

Shifting the Perfectionistic Mindset

Moving to Mindful Excellence

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Abstract: This article explores some of the common causes and solutions to perfectionism in gifted children. We highlight practical implications from studies examining perfectionism in gifted students, including how implicit theories of intelligence (e.g., mindset) relate to perfectionism. Specific strategies are shared to guide gifted children toward a mindful pursuit of excellence in which they are self-aware of how their thoughts, emotions, and beliefs about ability influence their behaviors in achieving a high standard.

Keywords: perfectionism, social/emotional needs, psychosocial development

Understanding Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a perennial topic in the field of gifted education. It is a quality that is easily and almost instantly recognized in many gifted children. Because of our achievement-oriented society, students are implicitly given the message that self-worth is measured by competence. Such messages are interpreted as “I am worthy if I achieve. I am worthy if I am perfect.” Many gifted children strive to be *the* best, and perfectionism is rewarded and reinforced with the excessive praise and privileges they receive for their accomplishments. While we all want to feel valued, many gifted children feel *most* valued when they are successful at something—at winning, being the best, or getting straight A’s. But, when a child becomes overly dependent on this recognition to validate self-worth or feel acceptance by others, a relentless drive toward perfection is fueled. This article will highlight types of perfectionism, review research about the connection between giftedness and perfectionism, examine

underlying causes and behaviors of perfectionists, and provide actionable strategies for addressing perfectionistic tendencies.

Perfectionism has its virtues and vices. Positive perfectionism (sometimes known as positive striving, healthy, adaptive, or normal perfectionism) is a healthy striving toward a high standard and can be a driving force toward excellence, but maladaptive perfectionism (i.e., excessive concerns, unhealthy, maladaptive, or neurotic perfectionism) breeds dissatisfaction and anxiety. Most in the field of gifted education recognize that perfectionism is a multidimensional construct related to adaptive outcomes—the striving toward a high standard for the pursuit of a goal—or maladaptive outcomes (the striving toward an

excessively high standard to avoid shame or failure; e.g., Speirs Neumeister, 2004a, 2004b). For the maladaptive perfectionist, the striving toward such excessive standards can lead to guilt, disappointment, harsh self-criticism, and the avoidance of situations that pose risk of making mistakes. The world of a maladaptive perfectionist is one of constant

disappointment and self-judgment, for impossible standards of perfection can never be maintained.

Perfectionism and Giftedness

Although it is documented in the literature that maladaptive perfectionism is not more prevalent in gifted children compared to other groups (e.g., Parker & Mills, 1996; Parker, Portesova, & Stumpf, 2001), it is clear that perfectionism is indeed an issue for *many* gifted students (Mofield & Parker Peters, 2015a; 2018a; Speirs Neumeister, 2004a, 2004b). There are a number of reasons why perfectionism can surface in this population. First, because of their exceptional abilities, gifted students are often capable of reaching perfection on given assignments. As described previously, gifted students are highly praised and recognized for their exceptional academic or talent

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performances, so self-worth is often tied to accomplishment. In addition, while it is somewhat debated whether intensities in the form of overexcitabilities are valid and more prevalent in the gifted population (e.g., Vuyk, Krieshok, & Kerr, 2016; Winkler & Voight, 2016; Wood & Peterson, 2018), some research suggests a link between emotional sensitivity and perfectionism among gifted students (see Mofield & Parker Peters, 2015b; White, 2007), though future research is needed to further substantiate these relationships. Gifted students may also pursue perfection as a means to challenge themselves. If school work is not difficult enough, especially during early years of schooling, some may set the bar to excessively high standards as a means to feel accomplished or maintain intellectual stimulation. For example, a third-grade student may have mastered all of the content and standards that will be presented in math this school year. Thus, in an attempt to remain engaged, the student sets a personal goal of perfection. The student has already learned the concepts behind the material presented in class, so she must find a way to combat boredom. The student is not learning new information, so new goals for perfection are set that will present greater challenge and stimulation. Such striving for perfection can contribute to developing a self-concept based on self-worth tied to performance. This presents a problem later when this student is not equipped to cope with handling difficult content posing ambiguity, open-endedness, and challenge (Speirs Neumeister, 2004a; Speirs Neumeister, Williams, & Cross, 2009).

Perfectionistic Thinking, Beliefs, and Behaviors

To change perfectionistic behaviors, it is first necessary to understand the root causes of them. In this section, we will examine the thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors associated with perfectionism.

