

MOVING PAST PERFECT

How Perfectionism May Be Holding Back Your Kids (and You!) and What You Can Do About It



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Thomas S. Greenspon, Ph.D.

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MOVING PAST PERFECT

**How Perfectionism May Be Holding Back Your
Kids (and You!) and What You Can Do About It**

**Thomas S. Greenspon, Ph.D.
Foreword by David Walsh, Ph.D.**

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Dedication

In fond memory of W. Haywood Burns and James Farmer, whose lives were devoted to the struggle for universal human acceptance.

Acknowledgments

A 1986 issue of the *Newsletter of the Minnesota Council for the Gifted and Talented* contained my first article about perfectionism, a subject that interested me professionally but for many years also was my own Achilles heel. An early 1999 conversation with psychologist Maureen Neihart led to an article on this topic, titled “Healthy Perfectionism Is an Oxymoron!” (listed in the bibliography at the end of this book). I’m indebted to Maureen for encouraging me to look more deeply into this topic and to begin writing about it again.

A little later my former student and longtime friend Judy Galbraith, founder and president of Free Spirit Publishing, approached me about writing a book for parents to complement Miriam Adderholdt’s now classic *Perfectionism: What’s Bad About Being Too Good?* Judy’s highly enthusiastic support for my outlook on this subject has been extremely encouraging. Her exceptionally competent editorial staff has respectfully made it clear that there are helpful and less helpful ways of saying things, and that the harsher remnants of my own perfectionism would have to go if I expected the book to be in print.

This is a book for parents, teachers, and anyone in the general public with an interest in the topic of perfectionism. It’s meant to be jargon-free, but I do want to note for my professional colleagues that the book is based on contemporary relational psychoanalytic theory. I have written and spoken about this elsewhere.

The ideas central to this book have been shaped by many people:

My graduate school guru, Charles W. Eriksen, taught me that what someone says doesn’t necessarily tell us what they are perceiving. Erik also imparted his curmudgeonly insistence on asking more questions before arriving at conclusions.

The widely respected Adlerian psychotherapists Bill and Mim Pew invited me into their practice for a time many years ago, and gave me a solid grounding in the life-affirming encouragement process.

My supervisor and later colleague Ann Stefanson helped make empathy a central part of the work I do.

My therapist and spiritual guide Patrick Dougherty helped me experience the retreat of perfectionism in the dawn of self-esteem.

Special thanks to my original editor, Pat Samples, who is a true gem. In an incredibly intense and incredibly brief period of time, she helped me disassemble my original manuscript and reassemble it in what I hope is a helpful, readable, interesting way, exactly as I would have said it if I had known how. Knowing that Pat is an author herself, I found that her enthusiasm for this book gave me hope when the tasks seemed overwhelming.

Great thanks also to my editor for this edition, Alison Behnke. She has deftly and reassuringly helped me include my more recent thoughts on the nature of perfectionism, while making the update possible without expanding the book to unreadable proportions.

Many thanks to my long-time friend and professional colleague Dave Walsh, whose thoughts and writings I have admired over the years and whose comments I am honored to have in this edition.

My daughter and son-in-law Erin and David Holker, my son David, and his partner Kay Mickelson have seen my perfectionism up close. Their incisive humor and profound encouragement have sustained my excitement about the project.

My clients in psychotherapy have always been both a source of data and a profound inspiration to me. I am in awe of the immense courage they show when they look inward, and of the vitalizing joy they discover as their connections deepen with partners and family.

Most of all, every single point of view and suggestion for action in this book is the result of a 48-year-long professional and personal conversation with my wife, Barbara, my partner and soul mate. This book is about the power of human connections, and Barbara has long been a shining example of passionate, empathic, supportive involvement in the lives of others. Although the many hours spent working on this book have been in the sheltered silence of my keyboard world, her part of our dialogue is a constant presence there, as it is in all parts of our lives together.

Finally: watching the joyous, messy spontaneity and openness of childhood provides a compelling antidote to perfectionism. My awesome granddaughters, Lily and Samantha Holker, are my best shot at immortality, and are my inspiration to write.

