

# “P” is for PERFECT!

Helping children cope with perfectionism and anxiety

## SUMMARY

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- ❖ Perfectionism and underachievement
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- ❖ Coping with perfectionism – SKILLS
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# A FEW HINTS TO HELP YOU AND YOUR CHILD COPE WITH PERFECTIONISM

## ***Appreciate the trait***

Don't be ashamed of being perfectionistic. Acknowledge your children's feelings of frustration. Share with them that you have often felt the same way and how you've dealt with your feelings.

## ***Understand that it serves a useful purpose***

Help your children understand the source of their feelings as positive traits in themselves. Ideals and high standards are good, even if it hurts when one can't always reach them.

## ***Set priorities for yourself***

Allow yourself to be perfectionistic in activities that really matter to you, rather than in everything all at once. Help your child recognize that no one can be perfect in everything, and that we all have to make painful choices in our lives about what to strive for, and where to settle for less than our best.

## ***Maintain high standards for yourself, but don't impose them on others***

Help your child distinguish between perfectionistic attitudes toward self and others. It's fine to hold high standards for yourself but unfair to expect others to conform to your standards.

## ***Keep striving even when your first attempts are unsuccessful***

Encourage your children not to give up. Remind them that with practice they come closer and closer to their goals. It takes time and effort to achieve high standards.

## ***Don't quit when the going gets rough***

Only allow yourself to quit when you're a winner. Give your children examples of people who felt intensely frustrated in their efforts and overcame their obstacles through persistence.

## ***Don't punish yourself for failing***

Focus your energies on future successes. Try to be a model of self-acceptance, of willingness to look foolish and admit being wrong. Adopt a philosophy that there are no mistakes – only learning experiences. Help your child to process what is learned from each "failure". Successful adults do not expect instant successes. They see each 'failure' as valuable information – a narrowing of possibilities leading them closer to success. One father said to his children, "Anything worth doing is worth doing wrong, because it is only by doing it wrong that you can learn to do it right".

## ***Hold onto your ideas and believe in your ability to reach them***

Support your children in following their dreams.

## ***Recognize that there are good parts and bad parts to perfectionism***

We have choices about how we use it. We can let it paralyze us with fear of failure, or we can use it to mobilize us for unparalleled excellence. We can use this drive to help create a better world.

## ***There is pain in perfectionism***

Fear of that pain can inhibit you from trying anything or you can deal with it courageously. Nothing is ever as bad as it appears. Teach your children that they can cope with this pain. It is a *good* pain. Help them realize that they are good problem-solvers, hard-workers, and emotionally strong. They may not be able to avoid the pain, but they can surmount it.

*(Linda Silverman)*

## Expectations

Having identified a child as gifted, it is easy to place extremely high expectations on the child. In many ways, these high expectations may be perfectly justified. A child with an IQ of 145 certainly has the potential to perform at a very high level. Such expectations, however, make life for any child very difficult. Not only are they continually aware of what is expected of them, they often feel, also, that they *should* achieve these standards, and should never fail. All children have a certain level of potential, and we would be wrong to think that every child *always* achieves to the best of their potential. Having extremely high expectations of gifted children places them under enormous pressure to continually do well and never fail.

Children who have not been formally assessed have no definite expectations placed upon them in terms of what they should be achieving. A prize, a high score, a great mark or a wonderful achievement are all received as unexpected surprises or accomplishments. For a gifted child, however, such achievements are often *expected*, and the joy and pride of doing well and surprising others is often lost. Too often with gifted children, we fail to acknowledge the level of skill, time, effort and perseverance that has gone into some great achievement, because we sadly fail to see it in terms of a great achievement, but see it as simply just another thing we expected the child to do well.

## Underachievement

Be prepared to see your child underachieve. Many gifted children play down their abilities in order to fit in with their peers. It is not unusual to see a child reading fluently at home, yet stumbling, word by word, at school, in order to sound just like his/her classmates. Many gifted children also revert to lying about their grades, or purposely failing certain items in a test, in order to be better accepted by their peers. These forms of underachievement are mild, and will often diminish, as the child grows older.

Severe underachievement, however, is a major concern. Often a child will underachieve because the work is not challenging or stimulating enough. This underachievement can lead to boredom and often behavioral problems. Some children also become chronic underachievers due to intense levels of perfectionism, and fear of failure. Both of these situations are of major concern. Teachers and parents need to watch for such signs, and redirect gifted children, often through counselling.

## Peer comparisons

In many ways, peer comparison is all part of a healthy competitiveness amongst classmates. It becomes unhealthy when the comparisons are being made by parents and teachers. See your child as an individual, and delight in his/her achievements. Challenge your child based on what you know they are capable of, and encourage them to strive for 'personal bests', not simply to win, or beat others. Your child will make their own comparisons with peers and will no doubt develop their own group of friends who challenge and inspire them.

## Home

No matter how old your child is, the home environment will always be one in which they are truly understood. There is so much that can be done for gifted children within the home and family. You serve as a great role model to your children. They watch the way you manage your day, how you fill your spare time, the way you choose friends, how you deal with failure, and how you set life goals.