Perfectionistic Thinking

Fear is the ultimate driving force of maladaptive perfectionism. For the perfectionist, failure or making a mistake is a threat, a danger, or a painful experience to be feared. For a gifted student, failure may mean making a “96” instead of a “100” or not being number one in a competition. When we dig even deeper into the roots of this fear, the fear of failure is grounded in the fear of experiencing shame, “a painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior” (“Shame,” 2017).

Maladaptive perfectionism is closely associated with shame and guilt (Stoeber, Kempe, & Keogh, 2008). The unpleasant feeling of shame makes one feel inadequate, and so, perfectionism is a means to achieve adequacy or gain conditional acceptance. As described by Brown (2010), perfectionism is a shield for shame, a protective barrier to avoid or minimize the hurt of criticism, judgment, and blaming. So, when teachers see a gifted child striving for excessive standards such as straight A's and getting upset when falling short of

meeting such standard, they must remember that the child may be trying to avoid feeling shame. The thoughts of a perfectionist are rooted in regulating the emotion of shame for the protection of one's self-worth. The child wants to be in control of such academic situations to prevent mistakes and maintain self-worth.

The belief that self-worth is tied to perfection also causes cognitive distortions such as “all-or-none” thinking (Adderholdt-Elliott & Goldberg, 1999). “If I don't get a 100, I'm ignorant. Either I'm the best, or I'm a failure. I got a B in chemistry, so I'm changing my major from pre-med to something else.” Another example of cognitive distortion might be magnifying the negative (Antony & Swinson, 2009). For example, if a teacher provides detailed feedback, the perfectionist may be consumed by one negative comment and view the mistake as a reflection of self-worth.

Perfectionistic Beliefs

The thoughts of a perfectionist are tied directly to belief systems. Specifically, beliefs about ability (beliefs whether ability is malleable vs. static) have been found to relate to types of perfectionism (i.e., Chan, 2012; Mofield & Parker Peters, 2018a; Shih, 2011). Those with a fixed mindset believe that one is born with a set amount of intelligence, and it does not change much over time. This belief leads to creating a goal to look smart, prove ability, and appear competent to others (Dweck, 2006). Therefore, those with a fixed mindset are more likely to avoid situations that would threaten such identity, especially when mistakes are a more likely possibility. Since their main goal is to *appear* smart, they view effort as embarrassing. They rationalize, “If I have to work hard on this, I must not be very smart.” Mistakes are tied to self-worth and viewed as personal deficiencies. Those with a growth mindset do not need to prove their smartness; rather, they desire to improve their abilities to be all they can be because they believe abilities can grow and further develop with sustained effort. When faced with a challenge, they see it as an opportunity to get smarter and better, not as a threat to looking dumb. When mistakes are made, it is not a reflection of their personal worth, but a means to help them know what to do differently to grow further (Dweck, 2006).

In a recent study, Mofield and Parker Peters (2018a) explored the beliefs gifted students have about their abilities (as they compare to advanced students and typical students) and how mindset beliefs relate to perfectionism and achievement attitudes. They found that gifted students did not have higher fixed mindset beliefs; furthermore, growth mindset beliefs were related to adaptive perfectionism, and fixed mindset beliefs were related to maladaptive perfectionism, echoing similar findings from other studies (e.g., Chan, 2012; Shih, 2011).

The relationship between mindset and perfectionism is important because educators know that mindsets are malleable; fixed mindsets can be cultivated into growth mindsets, which in turn might influence more positive approaches to attaining high

Table 1. Perfectionism and Associated Mindsets.

Maladaptive perfectionism—Fixed mindset thoughts	Adaptive perfectionism—Growth mindset thoughts
My mistakes will reflect that I'm not smart. I dwell on mistakes. They reflect my self-worth.	I can learn from mistakes and improve!
My self-worth is contingent on meeting a standard.	My self-worth is not contingent on meeting a set standard. I am a valuable person beyond my performance.
I want to be perfect because I am afraid to fail.	I want to be perfect because I want to succeed.
Since I'm afraid to fail, I want to avoid challenges.	Since I want opportunities to succeed, I seek opportunities where I am stretched.
I need to be number 1 to prove my smartness.	I am satisfied with meeting a personal goal.

standards. See Table 1 for how mindsets beliefs relate to thinking styles of perfectionists.

