

# DIALOGUE



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## Counseling & Guidance Division

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### Motivation to Learn: Using Independent Study to Engage Gifted and Talented Students Meredith Greene, Ph.D.

Many gifted and talented teenagers can become disengaged from school for various reasons. They may lack motivation because of unchallenging curricula or uninteresting subjects. Providing opportunities to create and conduct independent study projects can be an instant motivator.

Independent studies are research projects that are self-directed by the student and planned with the teacher. The best independent study projects are real-world investigations that uncover new questions and help create a life-long love for learning.

Gifted students with a passion for a topic are often much more engaged in learning when they can design a project around their own particular interests, skills, and "need to know." Independent study projects are also ideal for gifted and talented youth because they are individualized, differentiated, and emphasize autonomy. Many gifted teens have the need to explore "big ideas" and have developed the advanced knowledge and skills to do so, but are constrained by grade-level curriculum and whole-group instruction. Talented teens regularly pursue their interests after school hours, for sheer enjoyment and for no school credit. Independent research projects are often interdisciplinary in nature and are conducted outside the regular curriculum and time / space restrictions of traditional school. Having adult guidance and support, as well as earning credit for their work can be highly motivating. In addition, the focus of independent study should be on the use of methodologies that are authentic to the

discipline and practicing professionals. This focus will develop skills that can prepare students for future studies and even careers.

Independent study research projects are not for every gifted and talented student, and not for every teacher. The student must demonstrate an ability to work independently with minimal supervision, be able to design and develop (with advice and guidance from a supervising teacher/mentor) a learning and assessment plan, and organize and complete the learning experiences and activities within an established timeline. The role of the teacher/mentor is more facilitative than instructional or directive. First, the teacher should ensure that the independent study is in the best interests of the student. Gifted students often possess many high level abilities and even more interests. This does not guarantee the successful completion of an independent study. Students will need guidance so that they can focus in on a specific topic of study and decide on appropriate timelines and available/necessary resources. It may be necessary to provide initial instruction in these areas. Teachers will also need to monitor and support the student's progress and evaluate the student's work.

There are several major goals of an independent study project. Certainly, acquiring advanced knowledge and skills is an objective, but perhaps the most important and motivating goal is to gain opportunities to apply interests, knowledge, and creative ideas to a self-selected area of study. Pursuing a passion and creating their own learning experiences can bring back intellectual challenge and enjoyment of learning.

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*In this issue the C&G Network continues to highlight our members' contributions, with an emphasis on motivation and perfectionism.*

Dory Witzeling shares her understanding of perfectionism based on Dr. Friedman-Nimz's work, and has created a piece that can be shared with parents and students. Dr. Friedman-Nimz has also contributed to this piece. She can be contacted via email: [revac@ku.edu](mailto:revac@ku.edu)

## Perfectionism and Gifted Learners

By Dory Witzeling, teacher Odyssey Elementary Charter  
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While at the SENG conference in July last summer I heard a speaker named Dr. Reva Friedman-Nimz, Ph.D., LMSW of the University of Kansas speak about perfectionism and the gifted. Here are some of the things I took away from that lecture:

First, we need to understand that perfectionism comes in degrees, just like oversensitivities, temperament qualities, and other personality characteristics. People can function very well with perfectionism, or, they can be disabled by it. This information is not meant to give the message that all the traits of perfectionism are “bad” but that children (and adults!) who are hampered by their perfectionism need help. What does perfectionism look like? Here are some traits I got from Dr. Friedman-Nimz that you could use. If you put them each on a continuum from 1 to 4, (left to right) how many 1's would you have?

### Paralyzed Perfectionist

Life is wonderful/awful  
 Activities with a high failure possibility should be avoided  
 Mistakes really stand out  
 Starting/finishing anything is a challenge

### Empowered Perfectionist

Life happens in degrees  
 It is okay to learn from mistakes as well as successes  
 My accomplishments please me  
 I don't delay- and I finish work

(from *The Inventory*, Reva Friedman-Nimz, 2008. Used with author's permission)

There is very little empirical research about perfectionism among gifted students K-12, but what little research exists shows that dysfunctionally perfectionistic gifted children display a common profile that appears to contribute to their distress: irrational beliefs, inappropriate attributions for successes and failures, and dissonant perceptions of others' expectations for their roles and behavior. Three irrational beliefs are connected to dysfunctional perfectionism: One, it that they feel it is necessary to be loved and approved by everyone. Another is that competence and achievement are related to self-worth. The third is that it is catastrophic when things don't go as they should. This is especially prevalent in girls and women as they are typically taught to develop their self concept in relationship to others while boys and men are taught to have an internal standard by which to measure their success.

