

COMMENTARY

The cost of 'perfection'

BY CINDY MARKISON

In a society of competition, striving for perfection is common: "Just try a little harder." "You can do better." "Is that your best?" We've probably all heard or have said phrases like these. They seem harmless enough; yet, they can plant a seed of self-doubt in children, a doubt that can grow into excessive anxiety. The fear of failing, of not being good enough or of disappointing parents, teachers or coaches can become overwhelming. This type of anxiety is often referred to as perfectionism and is accompanied by self-defeating thoughts and unrealistic expectations that can interfere with success rather than promote it.

Most recognizable are the students who become distraught if they do not receive 100 percent on their assignments/tests. No matter what you say, these children feel inadequate, begin to see failure all around, and are robbed of any sense of personal satisfaction. These children set the bar so high for themselves that disappointment and "failure" are inescapable. Recall also the students who stay up most of the night doing more work for school than is necessary. They become sleep deprived, irritable and can have compromised immune systems. The less recognized students are the ones who simply stop doing or turning in work if they believe it is not "perfect." For these students, choosing to get a zero on an assignment is a better option than the risk of feeling like a "failure."

Perfectionism often starts at a young age and becomes a way of life instead of a passing phase. One example is of children who used to enjoy art and drawing; yet, as they grew older, they became upset if they felt like they had messed up. They may frequently rip up their pictures or stop drawing altogether. Activities that used to bring joy to these children can transform into sources of stress, and the smiles of pride and satisfaction that used to paint their faces become grimaces and tears. Children with perfectionistic anxiety will start a sport/activity out of enjoyment then begin to put so many unrealistic expectations on themselves to be the best that either they will stop playing altogether or begin to develop a pattern of thinking that is self-critical and devaluing.

The repercussions of ongoing anxiety about "perfection" can be costly. Constant stress, even in children, can lead to health problems and/or complaints about stomachaches and headaches. Some children begin to lose confidence and begin to feel inadequate in everything they do, causing their self-esteem to suffer. Other children use avoidance as a way to manage their anxiety and stop doing activities they previously enjoyed, causing them to withdraw from new experiences. Then there are children who focus all of their attention on being perfect in some way to the detriment of other areas such as social, physical, educational or emotional development. Other children and adolescents search for perfectionism in how they look, leading to unhealthy

exercise patterns and/or eating disorders.

So, the question becomes: How can adults cultivate a child's work ethic and desire for excellence and not create an anxiety laden individual who is constantly in fear of failing? When mistakes are seen as an expected part of life that offer children the chance to grow, the anxiety that naturally comes with "messaging up" is used in a healthy way to motivate. On the other hand, if a mistake is seen as a personal flaw that makes them less adequate, the anxiety that follows is about the fear of failure and can be demoralizing.

Mistakes are a great avenue for addressing perfectionistic anxiety. As adults, we can help children see that mistakes are a part of life. We can acknowledge when we make mistakes and role model ways to respond that promote growth instead of self-criticism. It is important to help children recognize that many of the things we learn are because of mistakes. Other ways to combat perfectionistic anxiety include helping children set realistic expectations of themselves and those around them. Also, helping children set goals based on their wants and abilities instead of what they believe others want from them is a way to reclaim personal satisfaction. As children strive for their goals, celebrate with them the process and give affirmations about the effort you see them putting forth instead of just celebrating the end product. Challenge all-or-nothing thinking and behavior in relation to their goals. If one part of reaching the goal is not working out as planned, encourage your children not to give up, and instead teach them flexibility and problem solving skills; adjust expectations if necessary.

If you see that your child's behavior and mood are being impacted by perfectionistic thinking and anxiety, seek support from your child's school or consult with a mental health professional. Even though perfectionism is sometimes seen as a benefit and, by some, necessary for success; in reality, this type of anxiety impairs overall effectiveness. Addressing self-defeating thoughts and unrealistic expectations early can help free children from unnecessary feelings of failure and can help them reclaim a sense of personal pride and enjoyment of life.

Note: The information provided should not be used during a mental health emergency or for the diagnosis or treatment of a mental health condition. A licensed mental health professional should be consulted for a diagnosis and treatment. Call 911 for mental health emergencies.

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