Perfectionistic Behaviors

There is a function behind all behaviors. As such, perfectionistic behaviors serve a purpose (e.g., to gain recognition, acceptance, manage/avoid unpleasant emotions). These behaviors are reinforced regularly as the child “benefits” from them in some way. To intervene to address these specific perfectionistic behaviors, it is first important to think about why they are exhibited. In general, maladaptive perfectionistic thoughts lead to two categories of associated behaviors, active behaviors and avoidance behaviors, that support the maintenance of potentially unrealistic standards (Antony & Swinson, 2009). Active behaviors function to provide “control” and manifest as over-trying and over-thinking. In effort to manage associated fears of failure and shame, the perfectionist will display overcompensating behaviors, taking activities to excessive levels in effort to maintain self-imposed standards of perfection (Hall, Kerr, Kozub, & Finnie, 2007). Perhaps, an assignment is to be two to four pages in length and contain three sources; a perfectionist might overcompensate by writing 8 to 10 pages and including 12 sources. Overcompensating behaviors can drive workaholism, as a student is reinforced by external rewards from achievements.

Active perfectionistic behaviors also include excessive checking and rechecking:

Did I make sure that I used the correct formula for that equation? Did I check at least three sources to determine the accuracy of my conclusion? Did I reread my paper enough to make sure that there are no mistakes that will bring negative criticism?

These internal thoughts lead to checking or rechecking behaviors, which regulate the sense of anxiety that may come with the uncertainty of attaining or maintaining perfection.

Students may also ask adults to check or recheck their work to have multiple confirmations of accuracy. In the same vein, such students may self-criticize or inquire about the confidence of an adult's opinion of accuracy to attain reassurance. As we will discuss later in practical tips, reassurance concerning their performance is not likely what these students need most; these students really need adults to convey that they are valued beyond their performance capabilities.

Avoidance perfectionistic behaviors are displayed when perfectionists avoid situations that may jeopardize their ability to maintain a high standard (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Therefore, procrastination is often linked to perfectionism (Foster, 2007). The procrastinating perfectionist rationalizes with self-handicapping thoughts:

Rather than submit my work and potentially receive a less than desired grade, I will put off doing or submitting the assignment. Therefore, when I receive a low grade, it is not because of my inabilities. Instead, the low grade is due to the lack of time put into the assignment or lack of submission. My abilities are not judged.

Another way avoidance behaviors may be exemplified is through giving up too quickly. Perhaps a student takes a small risk and engages in a challenging assignment or course. However, once the student enters this new challenge, the student may not have automatic success, as was likely with simpler tasks. In line with the fixed mindset, the student realizes that moving forward with the challenge may lead to potential errors, exposing oneself as incompetent. To avoid this situation, the student halts progress by giving up too early with the task or drops a challenging course. Although the challenges and mistakes presented would likely lead to greater exploration and growth, the risk of exposing a lesser-than ability is too great.

In turn, underachievement is often explained to be associated with perfectionism (Rimm, 2007).

Underachievement can be described as the discrepancy between expected and actual performance (McCoach & Siegle, 2003), but underachievement may not always be easily recognizable among gifted students with such high potential. For example, sometimes underachievement is masked by adequate achievement in situations where a student purposefully chooses to take an easier class because they seek to avoid potential “failure” in a more challenging class. Therefore, in studying the relationship between underachievement and perfectionism, we feel it is necessary to differentiate between *overt* (easily recognizable underachievement in the form of lower grades) and *covert* (masked underachievement evidenced through avoiding challenges) underachievers. Based on the avoidance rationale described previously, it may be more likely that *covert* underachievement is linked to perfectionism. Covert underachievers mask underachievement by seeking out and succeeding in less challenging tasks. These students might avoid challenges, such as AP courses or other situations, that would potentially jeopardize their ability to maintain a standard of perfection. Although these students appear to be performing at high levels, they are underachieving because they are not extending themselves to a level commensurate with their potential.