Friedman-Nimz went on to connect perfectionism to patterns of overexcitabilities, asynchrony and other developmental issues that she had addressed in previous articles. She highlighted other gender differences regarding attributions for successes. When their children are very young, parents tend to tell boys that they did a “good job!” when they are successful, but say “good girl!” to girls – subtly communicating the idea that achievement is related to self-worth. As a result, when adult males are complimented on their achievement they often attribute their success to hard work. In contrast, women tend to understand their successes as an expression of their personal worth rather than improving through effort. They discount the role their own effort plays in success, making comments such as “I had a great team” or “Oh, you're too kind.” Schools can promote dysfunctional achievement patterns if bright students are rarely challenged intellectually, particularly in the elementary grades. If a child never exerts effort to learn, she can develop the belief that she SHOULD master a concept the first time she is exposed to it. In fact, if success is not instantaneous, these youngsters think they must not be capable of learning it. These students can develop learned helplessness, underperformance and other dysfunctional patterns. It is also important to remember that as a child continues through their education, they could go to college where the outcome rather than the effort is rewarded. We need to prepare our students for that eventuality.

She suggested to start working with a perfectionistic child by encouraging him to explore his beliefs about himself, his explanations for successes and failures, and the expectations he believes that others have of him.

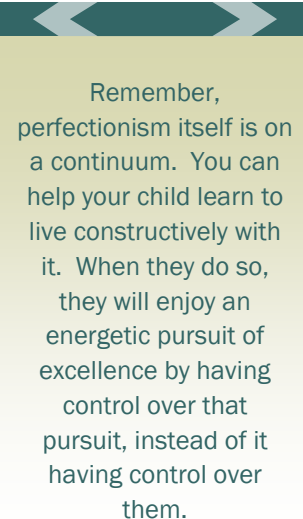
Also, learning how to give praise constructively is important. Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, et al (1995, see bottom of page 6), wrote about praise in their article titled *Praise That Doesn't Demean, Criticism That Doesn't Wound*. In it they point out that many people have a hard time accepting praise that evaluates them. When they hear “you're so well organized” inside their heads they say “not really”. This would be especially true for perfectionists for whom blanket statements of praise like “great job” or “you're terrific”

will only lead to them thinking up a million reasons why they don't deserve the praise. Instead of using praise that evaluates what a person has done, it is much more effective to DESCRIBE what they've done. You could say "I see that you're all ready for school tomorrow. You finished your homework, sharpened your pencils, packed your books, and even made your lunch." Then, THE CHILD, after hearing the description, praises herself! "Yeah, I did do all of that! I planned ahead really well!" The self-praise may be internal, but when the child recognizes what she did, she comes to see herself as worthy, and learns that she doesn't need approval from everyone else.

Along with this, we need to give criticism constructively. Adele Faber's group assert that you need to start by acknowledging what a child HAS accomplished first, then point out what still needs to be done. She gives an example from home with a child who's struggling to get ready for school. If the parent points out what's wrong "Look at you! Your hair is a mess. And you still haven't put on your shoes! Hurry up or you'll be late for school..." the child thinks "I never do anything right". If, instead, the parent describes what's right and what still needs to be done she'd say "You're almost dressed. Clean shirt, matching pants and socks...All that's left is shoes and hair and you're ready to go!" In this scenario the child is willing to keep working to finish the task they have already started successfully.

So what can you do besides give descriptive praise and constructive criticism to help your perfectionistic child?

- Talk to him or her about their attributes, and yours.
- Discuss motivation theory and emphasize the importance of effort over ability.
- Explain asynchrony and the importance of slowing down to think about what you're doing.
- Talk to your kids about their own goals.
- Teach relaxation techniques.
- Help them to become resilient by giving them challenges that are attainable but difficult.
- Explain how long it took you to learn specific skills.
- Point out your own mistakes. Laugh about them.
- Be silly!
- Do family activities that are about the process, not the end product.
- Take risks together.
- Do things you know you're not good at together and have a sense of humor.
- Read biographies of famous people who struggled in their childhood.

