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The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education

What's Wrong with Perfect?
Dr. Sylvia Rimm

We want our children to strive for excellence. It is attainable and provides a good sense of accomplishment. Furthermore, excellence is advantageous whether it involves children's school grades, ice skating, music, art, gymnastics, written work, or many other skills. It sets high standards, and opens doors to opportunity for talented children. Many talent areas demand excellence. Thus, the striving for perfection in an area of expertise may be a healthy development of talent. However, when perfectionism becomes pervasive and compulsive, it goes beyond excellence. It leaves no room for error. It provides little satisfaction and much self-criticism because the results never feel good enough to the doer. Perfection is impossible for children who apply impossibly high standards to too many activities too frequently.

The Pressures of Perfectionism

The pressures of perfectionism may lead to high positive achievement motivation or to underachievement. In very important ways, perfectionism is slightly different than the motivation for excellence. That small dissimilarity prevents perfectionistic children from ever feeling good enough about themselves and precludes their taking risks when they fear the results will not be perfect. They may procrastinate or feel anxious and fearful when they believe they cannot meet their high standards. They may experience stomachaches, headaches, and depression when they worry that they make mistakes or perform less well than their perfectionistic expectations. Sometimes they avoid accomplishing the most basic work and make excuses and blame others for their problems. They may even become defiant and rebellious to hide the fears of failure they feel.

Some children may only be specifically or partially perfectionistic. For example, some are perfectionistic about their grades and intellectual abilities; others may be perfectionistic about their clothes and their appearance; some are perfectionistic about their athletic prowess or their musical or artistic talent; some are perfectionistic about their room organization and cleanliness; and some children (and incidentally, also some adults) are perfectionistic in two or three areas, although there are some areas that apparently don't pressure or bother them at all. Those children who have not generalized perfectionism to all parts of their lives are more likely to be healthy perfectionists.

How Perfectionism Affects Others

Unhealthy perfectionism not only affects the perfectionist but also affects those around them. In their efforts to feel very good about themselves, perfectionists may unconsciously cause others to feel less good. Spouses, siblings, or friends of perfectionists may feel angry and oppositional and may not understand their own irrational feelings. Sometimes family members feel depressed and inadequate because they can't ever measure up to the impossibly high standards of their family perfectionist. Often times, there is an underachiever in the family to balance out the perfectionist. The underachiever feels like they can never do as well as their perfect sibling so they say to themselves, "Why try?"

In order for perfectionists to maintain their perfect status, they may unconsciously put others down and point out how imperfect they are, usually in a very "nice" way. For example, perfect sister Sally may say, "I don't understand why my brother isn't even trying to do his homework." Giving others continuous unsolicited advice seems to reassure perfectionists of how intelligent they are. They are so determined to be impossibly perfect that causing others to feel bad has an unconsciously

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confirming effect on their own perfectionism. The perfectionistic spouse, in his or her effort to feel best, may also cause his or her partner to feel inadequate or less intelligent.

What Causes Perfectionism?

The pressures children feel to be perfect may originate from extreme praise they hear from the adults in their environment. The pressures may also come from watching their parents model perfectionistic characteristics, or they may simply stem from their own continuously successful experiences, which they then feel they must live up to.

Certain activities like ballet, gymnastics, and music encourage perfect performance, and children involved in these activities strive to meet the high standards expected of them. This may be healthy, or children may generalize these expectations of perfection to other parts of their lives, and perfectionism may then become unhealthy and dissatisfying.

See Jane Win Research

When we studied the childhoods of more than 1,000 successful women for *See Jane in*, we found that 30 percent of the women viewed themselves as perfectionistic in high school. For the most part, their perfectionism was positive. Approximately half of the women felt pressured in high school, but they typically liked feeling that pressure and considered it to be a personal pressure. There were some exceptions. For example, television news anchor Donna Draves quit many childhood activities shortly after starting them. She would tell her parents that the activity was "boring." Donna admitted that she would drop out if she was not "best" in the activity. She would never attempt activities like sports and math because she considered her brother "best" at those.

Fortunately, she was "best" at speech, and she carried excellence in speech to her career. Donna's perfectionism even affected her eating habits. Although she was a size three, she continuously compared herself to two other girls in her class who were "skinnier" than her. She felt unattractive unless she was the thinnest. Donna is successful today, but the near pitfalls of perfectionism could easily have derailed her and prevented her from "making the mark" she so wished to make.

Source:

Rimm, S.B. (2008). What's wrong with perfect. Retrieved from http://www.sylviarimm.com/article_wwwperfect.html