

A NOTE TO GROWN-UPS

It can be very frustrating to watch your child struggling with perfectionism. Whether she is thrashing around with seemingly endless revisions of something, crumbling up in misery over the smallest mistake, or running out of time to do something she is capable of because of a microscopic attention to every detail of the task, it's clear your child is suffering—but nothing you say or do seems to help.

You *can* help. In fact, your child *needs* help from you—she needs you to understand her perfectionism, and to enter into a teamwork process to overcome it. Reading this book together is a start. In this section, you'll get some practical information on what else you can do.

How Do They Get This Way?

Contrary to what might seem logical, perfectionism is not simply a strong need to do well. It's not just being proud of doing well. Perfectionism comes from a deep fear of *not doing well enough*.

Perfectionists worry about this because they have a conviction that being perfect is the only way to be acceptable as a person. For this reason, perfectionism is described as a “relational issue,” rather than as something that arises from inside the child. That means it comes about because the child is hoping to prove himself or herself to someone. Because parents have the most emotionally intimate, continuous relationships that their children experience early on, parents always have a large role in their children's emotional development. Kids make sense out of their world—they come to conclusions about who they are and what others expect of them—by adapting to what they find at home.

As a parent—or as another important adult in the child's life—you want your child to do well and be successful in life. Doing things to help make that happen is a part of responsible parenting. Often, though, your hopes for your child's success are interpreted by the child as expectations. This is where it gets complicated: children learn what is expected of them, but they may have questions about what will happen if they don't live up to the expectations. Some kids conclude that they won't be as acceptable to their parents, and this could be where the struggle for perfection begins.

Parents don't always realize how a child interprets their expectations. Becoming aware of this is a vital first step to helping your child overcome perfectionism.

How You Can Help

It can be disheartening at first to realize that you and others in the family play a role in your child's perfectionism, but it's actually good news. It means you can play a role in overcoming it. You *do* have powerful emotional influence in your child's life, and if you can help him feel understood and hopeful, you can help him change.

And that is the essential point: helping your child to overcome perfectionism is not about finding the right thing to do, it's about creating an environment of acceptance. If kids can feel acceptable—loved, cherished, and appreciated—regardless of how well they do something, then not only will perfectionism fade, but their ability to improve will be enhanced as well.

Building an environment of acceptance is a process with several facets. Following are some important things you can do.

See Things the Way Your Child Does

Try to understand the world through your child's eyes. It may seem silly to you, for example, that she is so overly concerned about the two points she lost on a test in school, but if she sees the missed points as an imperfection that threatens her sense of acceptance as a person, then her anxiety makes more sense. The problem is not that she is "wrong," and if you explain to her that it's silly she will only feel worse. The problem is her underlying belief about what it takes to be acceptable. Ask her to talk with you about what her viewpoint is. Accept that for what it is, and then do what you can to reassure her that you do love her and respect her—and that you feel that way for reasons that have nothing to do with the grades she gets.

Engage in Self-Reflection

In spite of the best intentions, parents can send unwanted messages to their children regarding their expectations. It's important for you to examine what messages you are sending. This kind of self-reflection can be hard to do, and in most cases it helps to do it with your partner or spouse. It is not a way of pointing a finger of blame at yourself or your partner. The idea is not to look for a culprit, but to look for the ways you may have influenced your child's self-view. If your child has a negative self-view, you have the power to change things for the better.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself:

- Am I frequently critical of things or people?
- Do I look for and comment on things that aren't quite right?
- Do I "hover" over my children to see that everything is done correctly?
- Do I ever comment on what I appreciate?

It's also helpful to think about your own history: what did your parents expect from you, and how did they convey the message? Another thing to consider is whether there has been any arguing, fighting, violence, or other emotionally upsetting incidents in the home. Children are very sensitive to interpersonal relations in the home and they react, although sometimes only inwardly, to tensions and problems. If there is emotional turmoil in the home, it can't help but affect children, some of whom will strive for perfection in the hopes that it will divert attention onto all the good things perfection seems to promise.

Many of these issues are for you and your spouse or partner to think about and talk over in private. In many cases, they are also enormously helpful parts of a healing dialogue you can have with your child.

Have a Dialogue with Your Child

When you have a true dialogue, where you and your child are talking *and* listening to one another, you do two things: you make it more likely that problems can get solved, and, by paying attention to each other, you show that you are important to each other. Feeling important to you—that is, feeling acceptable to you as a person—is crucial to your child.

In this book, I have suggested to your child that he or she find ways to start such a dialogue. The exercises kids do here will provide ample subject matter for conversation. You could ask about those exercises, or you could suggest other topics. I've also recommended routine family meetings (and in some cases private meetings between you and the child who is reading this book), so that everyone can rely on a forum to explore ideas.