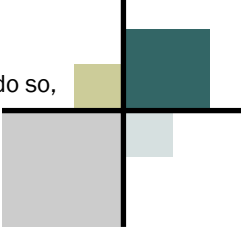


Remember, perfectionism itself is on a continuum. You can help your child learn to live constructively with it. When they do so, they will enjoy an energetic pursuit of excellence by having control over that pursuit, instead of it having control over them.

And, if your child freezes up, which is common with perfectionists, help them learn to break down a task into very small parts and concentrate on just the next step. Ask your child what their goal is and give that a "10". Tell them they're at "0". Ask them to describe what would be a "1" on the way toward reaching that "10". What is the smallest incremental change that would show that you're working on it? Have them give themselves a small reward to reaching each step on the way. Many perfectionists want to be perfect at whatever they are trying, and be perfect at it in no time. Help them see and acknowledge progress before they reach their goal, the intermediate steps.

If you need more information about perfectionism, you can check out the usual gifted education websites. Great books for kids (besides The Gifted Kids' Survival Guide by Judy Galbraith, M.A.) include (for K-1) Leo the Late Bloomer by Robert Kraus, Try and Stick With It, by Cheri J. Meiners, (for 2-3) No, David and David Gets in Trouble by David Shannon, I Tell the Truth by David Parker, and (for 4-5) Be a Perfect Person in Just Three Days! by Stephen Manes. For teens and adults, you may want to read Perfectionism What's Bad About Being Too Good? by Miriam Adderholt, Ph.D. and Jan Goldberg. In it, it addresses some of the scarier side of what might be the consequences in the future for the perfectionistic child with chapters on "What Perfectionism Does to Your Mind", "What Perfectionism Does to Your Body" and "What Perfectionism Does to Your Relationships" along with many chapters about how to ease up, gain control, reward yourself, savor success, and get help. If you do decide that professional help would be a good idea, remember to find a professional with experience working with gifted children (check referrals on the SENG website [www.sengifted.org](http://www.sengifted.org)).

Remember, perfectionism itself is on a continuum. You can help your child learn to live constructively with it. When they do so, they will enjoy an energetic pursuit of excellence by having control over that pursuit, instead of it having control over them.



## The Many Faces of Perfectionism

Dr. Linda Kreger Silverman

The term perfectionism is used to describe a variety of issues, and most of the mental health profession perceives it as psychologically unhealthy. In actuality, perfectionism must be seen as a potent force capable of bringing intense frustration and paralysis, or incredible satisfaction and creative contribution, depending upon how it is channeled.

Perfectionists set high standards for themselves, and experience great pain if they fail to meet those standards. They are besieged with guilt and shame that few people seem to understand. Their unrelenting self-criticism appears maladjusted. Even when others applaud them, they often feel miserable, aware of how much higher they aimed. They may feel they have cheated themselves and others by not fully utilizing their abilities. Those who perpetually remain in this self-castigating state live unhappily ever after, and give perfectionism its bad name.

But this is only part of the story, albeit the one that receives the most attention. The extent of joy it is possible to experience is directly related to the intensity of the struggle in which one engaged to reach his or her goal. Perfectionists are capable of ecstatic heights, of being totally in Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow, unfettered by time constraints or the judgments of others, when the activity itself becomes the reward rather than a means to an end.

*The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something that we can make happen....*

*Such experiences are not necessarily pleasant at the time they occur. The swimmer's muscles might have ached during his most memorable race, his lungs might have felt like exploding, and he might have been dizzy with fatigue—yet these could have been the best moments of his life. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, pp. 5-6)*

### Why Are the Gifted Perfectionists?

In a recent article (Silverman, 1999), I enumerated six reasons why gifted children tend to be perfectionistic. First, perfection is an abstract concept. It takes an abstract mind to grasp its meaning and to cherish a vision that does not exist in the concrete world. Facility with abstraction is the sine qua non of giftedness; this quality differentiates the gifted from others throughout the lifespan. Second, perfectionism is a function of asynchrony or uneven development. Gifted children set standards according to their mental age rather than their chronological age. For example, a six year old with a nine-year-old mind expects to be able to draw

and write like a nine year old, in spite of the fact that her motor coordination is age appropriate. Less able children have simpler goals. Third, many gifted children have older playmates, so they tend to set standards appropriate for their more mature friends.

