifted children emphasize intellectual growth over high grades and test scores
  - Parents who focused on high grades and test scores over learning had children who were more likely to be dysfunctional perfectionists
  - Parents who focused more on learning than grades and test scores were more likely to have non-perfectionistic or healthy perfectionistic children
  - There is a relationship between parental goals and a child’s level of healthy versus unhealthy perfectionism
  - Parker, 1997

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**It’s Your Turn...**
Examine yourself and your child.
What did you find?
Coping with Perfectionism

- Concentrate effort on the things that really need the extra attention (PRIORITIZATION)
- 80% of the reward comes from 20% of the activities
- Develop the capacity for constructive failure: present performance sets the tone for future improvement
- Develop self-concepts separate from products
- Recognize that commitment to excellence is a lifelong struggle
- Set realistic goals
- Find avocational interests and pursuits that bring joy

- Pyryt, 1994

Helping Perfectionists

- Play the "Then what..." or "What would happen if..." Game
- Determine Underlying Beliefs (ANTS) and Help Reframe Ideas (journal or discussion)
- Teach them to change self talk (Instead of... say...) Will this matter in 5 years? 2 years? 1 year? Tomorrow?
- Self assessment and goal setting - Awareness
- Emphasize learning over grades/scores – family that accepts risk-taking and doing the best versus BEING the best
- Whose problem is it? (Self-examination)
- Seek counseling if perfectionism hinders school or home life
- See "consequences of neurotic perfectionism"

REMEMBER CHANGING TIMES TAKE TIME, PRACTICE, and MULTIPLE STRATEGIES
- Rewiring tapes in head, constant reinforcement, self-talk, others talk, lifetime

Quotes

- When nobody around you seems to measure up, it's time to check your yardstick. ~Bill Lemley
- Once you accept the fact that you're not perfect, then you develop some confidence. ~Rosalynn Carter
- Striving for excellence motivates you; striving for perfection is demoralizing. ~Harriet Brailer