

Perfectionism

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Is your child highly sensitive to criticism?

Do you wonder if your child is lazy?

Do your children constantly compare and compete with each other?

Are you frustrated because your child won't even try if he or she can't do it perfect?

We live in a world where people thrive from having high standards for themselves and can easily adapt to the needs of a situation. If success is only based on getting it right, then many children will keep from even trying. On the outside, this can look like being stubborn, lazy, apathetic, or self-absorbed. Children can be full of excuses or conceal mistakes to avoid being found out.

On the inside, people with perfectionist tendencies are highly critical and shut down their thinking before they have an opportunity to playfully pursue interests, assimilate knowledge, or interpret mistakes as learning opportunities. Internal messages perpetuate the stress by focusing on the couple of points missed on a test rather than the 98 points they earned, discounting compliments, or only sensing approval when they've performed perfectly. Therefore, they create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Children who have these characteristics can be great achievers and great sufferers by being more at risk for depression, anxiety, migraines, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, substance abuse, and suicide. It is a very lonely place for children to be, when they only feel accepted when they perform perfectly.

You want your child to enjoy what they are doing, feel proud of what they learned, and be confident even when they don't know something. It is important to acknowledge their efforts, their creativity, or willingness to try again. Here are some things you can do to help instill a passion for learning rather than the terror of failure.

1. Provide guidance to solving problems. "How do you think you'll do that?" "I see you are trying this, can you think of another way?" "How is that working for you?" "Is that respectful?"

2. Allow children to make mistakes. When there is no risk of danger, let them mess up, recognize it, and experience that nothing bad happens. Let them take pride in figuring it out. Normalize with comments such as, “That’s how you learn.”
3. Convey your belief they are capable. “What do you think you’ll do now?” “I’ve seen you solve tough stuff like this before.”
4. Recognize effort. “I see you keep trying, wow, you sure are persistent! That’s how you get better.” “I appreciate that you cleared the table for me. To be safe, mom will take care of the knives until you’re older.”
5. Notice improvement. “I see you remembered to take your shoes off, put your backpack by the table, and wash your hands before snack. What else do you need to do today before going to play?” “You are ready 5 minutes earlier this morning.”
6. Don’t compare children! Focus on self-comparisons.
7. Give neutral praise. Sure kids like to know that an adult is pleased by their behavior. However, some children can become hyper-focused on pleasing, or discount your belief about them. Providing observations and naming what you’ve witnessed, rather than your opinion about it, is less likely to be disputed. “You brushed your teeth without a reminder today.” “You were gentle with the dog.” “You shared with your friends 4 times while they were here.”
8. Provide structure. Kids thrive on structure. It feels good to check off items on a list. Set them up for success by providing written checklists for various routines. Ex. Morning: Alarm clock set, out of bed by 7:15, get dressed, comb hair, breakfast done by 7:45, wash face and hands, brush teeth, shoes on by 8, backpack and coat on by 8:05.

9. Avoid over-reassurance. Saying it's going to be ok, when kids are feeling scared, is more likely to get resistance. Validate feelings of being scared, and convey your belief they are capable. "I see that you are nervous about walking in by yourself. Take a deep breath, introduce yourself, and remember, you are kind and friendly. They will figure it out."

10. Name the inner critic. Help your children establish some distance from the criticism, so it is not seen as the truth or their identity. Shame and guilt keep perfectionism in business.

Seeking support from a professional counselor can help integrate these strategies, as well as, develop more self-compassion to model for your children.

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I help people bring structure and calm to chaos.
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