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Foreword

David Walsh, Ph.D.

Megan, 15, walked into the kitchen in tears. "What's the matter?" her mother, Linda, asked.

"We have a big biology test tomorrow, and I just know I'm going to fail," Megan sobbed.

"But, honey," her mother responded, "You've gotten A's all year. Why are you so afraid you're going to fail this test? I know you've been studying."

"There's just so much to remember," Megan moaned. "How can anyone remember all the steps in the stupid Krebs cycle?"

"I'll tell you what," her mom offered with a reassuring hug. "I'm not doing anything right now. Suppose I quiz you so you get a sense of whether you're ready or if you need to study more."

"Yeah. That's a good idea." Megan brightened.

Twenty minutes later her daughter had nailed every question Linda had thrown at her. "See, Megan," Linda smiled, "you're ready. You know this material backwards and forwards. It's time to let it go and get ready for bed."

"No," Megan cried. "Let's go over it one more time."

Linda wisely refused and tried to calm down her red-eyed daughter. Eventually she had to become more adamant. "Megan, honey. That's enough. I want you to stop now. You've done enough."

Megan had a fitful sleep and skipped breakfast so she could study more. When the tests were returned two days later, Megan once again had the highest grade in the class.

Why did Megan torture herself with mental doomsday scenarios after having thoroughly studied and when she had a history of success? Perfectionism.

Twelve-year-old Riley constantly complained about his "stupid teachers" and many of the "idiotic nerds" in his classes. Although he had been identified as "gifted" in the second grade, his recent report cards showed an ever-downward trend, with his grades plateauing in the B to C range.

His math teacher told Riley's parents that he couldn't figure out how their son had gotten such a good grade on the latest test. "He looked like he was sleeping for the past week but still did well," Mr. Kolton said. "Can you imagine how he'd do if he ever tried?"

Riley's parents were frustrated and angry with their underperforming son. He responded to their attempts to motivate him with, "I just don't care. School is so stupid and has nothing to do with real life."

What was behind Riley's "I don't give a darn" attitude toward school when he clearly had the ability to excel if only he would apply himself? Perfectionism.

Megan and Riley have something in common: fear. Megan's fear shows up as a desperate drive to avoid mistakes by overstudying, overachieving, and driving herself and everyone around her crazy. Riley's outward appearance of indifference masks an underlying fear of failure. His unspoken defense could be summed up as, "If I don't try, I can't fail."

Perfectionism comes in many different flavors and takes many forms. It afflicts millions of children (and their parents). My friend and colleague Tom Greenspon has made a great contribution to the parenting and child development field with the excellent book you are about to read. He describes perfectionism's many faces and explains the many paths that lead there. More importantly, he provides solutions.

We all want our kids to do well. However, we don't want them to be crippled by anxiety and the fear of making a mistake. A Buddhist proverb reminds us, "There are two kinds of fear. One keeps us alive. The other keeps us from living." We learn best and achieve the most when we can be relaxed and open enough to benefit from our mistakes.

Like many successful people, Thomas Edison understood this idea. He was dubbed the Wizard of Menlo Park because of the amazing inventions that streamed out of his laboratory. In addition to the lightbulb and phonograph, Edison held 1,093 other patents. Edison himself knew that he was no wizard, though. He was well aware of how many failures he had, and he wasn't joking when he said,

“Genius is 1 percent inspiration, 99 percent perspiration.” If Edison had been paralyzed by perfectionism—by the fear of making a mistake—we might all still be living in the dark. Fortunately, with the helpful tips and sound advice you will find in *Moving Past Perfect*, you and your children can recover the joy of learning and living, and revel in the adventure of being unafraid to make mistakes.

David Walsh, Ph.D.

Author of *Smart Parenting*, *Smarter Kids* and *Why Do They Act That Way?*

Introduction

Everyone makes mistakes—they're part of human nature.

When some people make mistakes, they don't think about it very much. They simply go on about their business, and that's that. Some people pay attention to mistakes, but see them as guides for what to do next time. If they spend time thinking about their mistakes, it's usually to learn something valuable. The overall result is a sense of growth.

