

# Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a common characteristic in gifted children. In extreme cases a child will be unable to complete any work due to his/her frustration at being unable to meet unrealistically high standards of perfection. Some gifted children tend to set high goals for themselves even when they don't have the skills necessary to meet these goals. Not meeting those goals is interpreted by the child as a failure even though the goal was impossible in the first place. The following tips, by Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D., director of the Gifted Development Center, Denver, CO and author of, *Counseling the Gifted and Talented*, 1995, provides some ideas on how to deal with perfectionism.

## The DOs

1. Acknowledge their feelings of frustration.
2. Help them understand the source of their feelings as good traits in themselves. Ideals and high standards are good to have, even if it hurts when we can't always reach them.
3. Tell them that you have often felt the same way and share how you've dealt with your feelings.
4. Encourage them not to give up. Remind them that with practice they come closer and closer to their ideals. It takes time and effort to realize high standards.
5. Give them examples of people who felt intensely frustrated in their efforts and overcame their obstacles through persistence.
6. Ask them if they are willing to accept some help from you. Maybe you can simplify the task in some way so that they can feel successful.
7. Teach them relaxation techniques and deep breathing. Do these with your child.
8. Michael Davis, a therapist, just holds his boys when they are upset, not trying to solve their problems or even console them. He just holds them, mirrors their breathing pattern, and then slowly slows down his own breathing rhythm until his son relaxes. No words.
9. If your child is introverted, let him or her observe activities before trying them.
10. Let them learn things/skills in as private a setting as possible.
11. Home computers may be of help, too. They are perfectionist like the children and allow the child to learn in privacy.

12. Help your child distinguish between perfectionist attitudes toward self and others. It's one thing to hold high standards for yourself and another to impose them on others.
13. Try to model self-acceptance and willingness to make mistakes and admit them.
14. Have the whole family try a new skill together so that everybody learns together. That way, everyone has a good time and the child sees that parents don't die from looking foolish.
15. Give specific feedback on your child's work, instead of general praise.
16. Adopt a philosophy that mistakes can become learning experiences. Help your child to process what is learned from each "failure." Successful adults do not expect instant successes. They see each "failure" as valuable information – a narrowing of possibilities leading them closer to success. 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."
17. Help your child recognize that we cannot be perfect in everything, and that we have to make choices in our lives about what to strive for, and where to settle for less than our best.
18. 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.
19. There is pain in perfectionism. Fear of that pain can inhibit you from trying anything or it can be dealt with courageously. 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.

### **The DON'Ts**

1. Don't try to eradicate perfectionism. It doesn't work and it damages the child's self-esteem.
2. Don't tell the child, "Don't feel that way." Children have the right to their feelings.
3. Don't be highly critical of their efforts. Instead of praising their finished products, praise their efforts and risk-taking abilities.
4. Don't attempt to destroy their ideas, even if they seem unrealistic.
5. Don't give them the message that perfectionism is a bad quality.
6. Don't hold such high expectations for your child that he/she never feels adequate.