The Perfectionist Underachiever

Among educators of the gifted the link between giftedness and perfectionism is clearly established. The tendency toward perfectionism is an item on the most widely-used teacher rating scale for the identification of superior students (Renzulli, Smith, White, Callahan, & Hartman, 1976). Dealing with perfectionism among the gifted is often cited as one of the counseling needs of the gifted (Kerr, 1991; Silverman, 1993). Typically educators concerned with gifted children are concerned about two negative impacts of perfectionism: underachievement and emotional turmoil. In terms of underachievement, Whitmore (1980) reported that perfectionistic tendencies make some gifted students vulnerable for underachievement because they do not submit work unless it is perfect.

General Characteristics

- Has faulty thinking (irrational beliefs)
  1. I must be perfect or I will be rejected.
  2. If I make a mistake, it will be horrible.
  3. If I do it perfectly, then I will be accepted.
  4. I must be perfect or I will be embarrassed.
  5. If I make a mistake, I will be humiliated.
  6. When I get it right, I will finally accept myself.
  7. When I achieve perfection, I will find inner peace.
  8. If I do it perfectly, then it will be rewarded.
  9. If others do not approve of me, then I am not OK.
 10. If I make a mistake, then I am worthless.
 11. I'm not good enough. I must keep trying.
 12. I must be perfect or others will disapprove of me.
 13. If I do it perfectly, then everything will work out right.
 14. I'll never be good enough.
 15. If others approve of me, then I must be OK.
 16. If I do it perfectly, then everyone will notice.
 17. I must be perfect or I will fail.
 18. Things should be done the right way.
 19. There is a right way and a wrong way to do things.
 20. It is possible to do things perfectly.

- Usually neat in their appearance and are well organized.
- Push themselves harder than most other people do.
- Push others as hard as they push themselves.
• Perfectionists usually appear to be very competent and confident individuals. They are often envied by others because they seem to "have it all together."
• Perfectionists can have trouble making decisions. They are so worried about making the wrong one that they fail to reach any conclusion.
• Along with indecision, perfectionists are sometimes plagued by great difficulty in taking risks, particularly if their personal reputations are on the line.
General Recommendations

- **Appreciate the trait.** Don't be ashamed of being perfectionistic. Acknowledge your children's feelings of frustration. Share with them that you have often felt the same way and how you've dealt with your feelings.

- **Understand that it serves a useful purpose.** Help your children understand the source of their feelings as positive traits in themselves. Ideals and high standards are good, even if it hurts when one can't always reach them.

- **Set priorities for yourself.** Allow yourself to be perfectionistic in activities that really matter to you, rather than in everything all at once. Help your child recognize that no one can be perfect in everything, and that we all have to make painful choices in our lives about what to strive for, and where to settle for less than our best.

- **Maintain high standards for yourself, but don't impose them on others lest you become a tyrant.** Help your child distinguish between perfectionistic attitudes toward self and others. It's fine to hold high standards for yourself but unfair to expect others to conform to your standards.

- **Keep striving even when your first attempts are unsuccessful.** Encourage your children not to give up. Remind them that with practice they come closer and closer to their goals. It takes time and effort to achieve high standards.

- **Don't quit when the going gets rough.** Only allow yourself to quit when you're a winner. Give your children examples of people who felt intensely frustrated in their efforts and overcame their obstacles through persistence.

- **Don't punish yourself for failing.** Focus your energies on future successes. Try to be a model of self-acceptance, of willingness to look foolish and accept being wrong. Adopt a philosophy that there are no mistakes - only learning experiences. Help your child to process what is learned from each "failure." Successful adults do not expect instant successes. One father said to his children, "Anything worth doing is worth doing wrong" because it is only by doing it wrong that you can learn to do it right.

- **Hold onto your ideas and believe in your ability to reach them.** Support your children in following their dreams.

- **Recognize that there are good parts and bad parts to perfectionism.** We have choices about how we use it. We can let it paralyze us with fear of failure, or we can use it to mobilize us for unparalleled excellence. We can use this drive to help create a better world.

