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The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education

How Parents and Teachers Can Help Perfectionists
Dr. Sylvia Rimm

- **Help kids to understand that they can feel satisfied when 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." Also avoid comparative praise; "You're the best" makes kids think they must be the best to satisfy you.
- **Explain to children that they may not be learning if all of their work in school is perfect.** Help them understand that mistakes are an important part of challenge.
- **Teach appropriate self-evaluation and encourage children to learn to accept criticism from adults and other students.** Explain that they can learn from the recommendations of others.
- **Read biographies together 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. Stories from *How Jane Won* will be helpful to discuss.
- **Share your own mistakes and model the lessons you learned from your mistakes.** Talk to yourself aloud about learning from your mistakes so children understand your thinking.
- **Humor helps perfectionists.** (Remember Pamela Frank's story.) Help children to laugh at their mistakes.
- **Teach children empathy and how bragging affects others.** Help them to put themselves in the position of others. Say, "Suppose you messed up on your piano recital and Jennifer, the winner, told you that she had her best performance ever. How would you feel?"
- **Show children how to congratulate others on their successes.** They will feel they are coping better as they congratulate others.
- **Teach children routines, habits, and organization, but help them to understand that their habits should not be so rigid that they can't change them.** Purposefully break routines so your children are not enslaved by them. For example, if they make their beds daily, permit them to skip a chore on a day 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 will model flexibility and prevent them from feeling compulsive about habits.
- **Teach children creative problem-solving strategies** and how to brainstorm for ideas that will keep their self-criticism from interfering with their productivity.
- **Explain to children that there is more than one correct way to do most everything.**

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- If your child is an underachiever and avoids effort because he fears not achieving perfection, **help him to gradually increase his effort and show him how that relates to his progress.** Emphasize that effort counts.
- If your child is a high achiever, but overstudies for fear of not receiving an A+, help her to gradually study a little less to show her it has only a little effect on her grade. **Help her to feel satisfied with her excellent grades with the reasonable amount of study involved.** She needs to balance work with fun.
- **Be a role model of healthy excellence.** Take pride in the quality of your work but don't hide your mistakes or criticize yourself constantly. Congratulate yourself when you've done a good job, and let your children know that your own accomplishments give you satisfaction. Don't overwork. You, too, need to have some fun and relaxation.
- If your child's perfectionism is preventing accomplishment, or if your child shows symptoms of anxiety related to perfectionism, like stomachaches, headaches, or eating disorders, **get professional psychological help for your child and your family.**

The dilemma for parents and teachers 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 pressure to be the best. The childhood rhyme in the introduction of this article summarizes the problem well. We want our children to grow up to work hard and take pride in their work, but if they "never let it rest," they will never feel the satisfaction they have earned.

Source:

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