

# Perfectionism

Parents and teachers of gifted children often express frustration with the impossible expectations that their children hold for themselves.

Perfectionism affects many populations, but poses special concerns for gifted students. Many gifted children face unchallenging schoolwork and can achieve at perfect (or near-perfect) scores with relatively little effort. Their achievement expectations often become reinforced by teachers, parents, and even peer groups—and puts them at particular risk for perfectionistic behaviors.

Perfectionism manifests in children in several ways, and there are strategies for adults to help their children.

## HEALTHY & UNHEALTHY PERFECTIONISM

Although children's perfectionistic behaviors can be a frustrating and overwhelming experience for parents and teachers, it's important to understand that they can have positive benefits for students. Perfectionism, as a set of behaviors, can be classified as healthy and unhealthy.

**Unhealthy.** Unhealthy perfectionism can be associated with stress, unyielding expectations, risk avoidance, and procrastination, which can ultimately lead to depression and anxiety disorders, greater levels of violence and substance abuse, and eating disorders. When serious concerns about a child's mental health arise, it's imperative to seek help from a mental health professional.

**Healthy.** Healthy perfectionism is associated with achievement and dedication to academic performance. Students who exhibit healthy perfectionism have high expectations for their work, motivation to complete tasks, and self-confidence in their abilities to reach goals. Therefore, interventions aim to help children transition from unhealthy to healthy behavior.

## PROFILES & STRATEGIES

Children manifest their perfectionism in various ways, including overachievement, procrastination or risk-avoidance. Many gifted children fit multiple categories and may vary by area (e.g., homework, extracurricular activities, school projects).

**Academic Achiever.** Characterized by high expectations for academic performance, with a strong focus on external evaluations, such as grades. Often emotionally upset with grades that are less than the highest performance levels.



## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

» Although unhealthy perfectionism is a common concern about gifted children, parents and teachers can use strategies to help change to healthier orientations.

» Children exhibiting unhealthy perfectionistic behaviors can fit several profiles that each present unique challenges but ultimately can be overcome.

» Unhealthy perfectionism often manifests as procrastination when perfection on tasks becomes too overwhelming.

» Declining participation in fun activities may be a way that unhealthy perfectionists avoid disappointment in failing to live up to unreasonably high expectations.

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**Academic Achiever (con't).** May equate 89% on a spelling test with "failing," or generalize poor performance on one assignment or in one class to his overall level of intelligence or self-worth: *"I got a B on my math homework; I must not be very smart."*

*Parents can de-emphasize grades and external evaluations, focusing instead on growth and the satisfaction from completing work—before work is evaluated and grades are returned.*

**Aggravated Accuracy Assessor.** Focuses on mistakes and often spends inordinate amounts of time attempting to create "perfect" work. She often spends time on homework to the detriment of other activities, such as socializing with friends and family, extracurricular activities, and sleep. *Parents can help by modelling mistakes, providing examples of imperfection in role models from books and movies, and adhering to schedules that limit time spent on assignments.*

**Risk Evader.** Often chooses to disengage when faced with the possibility of not being successful or the best. A high school student might choose to avoid Advanced Placement classes, afraid he might not be able to achieve high grades in more challenging classes. A younger student may avoid answering questions in class or completing assignments. *Parents and teachers can create safe environments for these children to take academic risks and praise attempts, rather than the outcomes, of these endeavors.*

**Controlling Image Manager.** Focuses on the perceptions of others and attempts to preserve the appearance of perfection or high levels of success. This can create conflicts with peers when students quit playing or "throw" games when it appears that they may lose. *Parents and teachers can role play good sportsmanship and help children develop pride in the process and effort rather than the final outcome.*

**Procrastinating Perfectionist.** Often delays initiating work, faced with looming expectations and fear. Children may see this as a way to avoid risk or preserve their image. (If they wait until the last minute and then rush, they have an excuse for lesser quality.) Other children may procrastinate due to anxiety, paralyzed by fear that their performance will not live up to their expectations. *Parents and teachers can help create timelines for the completion of work and work with children to divide large tasks into manageable sub-goals.*



## FOR MORE INFO

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