Other people become very upset by mistakes. They dwell on their errors and missteps, revisiting them over and over. They feel embarrassed, ashamed, and angry at themselves. Eventually, they may begin to feel extremely anxious or afraid of making mistakes. They might even feel paralyzed by their fear.

Do you recognize any of these feelings in your children—or in yourself? If so, do you know what makes mistakes so upsetting?

In this book, I'll consider some of the possible answers to this question. Mistakes mean something to each of us, and while most people aren't happy about making mistakes, some people are much more upset by it than others. In particular, if it seems to you that making a mistake means that something is wrong with you, and if you think that mistakes make you less acceptable in the eyes of others, then making a mistake can feel awful. You are less likely to let go of a mistake, or to think of it as a chance to learn. And your desperate desire *not* to make mistakes can actually get in the way of your success.

Many people who feel bad about themselves for making mistakes will simply avoid making decisions about things, so that mistakes are less likely to happen. Others will get very busy making sure that everything they do will be perfect. Not just very good, or even excellent—*perfect*. They reason that if they can do things perfectly, maybe they'll feel good about themselves. This is what perfectionism is all about, and that's the topic of this book.

Seeing the Signs of Perfectionism

Does your child or teen . . .

- seem highly competitive and constantly compare himself to others?
- find it hard to relax and enjoy the present moment?
- hesitate to take risks for fear of failing or of making a mistake?
- berate himself when he does make mistakes?
- experience frequent stress and anxiety?
- seem prone to discouragement?
- procrastinate often because of a need to do things perfectly?
- have difficulty in relationships because he expects too much of himself, or of others?
- appear to be a compulsive planner?

If you've noticed any of these tendencies, your child or teenager may be a perfectionist. None of them alone is a sure sign, but the more of them you've noticed, the more likely perfectionism is at work.

A perfectionist is someone who feels extremely upset when a mistake is made and the unrealistic goal of perfection can't be met. Perfectionism can be seen at any age, even in very young children. It manifests in many ways, making it a challenge to combat. All the more reason to learn as much as you can about it.

Help for Your Child—and for You

Chances are, you're reading this book because you want help in dealing with your child's perfectionist ways of thinking and behaving. You don't want your child to be limited and frustrated by them. And frankly, your child's perfectionism may be driving you crazy.

You may also be wondering if you or others in your family have perfectionist tendencies that fuel those of your child. If so, reread the list above and see if any of these tendencies apply to you or to other adults in your household or family. If the answer is yes, then this book may be even more helpful than you had hoped. You will learn not only a new approach to your child's perfectionism, but also new ways of handling perfectionist tendencies in yourself or other important

people in your life. This book is about changing how you and your child relate to one another, so it involves everyone in the family.

If your family is affected by perfectionism, it makes sense that you hope to make some changes. Perfectionism is painful. Perfectionists suffer greatly from self-criticism. Even if they do well at something, they can't enjoy it because they feel they should have done better. Their high expectations and critical tendencies make everyone around them ill at ease. Intimacy seems elusive, because perfectionists avoid the vulnerability and risk-taking that intimacy requires. Work becomes overwhelming, because everything must be done just right. Creativity slows to a trickle. Physical exhaustion is common, and little "juice" is left in life.

No wonder you want to make changes.

I'm glad you're taking the time to read these pages and think about ways to get out from under the burden of perfectionism, whether you see it in your child, yourself, or other family members. Your interest in working on this means that your children and your family life are important to you, and that's the cornerstone of the plan I'll be showing you for overcoming perfectionism.

You're in Good Company

Perfectionism is a concern for many people. Whenever I speak publicly on any topic related to parenting or relationships, people in the audience are always eager to talk about their experience with perfectionism. No one can say just how widespread perfectionism is, partly because there are several ways to define it, but we do know that the modern winner-take-all attitude of our culture encourages it.

I've been a psychologist and marriage and family therapist for more than 40 years, and perfectionism has always interested me. I've read, written, and lectured widely on the subject, and I've helped many clients free themselves from perfectionism. In this book, I'll pass along to you what I've learned about perfectionism and how to overcome it. In doing so, I'll draw on not only my professional experience but my personal insights as well.