Tackling Perfectionism: Practical Examples and Ideas

Restructuring Thoughts

Perhaps teachers quickly recognize thoughts, beliefs, and active and avoidance perfectionistic behaviors in a student, so what can they do to help? Understanding the connection of automatic thoughts and beliefs to emotions and according behaviors is important when tackling perfectionism. This idea comes from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, which examines the connections between our thoughts, emotions, and according behaviors (Beck, 1970; Ellis, 1980) with the aim of restructuring unhealthy thought-behavior connections to more healthy versions. Knowing the thought-emotion connection allows for more targeted changes and solutions to restructure thoughts and according emotions. The following are suggestions for reframing a perfectionists' thinking:

- Lead a student to identify the corresponding emotion associated with failure (Antony & Swinson, 2009). Is the student feeling unsure, anxious, nervous, angry, disappointed, scared, worried, embarrassed, or humiliated? After the emotion is identified, guide the student to articulate the internal thought that is experienced with the emotion. You might ask, “What are you thinking? Tell me what your thoughts are telling you.” For the student feeling disappointed, the associated internal thought might be “I should have made an A. I expected to make an A.” Next, guide a student to develop an alternative thought such as “It is

okay to not make an A on every assignment.” Then, use gifted students' reasoning skills to their advantage. Have the student evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of pursuing the perfectionist thought versus an alternative thought. When students consistently expect A's and believe that they should receive nothing but A's (thought), anxiety is elicited (emotion). However, when the alternative thought is assumed, a safer long-term outcome is possible—“If I don't make an A on this assignment, I may not earn the top grade. But, even if this happens, I am still a strong student and do well in school.”

- As students consider the value of learning from their mistakes, allow the student to revise the assignment. This is an excellent opportunity to practice “learning from mistakes”; the student can actually see how revision leads to improvement while also alleviating anxiety associated with imperfection. Emphasize the value of the learning outcome associated with revision over the grade outcome.
- Promote self-awareness of a student's perfectionism. For example, the teacher might ask, “Are you thinking like a perfectionist?” In doing so, it is important for students to not feel belittled or judged, but to consider how perfectionism influences their behaviors (Adelson & Wilson, 2009). Guide students to do a reality check with their thinking. Ask them to consider, “What would actually happen if I made a B? Do terrible things really happen when someone makes an error in a presentation?” This self-awareness can lead to self-management.
- Ask the student to think from another's perspective (Antony & Swinson, 2009). For example, “What would your friends think if you made a mistake? Would they judge you and think of you as less smart? Even if they did, what would eventually happen?” Thinking through these implications can help a perfectionist realize that they may be magnifying the negative in their thinking. As noted by Wood and Peterson (2018), it is important for students to conceptualize that they are valued for reasons beyond academic performance.
- Help the student to step back and look at the bigger picture. For example, “Looking at all grades together, will one B keep me from being considered a good student? Will it affect how I live my life?” Students should also consider “What would happen if this does not go perfectly? Then what? Then what?” until the student reaches the root cause or fear driving the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Webb et al., 2005). The root is not likely insurmountable. Ask students to consider the best-case scenario. “What would be the *best* possible thing that could happen? What makes you feel this way?” This helps students uncover motives behind their excessive strivings (e.g., approval, acceptance, a sense of accomplishment).

- Guide the student to understand the “function” of their perfectionism. As students uncover reasons behind their perfectionism and what “benefit” they receive from it, they could consider other approaches to gain a sense of personal fulfillment. Learning to value the learning process over achievement can allow one to experience the joy of personal growth. States such as *flow* or self-actualized peak performance are not possible with self-doubt and criticism associated with maladaptive perfectionism. When students adopt more mastery goals (goals for improvement and learning) instead of performance goals (goals to look smart or be the best), they may find more personal satisfaction in their pursuits for high standards (Dweck, 2000).
- Discuss the balance of time expended and value added that come with the addition of excessive sources or length of the assignment. Question, “What value is added when you add 6 more sources to a paper that already has 4 sources and is only intended to have 3 sources?” It is important for students to articulate their thinking because when doing so, they may articulate the underlying need behind their behaviors. This can lead to self-awareness of the need to change associated thinking patterns tied to overcompensating behaviors.

Although these methods can be used to reframe rigid perfectionistic thinking to more positive perspectives, it is not possible to go through an evaluation of thoughts or ask these questions when a student is in the heat of a crisis (e.g., having a meltdown surrounding the possibility of making a mistake at a piano recital). In the crisis moment, the best approach may be to provide reassuring permission—permission to make mistakes, permission to not be liked by everyone, permission to not be perfect. For, the student may not realize that it is okay to not be perfect. Sometimes, this permission must be explicit—“You don’t have to be perfect,” and students can be guided to use these statements as self-talk when experiencing a personal “crisis” (e.g., not remembering exact wording during a presentation). These statements also communicate that the child is valued for more than a perfect performance. Students need this type of reassurance to know that they are cared for and valued beyond what they can do.

