

Parent & Community Network News

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I've learned though we try to shield our children from life's hardships and life's pain...there will always be occasions in life, when a kid needs to walk in the rain.

~Anonymous



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR
Gifted Children

Focus on Perfectionism

Editor's Notes

Perfect. Excellent. Best. What do these words do to our children? In the feature article in this issue, Debra Troxclair discusses perfectionism and how it can become debilitating.

What are you a perfectionist about? Does it cause you distress?

I (in my 50s) still battle at times wanting everything to be "perfect." Or maybe I just want everything to go exceedingly well. I don't obsess about things in a way that a psychiatrist would consider obsessive-compulsive, but I do like to set a nice table and have my house in order. I like this newsletter to be well-received and hope that it meet the needs of our readers.

But I do not believe I am a perfectionist. I never obsessed about grades...I liked learning. I believe I can thank my parents for the emphasis they gave to effort and perseverance. Although I like things to come easy, I know that learning, true learning, takes

effort. Learning often comes from making mistakes. Learning comes from taking risks, trying something new and sometimes trying again and again.

Many now believe that it takes 10,000 hours doing something to become a master. So why do we get concerned when we don't produce perfection the first time?

Two areas in a child's life easily lend themselves to learning through repeated effort and practice: the arts and sports. Playing the flute, ballet dancing, throwing a pot, hitting home runs and shooting free-throws require much practice and teach valuable lessons.

As the parent, you can reward effort rather than grades. Reward perseverance rather than winning. Talk about learning as requiring effort. And for yourself...do as you say to your children. Practice may make perfect--or it just may make for better.

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**We hope to see
you in New Orleans
November 3-6, 2011.**

Parent Day Re-Cap

Over 50 parents from Georgia and surrounding states attended the special sessions set aside for them at the recent NAGC convention in Atlanta.

Co-chairs Lynn Waite and Mary Jean Banter along with Parent & Community Network Chair and Chair-Elect, Pauline Bowie and Christy McGee led the organization of the day's events.

Bonnie Cramond, University of Georgia, was the morning's guest presenter. C. Annette Eger from the Georgia Department of Education closed the program in the afternoon.

The parents were recognized prior to the morning keynote by Carol Dweck. Dr. Dweck spoke about mindsets, praise and how our messages impact whether our children become learners or non-learners.

Next year the convention will be held in New Orleans, November 3-6..

Recognizing Perfectionism in Gifted Children

by Debra Troxclair

(This article first appeared in PHP and is available on the NAGC Mile Marker Series CD-Rom.)

As a classroom teacher for a decade or so, the initial awe and bewilderment of watching groups of children become varied, unique, social emotional beings evolved into a quest for concrete knowledge of how people become themselves. Each year it became more apparent to me that many intelligent children were not

thinking effectively, creating imaginatively, or reaching toward goals enthusiastically. As I searched, read, and questioned other teachers, parents, and psychologists, I kept arriving at the same conclusion. Lack of student enthusiasm for and problems with learning were often grounded in self-esteem. I discovered that one component of self-esteem gone astray, perfectionism, seemed a strong candidate as the root of many problems. (It should be noted that perfectionism is a pervasive problem. Just because someone is gifted neither ensures that he or she will become perfectionistic, nor does it relieve him or her from the possibility of being particularly vulnerable to this personality characteristic.)

ROOTS OF PERFECTIONISM

Most people know at least one person who has difficulty letting go of projects and tasks until they are "just right." While most know perfectionism when they see it, few know its origins or how to handle perfectionism in themselves or others. In my review of the research, I uncovered several theories as to the origins of perfectionism that provided insight into its associated behaviors. Understanding perfectionism and its roots is the first step to combating the negative consequences associated with it.

Perfectionism as a Component of Self-Esteem.

Perfectionism develops early and creates difficulties that can drastically inhibit the development of a gifted individual's self esteem. In her book Growing Up Gifted, Barbara Clark points out that very early in our lives all of us pass through three stages of personality development, as classified by Erik Erikson, known as the stages of trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs.

doubt, and initiative vs. guilt.

Depending on how children experience these stages, they may develop a sense of confidence and a healthy self-esteem or they may learn to view themselves as inadequate and unable to accomplish goals.

In the trust versus mistrust stage of development, the roots of inner or outer locus of control are established while a child is still nursing and bundled in diapers. An inner locus of control develops if a child consistently experiences security at this stage. Children feel they have worth and importance, and they feel they are in control of their lives. A perfectionist with an inner locus of control is productive and uses the intensity of the characteristic to forge ahead without wasting time blaming the rest of the world when he or she makes errors. On the other hand, an outer locus of control forms if a child experiences inconsistent nurturing and insecurity. As a result, children feel they have no control over their world. Indeed, they feel as though the world is controlling them. A perfectionist with an outer locus of control is ineffective. Much energy is wasted wishing and hoping the rest of the world would change so that he or she would be able to fit into it better.