My kids were pancake lovers, especially when the cakes were poured in the shapes of their initials. I often did the cooking. My own perfectionism made me something of a loner in the kitchen, since things had to be done a certain way.

One day, our daughter wanted to participate in the cooking. Fine with me, I thought. We could have a good time together. Quickly, though, I found myself getting nervous, and even angry. She was making a mess and doing lots of things “wrong.” I soon realized that my pointed commentaries were spoiling the fun for both of us and decided it was best if I left the job totally in her hands. She proudly took it on and made delicious pancakes, but my perfectionism cost me the chance to cook with my child that day.

In this book, you’ll find many stories like this one. Some are about me and my family, but most are about other people I’ve known, including clients, workshop attendees, friends, and relatives. The stories are real; names, and sometimes genders, have been changed in order to protect people’s privacy. The stories serve to illustrate important points and are meant to do three things: 1) remind you of similar experiences in your own life, 2) show you that you are not alone, and 3) demonstrate that perfectionism can be overcome.

Make This Your Book

The most important stories in these pages are yours. Throughout the book, you’ll find invitations to “Make a Note of It.” These are places where I give you ways to notice and reflect on your own experiences with perfectionism in your family. Use a notebook to jot down examples of what you observe. I’ll give you lots of hints that will help you know what to look for. By using your own observations, you can tailor the book to your own situation and needs.

The notes can be anything from one-word reminders to lengthy journal entries. They are meant to help you see patterns that might be significant. You might even find it useful to make a note of other things going on at the time. For example, is your child’s perfectionism more pronounced when she’s tired, or has just been in an argument, or is feeling bad about something else that has happened?

A note of caution: You might be tempted to read your notes to your child or other family members as a way to point out their perfectionist traits, with the intention of letting them know what they are doing *wrong*. In reality, as you can imagine, this might only make them more self-critical or defensive. Instead, use your observations and note taking to help you become clearer about your concerns and get into a supportive conversation about what’s going on.

You will also find invitations to “Talk It Over” throughout the book. These invitations consist of questions and activities to help you start conversations about perfectionism with your child and your whole family. Talk between family members is a powerful way to understand more about one another, and to build stronger family bonds. I recommend that you start talking with your family members as soon as you read the “Talk It Over” suggestions, and continue the conversations over time. They will naturally evolve as each person contributes, gains insights, and makes changes.

When having these dialogues with family members, make sure they observe your genuine involvement and curiosity—make eye contact, stay engaged, and be supportive. As you speak with your perfectionist child, you’ll have a great opportunity to get inside her world. Attempting to understand your child’s vantage point will bring two benefits at once: you’ll get important information about why she acts the way she does, and your interest in her world will feel good to her—she’ll feel understood, cared about, and hopeful. The same will be true of other family members when you show interest in their viewpoints.

The “Talk It Over” activities in this book can be done with your partner or child, or with the whole family. You may want to talk some things over with only one child, especially if there’s some rivalry between your children. For other discussions, it would be helpful if everyone in the family is involved and can be a part of examining how the family works and how it could work better. Some families have more than one perfectionist child, and each exhibits perfectionism differently. Use your judgment on how to proceed with the “Talk It Over” activities, keeping in mind that the ultimate goal is to have everyone involved at some time.

A tip about taking action: If a family conversation leads to a suggestion that you do something differently, adopt an experimental attitude. Agree to try it for a week or two (depending on what seems appropriate), and then plan to check in with each other to see how it went. If the change was helpful, continue it. If not, talk about other ideas you could try.

Getting to the Bottom of Perfectionism

As you read the chapters and do the activities, *Moving Past Perfect* will help you understand and minimize perfectionism in your family. In

Part 1, you'll explore what perfectionism is, what its root causes are, and how to recognize it. In Part 2, you'll discover how to help your child overcome perfectionism and, if necessary, how to overcome it yourself. "Read More About It" lists offer recommendations for resources that can help you learn more. You'll also find a checklist in Chapter 1 that you can photocopy for your own use and for other family members.