Communicating Praise

Indeed, what teachers say to gifted students matters. It is not a secret that many gifted students receive regular doses of praise, but if the majority of praise is imparted based on performance or products, what beliefs does this instill in the mind of the gifted student? “Another A paper! Way to go!” Such praise places value on the performance outcome, which spurs “should” and “ought” thoughts in the mind of a maladaptive perfectionist because they tie self-value on perceived expected performance. For students who become dependent on such praise, what do they think when they don’t make the A? If they

don’t receive praise after completing an assignment, do they start to believe they are less smart? Are they only valued for high levels of performance? Not likely, but these thoughts reflect students’ possible internalization of this pattern (Dweck, 2000). To combat this, praise should be based on process instead of product or performance outcome. Focusing on the process helps students understand that their *actions* led to a successful outcome. Teachers can still praise the A paper but in a different way. Instead of praising solely based on the grade, ask about the student’s thinking and organization. For example, “Wow. I love what you did here. How did you organize your thoughts and ideas as you were crafting this paper?” “What strategy did you use to arrive at the solution?” With these comments, teachers are valuing the high level of thinking that went into producing a strong performance. This type of feedback provides a student with safe options when things go awry. Feedback and praise based on processes allows for adjustment, improvement, and continued growth instead of supporting maladaptive perfectionistic thoughts.

When praising gifted students, teachers must also be careful to use words associated with achieving success—hard work, dedication, perseverance, endurance, more so than words associated with giftedness—brilliant, genius, talented, creative, smart. In doing so, teachers emphasize what the child can control (e.g., hard work) more than what a child perceives they cannot control (e.g., how talented they might be). This sense of control can be empowering to a perfectionist tackling a challenging task. Teachers must remember that when they affirm students’ efforts, dedication, and thoughtfulness, students hear that they are valued beyond accomplishment.

Messages About Mistakes

To a perfectionist, mistakes are the enemy. Mistakes are the evidence of a less than perfect performance and reflect personal failure. Thus, it is important to consider how mistakes are understood and communicated. Adults contribute to this understanding through modeling; students observe how adults react to and handle their mistakes. If adults overreact, hide, or gloss over mistakes, this shows students that mistakes are negative. Adults who respond to mistakes in these ways implicitly model that mistakes are shameful. Instead, adults should actively verbalize thoughts related to their own mistakes, modeling that mistakes are opportunities for action. For example, an adult might verbally process the mistake by stating, “I forgot a step in this recipe. Next time, I should read through the entire recipe first before beginning.” Instead of overreacting, which shows that mistakes are shameful, or saying nothing, which ignores an opportunity for learning, adults should state how to change the current strategy so that success will be experienced in the future. Adults should model how mistakes can be instructional; when adults learn what does not work effectively, they can eliminate the strategy from the possibilities. Mistakes allow us to learn more and grow more proficient. Accordingly, behaviors are rarely final; in most

cases, there is opportunity for change or adjustment. A positive approach to dealing with mistakes might be, “My efforts on this assignment contribute to a work in progress. When I make a mistake, I can adjust and try something different. I can change my strategy and choose one that will work better.” This is a very different line of thinking compared to that of one who only thinks or cares about the end product and not the steps taken to get to the product.

Messages About Giftedness

As discussed previously, teaching a growth mindset can help perfectionists view mistakes as cues for improvement of current abilities. When one is concerned with the desire to learn and believes that abilities can be further developed, mistakes are no longer seen as a threat to self-worth. In this way, the student can have high standards, but the motive in reaching the standards has shifted from validating self-worth to reaching unknown heights of potential.

Along these same lines, gifted students need to have the awareness that giftedness itself is malleable. A gifted child’s “smart” identity often forms from the messages promoted at school or home regarding what it means to be gifted. Are gifted students hearing messages that giftedness is something you’re simply born with? Are they hearing messages that portray giftedness as mere natural talent? If so, this may drive gifted students to believe that effort and mistakes cannot be a part of their actions as gifted students; for, natural talent means “I shouldn’t need to work so hard. I can’t mess up or I might not really be gifted. Maybe, I’m not really not smart if I have to put forth effort.” Mistakes can threaten the gifted identity, so they are driven to maintain perfection at all costs. On the other hand, if gifted students hear the messages that giftedness is something to be developed and nurtured further with learning, passion, and persistence, then maladaptive perfectionistic thoughts are not supported. Gifted students realize that their strengths and abilities can only continue to grow toward an unknown potential. Thus, when conveying messages about giftedness to gifted students, it is important to recognize that gifted students have strong exceptional abilities while also emphasizing that potential comes to fruition through sustained effort over time.