## Time management

“So much to do and so little time” is often the cry of gifted children. Their minds are constantly whirring away with ideas and possibilities. After an hour at their homework, they often seem to have achieved nothing. Each idea seems to branch out to another and they are diverted down some totally unrelated (but vitally interesting) tangent. It is encouraging to see your child enthusiastic, and engrossed in something of interest, yet frustrating to note that virtually nothing of any required task has been achieved.

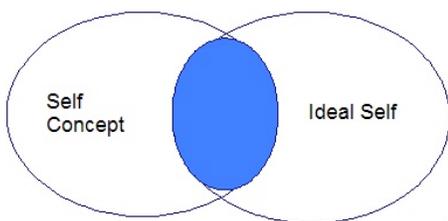
## Setting priorities

- Intend to accomplish goals in a reasonable amount of time
- Predict the amount of time and effort required to complete a task and plan accordingly
- Learn to use spare moments: standing in line, waiting for someone or something
- Be realistic in eliminating excuses; reward positive behavior
- Set priorities carefully in order to save time; allow enough time to do the best job you can
- Keep up-to-date with studies: pacing is important
- Provide time for continual review
- Look at the effects of procrastination
- Don't over-commit; give all commitments relative priorities

## Organizing yourself

- ☺ Organize belongings – catalogues / categories / shelving / folders (a place for everything)
- ☺ Create a dedicated ‘work space’
- ☺ Identify your best ‘working time’ and ‘working conditions’
- ☺ Recognize your own learning style and preferences in learning / producing work
- ☺ Make lists - Set yourself short-term goals
- ☺ Regularly evaluate and check your progress
- ☺ Reward yourself at varying intervals
- ☺ Write a timetable or planner (stick to it)
- ☺ Build some challenge into each task to make it more rewarding / enjoyable
- ☺ Take pride in yourself and what you do. Do your best so you can look back on it with satisfaction.

## Self Esteem



We want the biggest possible overlap between how we see ourselves (self-concept) and how we want to be (ideal self)

Problems in self-esteem occur when:

- people doubt themselves (low self-concept)
- people expect too much of themselves (over inflated ideal self)



# Helping your PERFECTIONIST!!

## TO HELP COPE WITH PERFECTIONISM:

1. Explain the desired outcome (BIG PICTURE) to your child
2. Give them permission NOT to know how to do it
3. Describe it as NEW ... today is our FIRST DAY to try this
4. Give an example of another child their age who tried this .... (make up a story)
5. Say ... “I know another 4 year old who tried 10 times before she could do this”
6. ASK if they would like any help ...
7. Would you like me to show you how to do it, or would you like to have a try yourself (giving them control of the situation)
8. Suggest an APPROXIMATION / half way point to aim for .... Ease the pressure
9. Walk off ... say “Well, you have a go and come and let me know when you would like some help”
10. If they seem proudly stubborn and won't talk ... offer an idea ... “Are you having trouble making the lines straight” (allow them to save face / they won't want to admit they are wrong or having trouble)
11. Be gently encouraging, don't say too much or get too involved (ASK FIRST)



# Coping with PERFECTIONISM

- Acknowledge the perfectionism, identify, own and appreciate it
- Don't try and ELIMINATE perfectionism, just help your child learn to COPE with it
  
- Recognize the different types of perfectionism:
  - The AGGRESSIVE perfectionist
  - The PARALYSED perfectionist
  - The EXHAUSTED perfectionist
- Recognize the signs:
  - Overly high expectations of self and others
  - Not starting anything, for fear of not being perfect
  - Constant desire to do everything in a precise & exact manner
  
- Understand WHY children exhibit perfectionism:
  - Asynchrony between thoughts and abilities
  - Accustomed to success / unfamiliar with failure
  - Complicating tasks to motivate themselves
  
- Develop more realistic attitudes:
  - Speak directly / confront the issue
  - Discuss coping with failure (less than 100%)
  - Encourage them to give themselves permission to fail
  - Emphasize the PROCESS not the product
  - Discover the joy of EXPLORATION
  - Encourage risk taking
  - Learn to let certain things slide
  
- Develop skills to help cope with perfectionism
  - Learning through mistakes
  - Developing a realistic self-perception
    - read biographies of famous people and their mistakes
  - Setting realistic goals
  - "It's okay to be perfectly wonderful in some areas and perfectly awful in others"  
(Winebrenner, 1996)
  - Set short-term / achievable goals
  - Model 'coping with failure' and trying again
  
- COPING WITH FAILURES
  - Ensure children attribute / see their failures:
    - AS SPECIFIC – don't generalize
    - AS TEMPORARY – not permanent
    - AS A RESULT OF ACTIONS – not a result of their personality
  - Encourage children to be BRAVE or CLEVER in trying again or considering an alternative solution
  - Model appropriate responses / behaviors and discuss feelings of frustration and disappointments of your own



*"Perfect is almost impossible . . . Excellence is achievable!"*