

## WHAT'S WRONG WITH PERFECT?

Good, better, best  
Never let it rest,  
'Til your good is better  
And your better best.



We want our children to strive for excellence. It is attainable and provides a good sense of accomplishment. Furthermore, excellence is advantageous whether it involves children's school grades, ice skating, music, art, gymnastics, written work, or many other skills. It sets high standards, and opens doors to opportunity for talented children. Many talent areas demand excellence. Thus, the striving for perfection in an area of expertise may be a healthy development of talent. However, when perfectionism becomes pervasive and compulsive, it goes beyond excellence. It leaves no room for error. It provides little satisfaction and much self-criticism because the results never feel good enough to the doer. Perfection is impossible for children who apply impossibly high standards to too many activities too frequently.

### The Pressures of Perfectionism

The pressures of perfectionism may lead to high positive achievement motivation or to underachievement. In very important ways, perfectionism is slightly different than the motivation for excellence. That small dissimilarity prevents perfectionistic children from ever feeling good enough about themselves and precludes their taking risks when they fear the results will not be perfect. They may procrastinate or feel anxious and fearful when they believe they cannot meet their high standards. They may experience stomachaches, headaches, and depression when they worry that they make mistakes or perform less well than their perfectionistic expectations. Sometimes they avoid accomplishing the most basic work and make excuses and blame others for their problems. They may even become defiant and rebellious to hide the fears of failure they feel.

Some children may only be specifically or partially perfectionistic. For example, some are perfectionistic about their grades and intellectual abilities; others may be perfectionistic about their clothes and their appearance; some are perfectionistic about their athletic prowess or their musical or artistic talent; some are perfectionistic about their room organization and cleanliness; and some children (and incidentally, also some adults) are perfectionistic in two or three areas, although there are some areas that apparently don't pressure or bother them at all. Those children who have not generalized perfectionism to all parts of their lives are more likely to be healthy perfectionists.

## How Perfectionism Affects Others

Charlotte Otto, Vice President at Procter and Gamble, also struggled with perfectionism as an adult in her career. She learned to affirm instead of blaming herself. Initially, she struggled with accepting criticism but finally realized how to learn from the constructive criticism she received instead of letting it debilitate her.

(Taken from *How Jane Won* by S. Rimm, 2001, Crown Publishing Group)

Unhealthy perfectionism not only affects the perfectionist but also affects those around them. In their efforts to feel very good about themselves, perfectionists may unconsciously cause others to feel less good. Spouses, siblings, or friends of perfectionists may feel angry and oppositional and may not understand their own irrational feelings. Sometimes family members feel depressed and inadequate because they can't ever measure up to the impossibly high standards of their family perfectionist. Often times, there is an underachiever in the family to balance out the perfectionist. The underachiever feels like they can never do as well as their perfect sibling so they say to themselves, "Why try?"

In order for perfectionists to maintain their perfect status, they may unconsciously put others down and point out how imperfect they are, usually in a very "nice" way. For example, perfect sister Sally may say, "I don't understand why my brother isn't even trying to do his homework." Giving others continuous unsolicited advice seems to reassure perfectionists of how intelligent they are. They are so determined to be impossibly perfect that causing others to feel bad has an unconsciously confirming effect on their own perfectionism. The perfectionistic spouse, in his or her effort to feel best, may also cause his or her partner to feel inadequate or less intelligent.

### What Causes Perfectionism?

The pressures children feel to be perfect may originate from extreme praise they hear from the adults in their environment. The pressures may also come from watching their parents model perfectionistic characteristics, or they may simply stem from their own continuously successful experiences, which they then feel they must live up to.

Certain activities like ballet, gymnastics, and music encourage perfect performance, and children involved in these activities strive to meet the high standards expected of them. This may be healthy, or children may generalize these expectations of perfection to other parts of their lives, and perfectionism may then become unhealthy and dissatisfying.

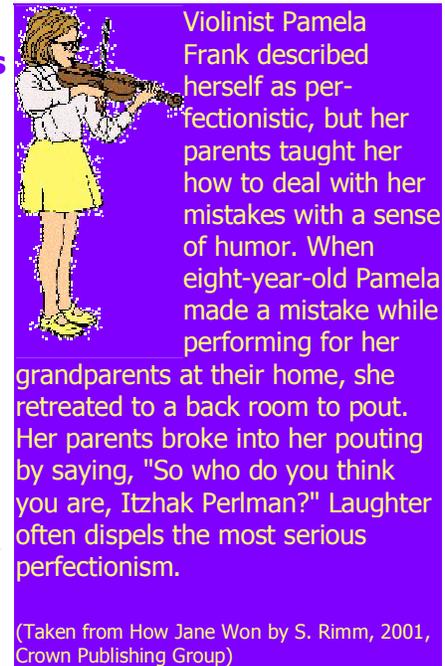
*See Jane Win* Research

When we studied the childhoods of more than 1,000 successful women for *See Jane in*, we found that 30 percent of the women viewed themselves as perfectionistic in high school. For the most part, their perfectionism was positive. Approximately half of the

women felt pressured in high school, but they typically liked feeling that pressure and considered it to be a personal pressure.

## How Parents and Teachers Can Help Perfectionists

- 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.
- 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.