Throughout the book, I will often suggest that you take a look at your own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and at the role you might be playing in your child's perfectionism. The purpose of this self-observation is not for you to take on blame but to help you take a wider view of the ways perfectionism may be present in your family so that you can respond to it more effectively. Since I have done this myself and have helped many other parents do so as well, I can tell you that it is worth the effort. In the end, your child will be free of a burden—and you will be free as well.

Families, Genders, and the Words We Use

This book is about children and their families, and families come in many forms. Yours may include biological or adoptive parents, stepparents, unmarried partners, or other adults sharing in your family life in an important way. While no one word describes all these other adults that may be part of a family's life, I will mostly be using the word "partner" to do so, since each significant adult in your family life is in some way a partner in helping to shape your child's experiences. Feel free to substitute another word if it fits your family situation better or to ignore it if you don't have any partners in parenting.

When we're speaking about one person, no English pronoun covers both sexes. In this book, I'll alternate between using *she/her* and *he/his* in order to make it easier for you to relate to what you're reading, regardless of the sex of your child or partner.

The most important word in this book may be *hope*. That's what it offers. If you're willing to learn, observe, and talk with your family about perfectionism, you can begin to free yourself from it and have a more satisfying and enjoyable family life. Best wishes on your journey!

Tom Greenspon

True perfection exists only in obituaries and eulogies.

—ASHER PACTH

Recognizing Perfectionism

We all like to do things well, and we sometimes work for perfection on things that interest us greatly. But does that make us perfectionists? Where do people cross the line from the normal desire to do things well into the perfectionist behavior that leads to frustration for them and for those who love them? And how can we recognize and respond to perfectionism if it's present in our families?

Perfectionism isn't easy to define, although we might think we know it when we see it. But do we? Some things are dead giveaways—always having to line things up perfectly straight or showing extreme disappointment at anything less than an A. But other evidence may be more subtle, such as giving up on something if the first attempt fails or having difficulty making choices.

How can you tell if your child or your partner is a perfectionist? How do you know if *you* are? These are the questions you'll explore in this chapter. If you already know that this is an issue, this chapter will provide a helpful review.

What Is Meant by Perfectionism?

Just what *is* perfectionism, and what are its characteristics? Let's look first at the traits that make up perfectionism. Exploring these traits at the start will bring us to a satisfying definition, one that describes not so much what perfectionists do, but what goes on inside their minds. To make it simpler to recognize these traits, I've divided them into categories, but as you probably know from experience, perfectionism is anything but simple. In the end, you may not find the perfect definition. If that bothers you, be sure to read on—this is the book for you.

What Does Perfectionism Look and Sound Like?

The “Perfectionism at a Glance” list on pages 9–10 shows the range of ways that perfectionism is often expressed. Use it to help you identify where perfectionism exists in your family. Take a few moments and complete the checklist for your child, your partner, and yourself. You can photocopy the page and use it for other family members as well. The more of these items you check for someone, the more likely that person is a perfectionist.

Some traits may be present only part of the time, or present to a greater or lesser degree. Perfectionism can be mild, moderate, or extreme, and people can be perfectionists about some things and not about others. Perfectionism can show up in different “flavors” in different people. For example, some perfectionists arrive late to places because there’s always one more thing that needs to be done before leaving for an appointment. Others, however, would never even *think* of getting somewhere late—they are always early for appointments. Similarly, some perfectionists put things off for fear of doing them incorrectly, while others are determined to complete tasks ahead of schedule. This book will show you how these different flavors are linked together.

The point is, wherever perfectionism shows up, and however strong it is, it interferes with one’s peace of mind, and even one’s ability to perform.

In her 1999 commencement speech at Mount Holyoke College, author Anna Quindlen spoke of overcoming her own perfectionism, a process she likened to laying down a “backpack full of bricks.” She pointed out that being perfect requires an ability to imitate whatever the crowd or the times require, and to be the best at it. Then she said that “. . . nothing important, or meaningful, or beautiful, or interesting, or great ever came out of imitations. The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself.”