Fourth, young gifted children have enough forethought to enable them to be successful in their first attempts at mastering any skill. "As a rule, it will take the gifted longer to decide to dive into the pool, but they will be less likely to hit their heads on the bottom" (Roepers, 1991, p. 97). The gifted have greater ability than their age-mates to predict the consequences of their actions. From their earliest years, they have been able to avoid failure and act in a manner that will assure success in their endeavors. They have succeeded in the past, so they expect to be successful in the future, no matter how difficult the challenge.

*There are several reasons to expect that gifted children would develop high standards. They are not only more capable than other children of meeting expected goals, but they are also used to doing so and therefore optimistic about future attainment. (Robinson & Noble, 1991, p. 65)*

Since they are accustomed to success, and relatively unfamiliar with failure, some gifted children become quite failure-avoidant.

Fifth, the gifted crave challenge and stimulation, and if schoolwork is too easy they will do whatever they can to complicate the task, including trying to accomplish it perfectly (e.g., striving for 100% instead of mastery). This was revealed in Schuler's (1997) study. The majority of the students found the work they were expected to do unchallenging—requiring a minimal amount of intellectual effort—yet they poured their enormous energies into achieving the highest grades possible. There is no joy in demonstrating mastery of a skill or concept one learned long ago; therefore, artificial rewards, such as grades, become the only satisfaction possible. Unchallenging schoolwork, combined with the high premium placed on competitive grades, fosters "dysfunctional" perfectionism in gifted youth. Last of all, perfectionism occurs as a distortion of the drive for self-perfection, which is a positive evolutionary drive (Dabrowski, 1964)

### Perfectionism and Giftedness: A Review of the Research

Much has been written about the perfectionism of the gifted population, usually from a negative standpoint. However, according to Hamacheck (1978), there is such a thing as "normal" perfectionism that is not unhealthy. "Normal" perfectionists derive pleasure from accomplishing difficult tasks, whereas "neurotic" perfectionists never feel that what they have done is good enough.

Research with the gifted, based on Hamacheck's model, discloses healthy aspects of perfectionism.

Roberts and Lovett (1994) reported much higher levels of perfectionism among gifted junior high school students than among nongifted academic achievers and nongifted students. Kramer (1988) found greater degrees of perfectionism in gifted than in nongifted teens, and more perfectionistic tendencies in females than males. Baker (1996) also found higher levels of perfectionism in exceptionally gifted ninth grade girls than in girls of average ability. Kline and Short (1991) reported increasing perfectionism in gifted girls as they went from elementary to high school. Schuler's (1997) study of 112 gifted adolescents in a rural setting indicated that 87.5% had perfectionistic tendencies; no gender differences were found. In their analysis of gifted sixth, seventh and eighth graders, Siegle and Schuler (in press) found perfectionistic tendencies across all socioeconomic, racial and ethnic groups.

Two studies bear closer attention. Parker (1997) conducted an investigation of 400 gifted sixth graders with Frost, et al.'s scale, along with several other measures. Three groups emerged from his study: 32.8% were nonperfectionistic, 41.7% were healthy perfectionists, and 25.5% were "dysfunctional" perfectionists. Parents' and children's perceptions closely matched. His research supported the existence of both normal and neurotic perfectionism. He concluded that "the overriding characteristic of perfectionism in these talented children is conscientiousness, not neurosis" (p. 556.).

Schuler (1997; in press) studied gifted adolescents in a rural setting. Both "healthy" and "dysfunctional" perfectionists were revealed. The healthy perfectionists had a strong need for order and organization; accepted mistakes; enjoyed the fact that their parents held high expectations for them; had positive ways of coping with their perfectionism; had adults who modeled doing their "best"; and viewed effort as an important part of their perfectionism. The dysfunctional perfectionists were continuously anxious about making mistakes; held extremely high standards for themselves; perceived that others held excessive expectations for them and internalized negative remarks from others; questioned their own judgments; lacked effective coping strategies; and exhibited a constant need for approval. These studies suggest that there is a high correlation between perfectionism and giftedness, and that perfectionism is multifaceted, with both healthy and unhealthy forms.