These dialogues might be difficult, but they are worth the effort. Your child may bring up some emotional issues, such as anger or sadness about how things have gone in

the past. It's important for you to simply hear what your child says, without making excuses or downplaying it. If you become aware that you have played a role in painful interactions, an apology can help your child in powerful ways. For example, you might say, "Now that I think of it, you're right, I am usually criticizing one thing or another, and I guess I haven't told you why I'm proud of you! I'm really sorry for that." When you apologize, you set the stage for positive change. You have given your child a true gift. If you can say, "I'm sorry for this mistake; I'll work on that and make a difference," then your child can also begin to see that mistakes can be looked at and learned from, and they are not signs of flawed character. This kind of dialogue then becomes an anti-perfectionism vaccine.

This is not easy, of course. No one is totally comfortable owning up to mistakes, and in fact this discomfort is one of the sources of perfectionism. You may feel some shame and embarrassment. This can be a part of the dialogue: "I'm sad and embarrassed about this, and it's hard to talk about, but you're important to me so I'll talk about it with you even though it's hard." It's okay if you struggle with this a bit or don't say everything you want smoothly. The conversation is vital, but it doesn't have to be perfect.

Encourage Your Child

In our current culture, we're good at pointing out errors and things that are done wrong, but we are not always so good at pointing out things that are done well. It is important for your children to have a clear idea that they are valued, not for what they can do (although you are understandably proud of that), but for the simple fact that they are here. Telling your kids what you appreciate about them, thanking them for things they have done, participating with them in their sense of pride or disappointment about something are all ways of letting them

know they are cherished and hold an important place in your life. They are ways of affirming and validating your children and helping them feel acceptable. It is called the encouragement process, and there is no such thing as too much of it.

It is only when people feel acceptable as people that a mistake can be just a mistake. If they don't feel acceptable, or if they have questions about that, a mistake seems more like a reflection of some inherent flaw. The resulting anxiety will always make things worse, not better.

For more information on all of these aspects of creating an environment of acceptance, and on perfectionism in general, you can consult my book for parents, *Freeing Our Families from Perfectionism* (see page 133).

Mental Health Issues

I've explained in this book that sometimes the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings that characterize perfectionism can, in their more intense forms, also signify emotional or mental health issues. Perfectionism is simply a personality constellation, or group of particular personality traits, not a form of mental illness. It can, however, be accompanied by emotional disorders. Conditions such as depression, anxiety disorder, or Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder can look a lot like perfectionism, and they can also make perfectionism harder to overcome. Likewise, perfectionism can make these conditions harder to overcome. All of these conditions can be treated with counseling, medication, or a combination of the two, and they should be treated if they exist. Overcoming perfectionism will become easier if these other conditions are addressed in the meantime.

Getting Professional Help

If you have attempted to address your child's perfectionism, especially with the approach suggested here, and your child remains stuck, feels overwhelmingly hopeless, or can't seem to give up rituals of repetition or extreme orderliness, a psychological assessment may be in order.

A psychological assessment is the first step in getting professional help. They are best done by trained and licensed professionals; psychologists have the most extensive training in mental health assessments. If the assessment indicates that a mental disorder is present, there are several options for treatment. In many cases, the person who does the assessment can also do therapy or recommend someone who can. Psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, marriage and family therapists, counselors, nurse-practitioners, and pastoral counselors may be trained to do psychotherapy and family therapy. If medications are needed for conditions like depression or anxiety disorders, or if hospitalization is necessary for conditions like advanced eating disorders, the services of a medically trained psychiatrist will be required. Licenses, degrees, and levels of training can vary greatly.

The best way to find a professional to help you or your child is to ask trusted friends or family members if they know of someone they'd recommend. If no friend or family member can give you suggestions, here are some other ways you can find one:

- Ask your doctor or other health care professionals for references.
- Ask your child's teacher or school counselor, who can draw on experience from their consultations with mental health professionals about students.

- Ask a member of the clergy from your religious faith.
- Ask people in any support group you might belong to, such as a parenting group, Alcoholics Anonymous, or Al-Anon.

If no one you know personally can give you leads, you can also call one of the professional associations listed on pages 133–134. They often have lists of professionals in local areas. Let them know if cost is a concern; ask if free or low-cost services are available.

Make sure you and your child feel listened to and respected by the person you consult; if you don't, try someone else.

Before treatment begins, find out how you will be part of the process. Except for the details of any particular session, which are covered by privacy rules, you should be informed about your child's progress. This may be done in a separate session with you, or you may be included in one or more of your child's sessions.

A Word of Encouragement

Thank you for sharing this book with your child, and for having the courage to examine what the issue of perfectionism has meant to you. As your child's parent, or as an adult who is close to the child in question, you have the power to change things for the better. Working together with your child on this will strengthen the bonds between you, and it will lay the groundwork for freeing your child, and perhaps yourself, from perfectionism. Best wishes on the journey!