Perfectionism at a Glance

1. Check the statements that apply to your child.
2. Check those that apply to your partner (spouse or other family adult).
3. Check those that apply to you.

How a Perfectionist Acts

	YOUR CHILD	YOUR PARTNER	YOU
Overcommits himself			
Rarely delegates work to others			
Has a hard time making choices			
Always has to be in control			
Competes fiercely			
Arrives late because one more thing had to be done			
Never arrives late			
Always does last-minute cramming			
Gets carried away with the details			
Never seems satisfied with his work			
Constantly busies himself with something or other			
Frequently criticizes others			
Refuses to hear criticism of himself			
Pays more attention to negative than positive comments			
Checks up on other people's work			
Calls himself "stupid" when he does something imperfectly			
Procrastinates			

What a Perfectionist Thinks

	YOUR CHILD	YOUR PARTNER	YOU
If I can't do it perfectly, what's the point?			
I should excel at everything I do.			
I always have to stay ahead of others.			
I should finish a job before doing anything else.			

continued →

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Perfectionism at a Glance continued

	YOUR CHILD	YOUR PARTNER	YOU
Every detail of a job should be perfect.			
Things should be done right the first time.			
There is only one right way to do things.			
I'm a wonderful person if I do well; I'm a lousy person if I do poorly.			
I'm never good enough.			
I'm stupid.			
I can't do anything right.			
I'm unlikable.			
I'd better not make a mistake here or people will think I'm not very . . . [smart, good, capable].			
If I goof up, something's wrong with me.			
People shouldn't criticize me.			
Everything should be clearly black or white. Grays are a sign of confused thinking.			

How a Perfectionist Feels

	YOUR CHILD	YOUR PARTNER	YOU
Deeply embarrassed about mistakes she makes			
Disgusted or angry with herself when she is criticized			
Anxious when stating her opinion to others			
Extremely worried about details			
Angry if her routine is interrupted			
Nervous when things around her are messy			
Fearful or anxious a lot of the time			
Exhausted and unable to relax			
Plagued by self-hatred			
Afraid of appearing stupid			
Afraid of appearing incompetent			
Afraid of being rejected			
Ashamed of having fears			
Discouraged			
Guilty about letting others down			

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The Many Faces of Perfectionism

One way to understand perfectionism better is to group its characteristics into behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. Behaviors refer to what we do—our actions, what people see as they watch us. Thoughts are the beliefs and ideas we have in our heads—little inner conversations we have with ourselves as we try to figure things out. Feelings are the stuff of our emotional life—fear, joy, anxiety, and anger, for example.

Some characteristics show up in all three categories on the “Perfectionism at a Glance” list, but in a slightly different form. For example, a person may think every detail must be perfect (thought), feel anxious or worried about the details (feeling), and get carried away with attention to details (action). All three forms carry a similar message, but each one gives you a different way to recognize it. The more windows you can look through as you examine how perfectionism shows up, the easier it will be to recognize it in your family and discover how to make changes for the better.

How Perfectionists Act

John is a worrywart. In school, he takes every assignment seriously and sets out to do it absolutely perfectly. He makes sure to do all the required reading and worries when he can't recall every main point without looking at notes. Should he read the material again? When he writes, will he remember to cover everything? Is there something he should know that may not have been in the readings, that should be in his paper?

John is in a flurry of activity prior to writing—gathering information sources, setting things up, arranging an outline, organizing his desktop. If you were watching him, you might begin to wonder if he was ever actually going to start writing. When he does at long last, he appears to be in great distress about the first few sentences, each of which he rewrites several times.



Sara is typically late with her assignments in school, and some of them never get done at all. Her parents describe her as lazy. They have set up regular study times for her in an attempt to help her get organized. While she complies by going to her room, she does so with a sullen face and big sigh. Then she sits at her desk and daydreams or does practically anything but study. Her grades have fallen, her teachers are concerned, and her parents are angry and desperate.

Is Agitated Overactivity Typical?