### How Should Counselors Deal with Perfectionism?

Maslow (1971) equated the full realization of one's potential with the struggle for perfection of one's talents and capabilities. Maslow's description of the process of self-actualization sounds remarkably like Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow:

*Self-actualization means experiencing fully, vividly, selflessly, with full concentration and*

*total absorption. It means experiencing without the self-consciousness of the adolescent. At this moment of experiencing, the person is wholly and fully human. This is a self-actualizing moment. This is a moment when the self is actualizing itself. As individuals, we all experience such moments occasionally. As counselors, we can help clients to experience them more often. We can encourage them to become totally absorbed in something and to forget their poses and their defenses and their shyness—to go at it "whole-hog." (p. 45)*

Maslow invites counselors to encourage what others might discourage: perfectionistic zeal.

Robinson (1996) also regards perfectionism in the gifted as a potentially healthy trait, and exhorts counselors to support what she calls "positive perfectionism":

*Some therapists would label as neurotic those characteristics that are quite typical of bright youngsters. Indeed, therapists are trained to look for psychopathy rather than health in people who are "different." ...Counselors tend, in particular, to see perfectionism as a neurotic trait. Although, in general, high degrees of perfectionism may be associated with lower degrees of self-confidence (Flett, Hewitt, & Davidson, 1990), supportive adults can enable students to practice "positive perfectionism" (i.e., setting high standards for oneself, working to meet those standards, and taking joy in their attainment). Passionate pursuit of one's own interests, even esoteric ones, to the exclusion of a well-rounded life may be seen by counselors as "peculiar" and socially isolating. (pp. 133-134)*

### Conclusion

Perfectionism applied to oneself may lead to higher accomplishment, whereas perfectionism applied to others may lead to unfair expectations, disappointment and resentment. Perfectionism that translates into trying again and again leads to success, whereas perfectionism that results in paralysis, avoidance, anxiety attacks, and withdrawal guarantees failure. Perfectionism facing forward leads to striving to create a better life, while perfectionism facing backward leads to self-flagellation, overconcern with one's mistakes, and wallowing in self-pity. The key is learning how to set priorities. Instead of obliterating perfectionistic tendencies, I encourage gifted students to channel their perfectionism into what they care about the most, rather than dissipating it in areas that are unimportant to them.

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Perfectionism is an energy that can be used either positively or negatively depending on one's level of awareness. It can cause paralysis and underachievement, if the person feels incapable of meeting standards set by the self or by others. It also can be the passion that leads to extraordinary creative achievement—an ecstatic struggle to move beyond the previous limits of one's capabilities ("flow").

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#### Perfectionism and Gifted Learners (p. 2-3)

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Another goal is to develop authentic products that are directed toward bringing about a desired impact upon a specific target audience. This ensures that the project has a life beyond the classroom walls. A student is more likely to produce superior work if s/he is not merely performing for a teacher or a letter grade. A third major goal is to develop self-directed learning skills in the areas of planning, organization, resource utilization, time management, decision-making, and self-evaluation. Students may never have learned these skills in the early years of school, especially if they did not face appropriate levels of challenge in the curriculum, yet these are some of the most crucial life/career skills for students to have success in their adult lives.

Clearly, there are many benefits of independent study for gifted students. Independent studies can have a positive influence on motivation and career, and opportunity for self-expression. At the most basic level, students become prepared for other research assignments, and learn to manage time and set goals. Their school grades can improve as they learn study habits and are more internally motivated toward the projects that they design around their own interests. More importantly, gifted students engaged in independent study projects experience higher self-efficacy in creative productivity and thus will be more likely to pursue creative productivity throughout their lives. Finally, independent studies provide the opportunity for gifted and talented students to develop task commitment, self-confidence, and feelings of creative accomplishment. With these attitudes, students will be able to enjoy many years of intellectual curiosity and life-long learning.

### A Word from the C&G Chair: **Sal Mendaglio**

C & G is one of the largest divisions of NAGC but one would never know from the submissions to our newsletter. Here's my attempt to encourage your submissions. Please read on. It may spur you to jot down an item to submit. One thing may help you: **Our Newsletter is not a journal**. The newsletter may contain such pieces but that is not the only type of submission we want. I believe that our newsletter's primary objective is to facilitate communication among our members about the topics related to our mission. Newsletter submissions do not have to look like journal articles. You know, the formal language, the citations and APA style reference list and so on. I review for virtually all the journals associated with gifted education in North America and I know what the essentials of a good journal article are. But our newsletter is NOT a journal.

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