In the autonomy versus doubt developmental stage, shame, inadequacy, self-doubt, and low self-esteem may develop if a young child is limited, punished inappropriately, or criticized during this developmental stage. Two types of limitations are overprotection and overuse of the word "no." In addition, punishment or criticism without positive verbalization to balance it is harmful to gifted children, yet quite common. (Parents should realize that when they go behind their children and

redo their chores, it may come across as a way of telling them that their work was not good enough. Teasing relentlessly in an attempt to be playful can also be a form of criticism.) To compound the problem, many young gifted children inherently possess well-developed analytical and critical-thinking skills as a component of their high intelligence. The combination of this inherent trait with behavior modeled by adults who are critical reinforces perfectionism.

As children emulate significant adults who are critical of them, they begin to analyze and criticize themselves, calling into question their abilities and talents while forcing them to pursue an ideal that will not be criticized.

As part of the initiative versus guilt developmental stage, children develop either a sense of confidence or a sense of inadequacy. If youngsters are allowed to explore their world via challenging situations and in positive ways, they learn how to deal with people, places, and things with confidence. On the other hand, if inappropriate learning occurs at this stage due to overprotection or criticism, or if significant adults belittle their self-initiated activities, a child may not grow to be a risk-taker. He or she may feel guilty when experiencing or even desiring self-initiated activities because he or she has not received positive reinforcement from adults.

Lacking confidence in self-initiated activities, students focus only on what they know they can do “perfectly.” One of my former students refused to use cursive handwriting after months of instruction. His cursive handwriting was above average, but he continued to print in manuscript and stubbornly refused to hear any well-deserved praise for his cursive. He was secure in his ability to write in manuscript form and couldn’t take the risk that the new way he had

learned to write would match the quality of his manuscript handwriting. While still young and moving through these three developmental stages, I suspect that many perfectionists experienced situations that led them to feel inadequate and unsuccessful despite their abilities. Therefore, they developed self-images that allowed for nothing less than perfection. In order to feel worthiness, whatever they produced needed to be beyond reproach from anyone who might lay a critical eye on it.

Perfectionism as a Personality Trait.

High cognitive abilities enable a child to do things with a high degree of excellence, and a sense of omnipotence leads a child to believe he or she can do all things. Premature superego development (as a result of the gifted child’s greater awareness and sensitivity and the fact that he or she goes through developmental stages faster) makes the child feel he or she is duty-bound to do all things almost perfectly. The gifted child imposes great expectations upon himself or herself. Moral development can occur earlier, too, because the gifted child identifies earlier with parental personalities. This early moral development leads the very young child to mistakenly affirm to him- or herself that he or she has a moral responsibility to master all situations and/or learning experiences quickly, adeptly, and easily.

Perfectionism as a Developmental Vulnerability.

Perfectionism, as defined by Wendy Conklin Roedell in her article “Vulnerabilities of Highly Gifted Children,” is a developmental vulnerability of being gifted. It is an inner drive to accomplish tasks coupled with unrealistic expectations of ability. Roedell states that, as an asset, perfectionism assists in achieving tasks that require attention to detail, commit-

ment, and persistence. It can help individuals develop high standards and perseverance, supports extraordinary efforts, and helps individuals use all of their talents and abilities. However, it’s not always an asset. When perfectionists mistakenly believe that they must have high standards for every feat, task, and experience, they often impose those high standards on the people they encounter, their view of the world, and most devastatingly on their own self-esteem.

BEHAVIORS ASSOCIATED WITH PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionism has a long list of accompanying behaviors, and it ranges in intensity, with some people embracing its effects more tightly than others. Some of the manifestations of perfectionism are obvious, but others are not. The more you and your child become aware of the manifestations of perfectionism, the better able you will be to deal with it. Consider procrastination. Perfectionists procrastinate in order to mask the core of the problem, fear of imperfection. Jane B. Burka and Lenora Yuen, two noted psychologists, offer five reasons for procrastination: fear of failure, fear of success, fear of control, fear of separation, and fear of attachment. Procrastination results in test anxiety, writer’s block, and paralysis. When your gifted children fail to turn in assignments on time or at all, consider the source of this misbehavior. It could be perfectionism. Perfectionists play other mind games as well. In Perfectionism: What’s So Bad About Being Too Good, Miriam Adderholdt-Elliott and Jan Goldberg describe a number of these games and behaviors.

- Mood swinging is the result of fluctuating between the two poles of elation and depression. A perfectionist sets a goal, meets it, and becomes elated. However, when a goal is not met perfectly, depression sets in. The perfectionist struggles with the coping skill of “shaking it

TAKE NOTE!

Check out the
Webinars on
Wednesday
(WOW)
www.nagc.org

Proposals for the
2011 NAGC
convention in New
Orleans will open
in December.
Watch you email
inbox.

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off” (as the baseball coach once told my son to do) and getting on with things. Depression and even paralysis can result. Self-esteem is injured and the person is emotionally exhausted.