Many people would describe John as the typical perfectionist. He seems to be in constant turmoil, always doing something, never satisfied. For John, less-than-perfect results mean redoing the job. He's likely to say, "I'm such a dummy!" or "How could I be so stupid?" This chronic busyness, anxious manner, and self-critical commentary represent the most familiar forms of perfectionist behavior.

But what about Sara? She appears to be just the opposite: she doesn't seem to care how things turn out and is willing to just let things go.

If you're surprised to learn that Sara is also a perfectionist, then you're not alone. Sara's case shows us that the usual description of the typical perfectionist is limited, and that, in fact, perfectionism has more than one face. Perfectionists like Sara appear passive and disinterested and seem to give up in discouragement. Parents think that children like Sara are lazy or don't care. However, unlike Sara, kids who really don't care whether they succeed are rarely bothered by underperformance. Perfectionists like Sara, on the other hand, will typically seem distant, sad, depressed, or somewhat hostile when not performing well. They're thinking, "Since I can't seem to do it perfectly, what's the use?" To label them lazy misses the point.

So when it comes to behaviors, perfectionists can range all the way from overdriven, anxious achievers to laconic, discouraged nonachievers.

Procrastination

All types of perfectionists can be serious procrastinators. People put things off for a number of reasons, but perfectionism is one of the more common ones. It's as if the perfectionist procrastinator says (usually unconsciously), "I might not do this job perfectly, so I'm not sure I want to do it at all." People who procrastinate to avoid imperfection are fearful and anxious, rather than lacking in motivation. Although a parent may interpret a child's procrastination at homework as laziness or even defiance, the perfectionist child is actually hesitating for fear of getting a less-than-perfect grade.

Telling the difference is not always easy, but a parent who sees other evidence of perfectionism might well suspect that fear is the motive when a child procrastinates.

Being Critical of Other People

My reluctance to let my daughter do the pancake-making tasks by herself, which I described in the introduction, was a form of perfectionist behavior. For whatever reason, it was a job I felt had to be done correctly, and that meant I had to do it. This insistence on doing it right is why perfectionists can be hard on other people. There are any number of ways this behavior can show up:

- Although a young man was accepted by a very fine college, his father said, “Well, it will do, but it isn’t the Ivy League.”
- A woman who is both a very successful entrepreneur and a good cook continues to receive coffee-making instructions whenever her watchful mother comes to visit.
- When a preschooler comes to his mother very excited about a drawing of a cat he has just made, she says, “Where’s the tail?”



Make a Note of It

Take a closer look at the behaviors (“How a Perfectionist Acts”) on the “Perfectionism at a Glance” list on page 9. In the next few days, jot down examples of these behaviors when you notice them in any family member. Be discreet so that no one feels spied on.

Talk It Over

Discuss with your child or partner some of the things in your notebook that concern you. Your main goal at first is to do some scouting—to gather information from the other person about how he perceives what’s going on. Your family may be used to talking about personal subjects together; if not, here are some things that may help you:

First and foremost, although you may be angry about your child’s behavior, angry confrontations will make resolving the problem harder. If, like most parents, you are mainly worried about your child (even if you’re also angry), start from there. You might say, “I’ve been concerned about something for a while, and I’ve just realized it’s that I’m sad about how you seem to struggle so hard at the last minute before a test. Does that bother you, too?”

Do you have any ideas about why that happens so often?" It's important to keep the focus not on the troublesome behavior, but on the internal struggle that seems to be going on when the child is behaving this way. Of course you may want your child to be less controlling, but the primary concern is how anxious he gets when he feels things are out of control.

If the behavior in question is something you do yourself, talk about this and suggest working together to change things. You might say, "I've been reading this book, and I can see something that both you and I seem to do . . . [name it]. Have you thought about that, too? Do you have any ideas about why we do it?" Bank on the fact that you and your child aren't the only ones who have this problem. If it's appropriate, you might say, "A friend of mine was telling me the other day that her son never seems to be satisfied with his schoolwork, even though he does very well. I realized that's something I've seen with you, too, and I wonder if that's a problem for you."

