

Connecting for high potential

Your Tear and Share Guide

NAGC receives similar questions from teachers and parents; however, rarely is there an opportunity to explore how the “other side” might face the issue. Interestingly, both groups benefit from the same information even though they look at it from different perspectives and have different roles to play in helping gifted children reach their potential.

Our ongoing goal is for teachers and parents to develop a broader understanding of their students' potential and thus create stimulating learning environments.

This month's question: “Are there ways to help the gifted child who procrastinates, has anxiety, and/or never seems to think things are good enough?”

A TEACHER VIEW

I have been working all year to build a sense of community and trust in my high school classroom; nevertheless, I feel so frustrated with what happens when I use cooperative learning.

Although there are detailed rubrics and individual grades, Christine becomes impatient and irritated with other group members and she takes everything home to re-do the day's work. Her group's final product is always outstanding but, by the time it's done, none of the other students want to work with her again. Christine often comments, “It would have been so much better if I could have done it myself.”

A PARENT VIEW

*My child gets **really** upset if anything is “too hard” for him. He always wants to be #1 at whatever he does and he just can't cope if he gets anything wrong – reacting with awful tantrums. Now I'm noticing changes in how he approaches both school and sports. He's really withdrawn and seems less interested. I worry that he's learning to pull back from challenge...to take the easy road.*

*At the same time, I don't want him to feel like he's living in a pressure cooker home, so I'm reluctant to push...although I do expect him to **do** his best.*

“Be the best you can be.” “Maximize your potential.” “We're proud of our champions.” “Don't settle for second best.” Children hear and see those messages echoing throughout their daily lives. It's no wonder that gifted children, with their heightened awareness, strong memory capacity, and ability to make cause-and-effect links, might then conclude that their value to family and school is determined by their number of successes.

Understanding perfectionism requires balancing seemingly conflicting ideas. Consider these points:

- Constantly aiming for perfection in all circumstances and at all times is not healthy.
- Perfection (defined as accurate, proficient, organized, and satisfied only with the highest standards) can be a highly desirable goal. For example, think of the precision we expect in engineering airplanes, or the flawless skills we want in a surgeon.
- Becoming good at something involves experimenting, not always getting it right, and trying again.
- Potential, even the exceptional potential of a gifted child, doesn't automatically translate into high-level achievement. It takes long hours of practice, hard work, and persistence (even in the face of failure) to develop natural abilities into accomplishments.

1. Procrastination and Perfectionism?

- Is it procrastination or confused priorities? Check frequently to be sure students understand the difference in time and workload expectations for various assignments, such as term papers versus quick overnight homework.
- For long-term projects, encourage students to envision an entire completed project but also help them set intermediary goals. As each benchmark approaches, provide students with time to discuss their progress and focus on the next forward steps with you or another adult. Beware of the temptation to revisit completed work; the goal is to sustain forward momentum!

- “I don’t want to do it – It’s boring” may be a sign that the work itself is too easy. But, there are tasks in life that need to be done, anyway. Help your child learn to find pleasure in completing necessary tasks. Talk about types of incentives. Create a list of motivators used by people you know and people throughout history.
- The first step (getting started) is sometimes the most difficult step. Some gifted children learn to avoid projects they love because they know they will become completely absorbed, not wanting to be interrupted by other responsibilities. Does your child feel rushed from activity to activity?

2. Anxiety and Perfectionism?

- Consider that if gifted students have been high achievers without being challenged, they may falsely believe that being smart means you don’t have to work hard. They may also equate being smart with always being right. Trying new things and not instantly succeeding can cause anxiety.
- Recognize that some students may respond to new cognitive demands with persistence and willingness while others may view them as threatening, insurmountable barriers. Help by teaching study skills and other foundation strategies along with your regular content. Check “*Helping Gifted Students With Stress Management*” at: www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=129

- Children develop a pervasive feeling of worry when they always need to be right. Even after doing the work, some gifted children may “forget” to turn in their homework. The work may not be up to their personal standards, or they may be anxious about having it seen and judged by others. To avoid a building sense of pressure, check to see how homework is being graded. Are there high stakes attached?
- Make sure your child feels valued as a person, not just for accomplishments. Self-esteem based on external praise leaves children vulnerable and anxious about the opinions of others, leading to fear of letting people (especially parents) down.

3. Encouraging Excellence

- Making a choice among many ideas and options needs to be practiced. Use open-ended activities. Perfectionists strive to find the *one right answer* – help them take healthy risks by presenting activities or situations in which multiple paths can lead to the same learning goal.
- Carefully selected books and movies can help students open up about excessive pressures to achieve. For students in grades 4-8, investigate *The Report Card* by Andrew Clements. Try the movie *The Perfect Score* for older students.

- Aiming for excellence and holding high personal standards can lead to exceptional achievement. New studies of elite athletes show that a strong inner drive for perfection is good if there are not negative reactions to imperfections or failures. Those who are sensitized to criticism or become overly concerned with making mistakes do not reach the same high goals.
- Share your own stories and life lessons so your child sees that success and satisfaction are still attainable even if they aren’t “perfect.”

For more information about perfectionism along with many links to additional articles and suggested readings, check the Parent Pages on the NAGC website at: www.nagc.org. Begin by clicking on the “Parent” tab across the top of the homepage. Then select “The ABCs of Gifted.” Perfectionism is listed under the general topic of “Social and Emotional Issues.”

At the root of human responsibility is the concept of perfect, the urge to achieve it, the intelligence to find a path towards it, and the will to follow that path, if not to the end at least the distance needed to rise above individual limitations and environmental impediments.
--Aung San Sun Kyi (winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize for her non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights in Burma.)

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