- **There is pain in perfectionism.** Fear of that pain can inhibit you from trying anything or you can deal with it courageously. Nothing is ever as bad as it appears. Teach your children that they can cope with this pain. It is a good pain. Help them realize that they are good problem-solvers, hard-workers, and emotionally strong. They may not be able to avoid the pain, but they can surmount it.
**TYPE:** Perfectionism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACHIEVEMENT ORIENTATION (Self-Efficacy)</th>
<th>CHARACTERISTICS</th>
<th>SEVERITY OF PROBLEM</th>
<th>INTERVENTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perception of Ability</td>
<td>• May be a high achiever</td>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>• Build a relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Self-Efficacy)</td>
<td>• May exhibit high personal standards;</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Point out irrational beliefs, “stickin’ thinking”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Point out past achievements, build on them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemplation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Help the student process the following: “If you believe that getting things just right in your life will lead to acceptance, then you must not be feeling accepted right now. What are the things you would like to change about yourself? What could you do differently that would make you feel better about who you are? If you can figure out what is missing or needs changing, you can focus your energies in that direction.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Have students contemplate how perfectionism fits in the real world</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Acknowledgement | • Help change thought processes-
Instead of "I must have perfection before I can have peace of mind," consider "I need to give myself credit for what I do well, even if it is not perfect." Help them take inventory of their accomplishments or assets.  
• Share stories from “Cradles of Eminence” or like books. |
| Acceptance | Help the student to reevaluate how he/she spends his/her time. If he/she decides that a task makes him/her feel good, then he/she can do it. If it is just extra work that no one will notice, then he/she may skip it. Have students participate in Student-Led IEPs |
| Maintenance | • Celebrate even small successes.  
• Continue positive self-talk |
| Environmental Support (Expectation to Succeed) | • May set unrealistic expectations;  
• May be self-evaluative and self-judging; |
| Denial | • Build a relationship.  
• Point out irrational beliefs, “stickin’ thinkin’” |
| Contemplation | • Give them specific points of hope.  
• Show student that turning in a paper that isn’t perfect is better than no paper at all. “Do the math.” |
| Acknowledgement | Help student to keep a record of papers turned in and grade point average.  
|                 | Help students to set appropriate goals for turning in work, even if not perfect.  
|                 | Break tasks into small steps when big projects is too overwhelming  
| Acceptance      | Continue to support the student’s success  
|                 | Celebrate success of each small step  
| Maintenance     | Be aware of their successes and help them celebrate.  
<p>|                 | Point out to the student when he/she is slipping back into unhealthy perfectionism.  |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation/Interest (Meaningfulness)</th>
<th>Denial</th>
<th>Contemplation</th>
<th>Acknowledgement</th>
<th>Acceptance</th>
<th>Maintenance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• May give up if own standards are not met, or if a mistake is made; • May become extremely defensive if given criticism;</td>
<td>• Build a relationship. • Point out irrational beliefs, “stickin’ thinkin’”</td>
<td>• Give them specific points of hope.</td>
<td>• Help them get involved with volunteer activity. • Map out career path and how to get there (education, training, etc.)</td>
<td>• Continue to support the student’s success</td>
<td>• Be aware of their successes and help them celebrate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of Parents, Peers, Teachers</td>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>Contemplation</td>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>Maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| • Perceive that others don’t understand  
• May have feelings of inadequacy and inferiority and desire praise and reassurance; | • Build a relationship.  
• Point out irrational beliefs, “stickin’ thinkin’”  
• Ask, “What does it do for you to think that?” | • Show relationship between current behavior and unhappiness and poor performance.  
• Help student gain insights into causes and how it developed in them. | • Help students understand relationship between perfectionism and emotions.  
• Make failure acceptable. | • Reframe perfection as excellence.  
• Acknowledge all work completed and turned in irregardless of grade. | • Validate the progress the student has made. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Realistic Expectations (Self Regulation)</th>
<th>Denial</th>
<th>Contemplation</th>
<th>Acknowledgement</th>
<th>Acceptance</th>
<th>Maintenance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• May set unrealistic expectations;</td>
<td>• Build a relationship.</td>
<td>• Share the experiences of others in the same situation and the outcome.</td>
<td>• Help student set realistic goals</td>
<td>• Monitor progress toward goal</td>
<td>• Support the student’s expectations for success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• May give up if own standards are not met, or if a mistake is made;</td>
<td>• Point out irrational beliefs, “stickin’ thinkin’”</td>
<td>• Help the student set small, obtainable goals.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• May procrastinate.</td>
<td>• Break it up into small achievements.</td>
<td>• Break it up into small achievements.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• May have feelings of inadequacy and inferiority and desire praise and reassurance;</td>
<td>• Make sure students have realistic vision of what his/her gifts are</td>
<td>• Let the student know it is OK to ask for help and that they don’t have to be the first one done.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• May be self-evaluative and self-judging;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>