What if you get an exasperating shoulder shrug and "I dunno" for a response? Try the door-opener approach: say to your child, "Well, I'm interested in talking more about this, so I'd like both of us to think about it a bit. Let's talk about it in a few days." Then let it go, and come back to it in a few days—and keep trying.

If something is so important it has to be discussed, give choices, not about whether to talk but about who to talk with: "Would it be easier to talk to me or your dad [or a relative, trusted adult, counselor, clergy member, etc.] about this?"

Remember to keep your sense of humor in all of this. You might want to say, "I know details just drive me nuts! How about you?" Don't be reluctant to talk with your child about perfectionist behaviors you've seen in yourself. It isn't a sign of weakness! Instead, it's a message to your child that you share a part of your lives that could go better, and that you might be more successful at improving it by working together. This approach communicates three things to your child: 1) you're willing to improve something in your life, 2) you trust your child as a partner in the improvement process, and 3) you believe improvement is possible. As you will see later in this book, these messages are anti-perfectionistic and they lay the groundwork for positive change.

One more point: Ask questions when things are going well, not in the middle of an argument. In Part 2, you'll find more ideas on what you can do and say to make these conversations helpful.

What Perfectionists Think

Ray is a successful businessman who comes from a chaotic, alcoholic family in which there was physical and emotional abuse. He says he feels like a circus performer who keeps several plates spinning on the tops of long poles. Ray is always on top of everything—clients, customers, family activities, friends, hobbies—trying to make sure everyone is happy. As a child, he learned that if he struggled to make everything go well, his father might not be quite as angry. Though it rarely worked, Ray came to believe that trying to make things go perfectly would reduce the chaos and lead to harmony. Ray could be happy, he thought, if he could make everyone else happy.

Joan's parents believed that the way to help people grow was to point out their shortcomings so they could be aware of them and learn to do better. As a result, Joan heard only what she had done wrong, never what she had done well. From her parents' reactions, she concluded that she was never good enough. She didn't give up, though; Joan struggled to be perfect, in the hope that her mom and dad would finally be proud of her. Joan thought that if she could be perfect, she would be loved.

We all live by a set of convictions about who we are and what our role is in relationship to others. We frequently experience these convictions as a set of internal messages, or self-talk, which the previous examples illustrate. Ray's belief is, "If I'm perfect, then my world can be peaceful, harmonious." For Joan, the belief is, "If I'm perfect, I can matter to people and be acceptable (lovable)."

Make a Note of It

Take another look at the "Perfectionism at a Glance" list. This time, turn your attention to the items listed under "What a Perfectionist Thinks" (pages 9–10). Over the next few days, jot down any thoughts like these that you find yourself thinking.

Even though Ray and Joan have little evidence to support their beliefs, they keep struggling to be perfect, hoping to gain the love and harmony they desire. Their belief systems are deeply rooted in the environments in which they grew up, and they've been shaped by the interactions they had back then with significant adults in their lives.

The internal self-talk of most perfectionists shows something about the nature of perfectionism in general. Rarely do these messages have a positive, enthusiastic quality to them, such as "It would be really great to do this perfectly" or "I'd love to do a perfect job here." Instead, the self-talk has overtones of anxiety and demand, and the words *should*, *must*, *need to*, or *have to* are prominent: "I need to get a perfect score on this project" or "I have to win this one." This pressure, this necessity to do a perfect job, is a hallmark of perfectionism. Fear of making any mistake at all is common.

The internal self-talk of perfectionists typically involves a set of instructions about how they must act ("get a perfect score") or a statement about how well they're doing in life ("I never seem to get anything right"). If we asked them why they had to act in these ways or what they achieved by doing better, we'd probably find that it had to do with a desire to be acceptable to others.

Thinking Like a Perfectionist

- A man calls something by the wrong name in a conversation. Later, when he realizes his mistake, he says to himself, "I'm such an idiot!"
- A brilliant young student and athlete ignores several great plays she makes on the basketball court because of her belief that the one play she messed up was the single most important one and that this shows she is a poor player.
- A student concludes that she is no longer as bright as she used to be because she has received a lower grade than usual.