- The numbers game and all-or-nothing thinking are similar; both are related to the insatiable desires reflective of perfectionists. The numbers game is characterized by never being satisfied with the number of accomplishments achieved. An example of all-or nothing thinking is when a report card filled with A's isn't good enough because there is one B on it.

- Focus on the future, pine over the past, and telescopic thinking deal with goal setting that has gotten out of hand. Focus on the future is exhausting because the perfectionist never stops to gloat over the successful outcome of meeting a goal before he or she dives in the water frantically swimming to achieve the next goal. When a perfectionist is pining over the past, he or she can't let go of what he or she could have done that would have improved a grade, race time, project, etc. In telescopic thinking, the perfectionist looks at goals not met with a magnifying glass, blowing them out of proportion, while looking at accomplishments through the wrong end of the telescope, minimizing them and looking at them as insignificant and unimportant.

- When perfectionists are playing the putting your goals first game, they always put their achievement goals ahead of everything else, including family, friends, and health.

- The last game, getting it right, is simple to explain; it is “practice makes perfect” taken to the extreme. The perfectionist will not let go of a project until it is “perfect.”

Besides its internal, cognitive repercussions, perfectionism can also affect a person's relationships. Loneliness often results when the perfectionist imposes his or her

innate standards of perfection on partners, peer groups, and family members. The perfectionist can project superiority that makes others feel inferior. Perfectionists also endanger relationships when they over commit themselves to their goals, becoming obsessed by them and leaving little or no time to experience a relationship.

COMBATING PERFECTIONISM

Awareness and recognition of perfectionism, while complicated, is nowhere as difficult as eradicating perfectionism from one's personality. If perfectionism is deeply rooted and stubborn and is causing emotional distress, you may want to seek professional help. It is very important to look for someone who has experience with gifted and talented children and who understands their special needs, talents, and abilities. Whether you seek professional help or not, there are things you and your child can do.

The first step in assisting yourself and your gifted child is to become knowledgeable about and be able to recognize the wide range of perfectionistic behaviors. By making yourself aware of what perfectionism is, learning how you and society have role-modeled this tendency, and applying corrective action in your own life, you can help children increase their own awareness and broaden their understanding of this aspect of self-esteem. In addition to reading and learning about perfectionism, below are a number of tactics to help you and your child combat unproductive and unhealthy perfectionistic tendencies. Teach your gifted child about perfectionism after you've learned more about your own perfectionism or the perfectionism they encounter around them.

Tell them that perfectionism is nothing more than a way of thinking that is harmful and that can be corrected with effort. Model the corrective thought patterns and

talk about them with your child so that he or she is aware of them.

- Teach your child that it's okay to make mistakes, especially when you are learning something new. Teach your child to turn mistakes into a lesson and an opportunity rather than a regret.
- Teach your child how to say "Oh well!" when things don't go exactly the way he or she would like them to or think they should. It will still sting, but by saying those words when something doesn't work out perfectly, some of the sense of failure will go away, which will help reduce emotional festering.
- Replace the words should, ought, must, have to with it would be nice if, I might, or I could do so if I chose.
- Help your child discover that his or her good enough is usually more than okay, that doing his or her best is more important than doing it perfectly.
- Teach your child that life isn't always fair by presenting examples in your life in which you had to cope with unfairness. When an unfair situation arises, help your child remind himself or herself out loud that life isn't always fair.
- Following the phrase "Just do it" helps a procrastinator get started sometimes. It doesn't always help, but it does sometimes, and that is good enough.
- Help your child understand that even though he or she learns things quickly and quite well, he or she is only human and that is good enough. In fact, it is the best he or she will ever be on this planet.
- Teach them that every day brings a fresh start. The past is history and a lesson, not a regret. The future isn't here yet. The goal is to do the best you can today.

- Help your child be as perfect as he or she wants to be in one area of his or her life, school subject, hobby, etc., but teach him or her to lighten up and help them see the funny side of life every day.
- Finally, help your child understand that these thought patterns are thinking habits that didn't just pop up over night. In fact, tell him or her that once he or she learns about perfectionistic thinking it will seem like they are engaging in those thought patterns even more. That's the way its supposed to be and that's OK. Awareness is the first step in changing a behavior.

Modeling healthy behavior and talking about perfectionistic habits when they occur is a good way to help your child work through perfectionistic tendencies. As you and your child gain an awareness and understanding of perfectionism, you can learn to take control of perfectionism instead of allowing it to control you. No longer do you have to allow perfectionism to limit activities or relationships. You can learn to assess and prioritize projects according to their value and importance to you, choosing only those tasks on which you wish to impose high standards. The journey from being a perfectionist riddled with anxiety to a healthy pursuer of excellence is long and difficult, but very well worth the effort.

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Gift Idea
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www.nagc.org

**Failure
should be
our teacher,
not our
undertaker.**

**Failure is
delay, not
defeat.**

**It is a
temporary
detour, not
a dead-end
street.**

**~Denis
Waitley**