



Tackling Perfectionism

Perfectionism is the tendency to set very high standards for yourself and place strong importance on meeting those standards. Healthy perfectionism can motivate children to work hard, set goals, and take pride in their accomplishments while understanding that mistakes are a normal part of learning. Unhealthy perfectionism, however, can cause children to fear failure, become overly self-critical, avoid challenging tasks, or feel that their worth depends on being perfect.

Parents can help gifted children manage perfectionism by encouraging high standards while teaching them that mistakes, failure, and challenges are normal parts of learning. Rather than immediately fixing problems or focusing only on results, parents can praise effort and persistence; for example, if a child is frustrated with a difficult homework problem, a parent might say, "It's okay if you don't get it right the first time. What have you tried, and what could you try next?"

Pay attention to signs that perfectionism is causing your child excessive self-doubt. Statements such as "It's not good enough" or "If I don't get an A, I'm a failure" indicate that the child is placing unhealthy pressure on themselves. If a child repeatedly worries that their homework is not good enough, a parent might say, "It sounds like you're putting a lot of pressure on yourself. What would you consider good enough for this assignment?" This can help them recognize that falling short of their own expectations does not mean failure.

An important aspect of perfectionism in your gifted child is helping them distinguish between "high standards" and "having to be perfect". To combat these parents can encourage high goals but emphasize that the goal is growth and effort rather than flawless performance. Helping your child recognize the difference between "I want to do my best" and "I cannot make a mistake" can help establish how they are perceiving themselves and what to strive for in the future.

Keep in mind that procrastination can sometimes be a sign of perfectionism, especially when a child avoids starting because they are afraid of making mistakes or not doing the work perfectly. Parents can help by breaking assignments into smaller steps, encouraging a first attempt without worrying about perfection, and praising completion and effort. For example, instead of saying, "You need to make this really good," a parent might say, "Let's get a first draft done first, and then we can work on improving it."

Parents can help prevent perfectionism by setting challenging but realistic expectations and making it clear that their love and approval are not dependent on their child's academic performance. Avoid comparing children to siblings or classmates and give them opportunities to set goals that are appropriate for their abilities. For example, instead of saying, "You need to get an A on this test," a parent might say, "What do you think is a realistic goal for this test, and how can I help you work toward it?"

Resources:

1. Grugan, M. C., Hill, A. P., Madigan, D. J., Donachie, T. C., Olsson, L. F., & Etherson, M. E. (2021). [Perfectionism in Academically Gifted Students: A Systematic Review](#). *Educational Psychology Review*, 33(4), 1631-1673.
2. Parker, W. D., & Mills, C. J. (1996). [The Incidence of Perfectionism in Gifted Students](#). *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 40(4), 194-199.
3. Carolyn Orange (1997) [Gifted students and perfectionism](#), *Roeper Review*, 20:1, 39-41