Other Tips

Here, we offer a few more practical suggestions for helping students with perfectionistic tendencies. Some of the suggestions can provide direct support and empathy while others provide contexts to enhance a student’s self-awareness on the motivations behind perfectionism. Overall, educators, parents, and practitioners can play an important role in cultivating a safe, supportive environment where a child feels accepted and valued:

1. Provide opportunities for students to take achievable risks and get out of their comfort zones. Help them find opportunities to do something new where they may not

be great at something right away. For example, a student may be enrolled in a ballet class, Ballet I. The student has been taking this class for 2 years and is very successful. However, instead of enrolling in Ballet II, the student desires to take Ballet I again. Encourage your student to try Ballet II. Discuss the new skills that will be learned that will make the student even stronger. When students make the choice to embrace a new challenge, praise these attempts so that risk-taking is reinforced.

2. Rather than simply telling students they are valued, help them *feel* valued. Perfectionism can be rooted in maintaining an identity that is reinforced by high accomplishment and achieving excellence. Educators must ask, “Are students taught they are valued entirely by their high performance?” If you consider a time in your own life when you felt valued and appreciated, does it relate to achieving a major accomplishment? Or, perhaps, it relates to contributing someone else’s life in a positive way. Do children have opportunities to be more than “the smart, accomplished one?” Give them opportunities to contribute in purposeful ways to the lives of others through meaningful service.
3. Guide students to learn approach-oriented coping strategies in response to making mistakes and develop strong organizational and planning skills as constructive ways to meet set goals. The most unhealthy type of perfectionist is one who has high levels of maladaptive perfectionism (excessive concern over mistakes and doubting of one’s actions) along with low levels of adaptive perfectionism (preference for order and organization; Dixon, Lapsley, & Hanchon, 2004; Mofield & Parker Peters, 2015a). For these types of perfectionists, they have high standards without the organizational skills to attain them, which can lead to heightened anxieties or depression. Adelson and Wilson (2009) suggest long-term and short-term goal setting, chunking of large projects, and developing priorities with guided timelines as constructive approaches to organization. Help the student manage challenging assignments with a clear plan of action. For example, provide structured guidance on breaking the task down so that focused, thoughtful effort can be applied to chunks of the task. For example, when preparing for writing an essay, students may first share their thesis statements before deciding on their major points and topic sentences. Then, students would proceed to developing their paragraphs. This would help the perfectionist not feel so overwhelmed by the assignment whereby the student might procrastinate or even avoid the assignment altogether.
4. Be aware that some perfectionists may appear “just fine” to an outward observer. They have lofty goals and are equipped with healthy strategies and organization to reach these goals. However, this type of perfectionist

(high maladaptive coupled with high adaptive) is associated with internalized avoidance coping behaviors (Mofield & Parker Peters, 2015a). Although these types of perfectionists may be outwardly functioning in healthy ways, they may have a thought-life consisting of excessive self-criticism and self-doubt, maintaining the belief that self-worth is contingent on reaching excessive levels of performance. Excessively high levels of achievement or expectations of achievement can be indicative of unhealthy perfectionism; thus, practitioners or parents should be proactive in taking action before maladaptive perfectionistic behaviors manifest into more serious mental or emotional concerns. Talk to students about their goals and achievements. Determine if students' goals and self-worth are entirely performance-based. Knowing this sooner will support earlier interventions.

5. Remember that the primary emotion related to perfectionism is fear. Just as children might fear storms, snakes, or public speaking, it is important not to minimize their fear as it relates to perfection. Rather, educators must validate students' feelings and offer needed support. Perfectionists fear failure, a loss of control, a lack of certainty, or the pain of shame. Provide them the reassurance that they need and ask them, "What can I do to support you?"
6. Help perfectionists enjoy the present. They can be consumed by the past by thinking "I should have . . ." or excessively worried about the future by anticipating negative outcomes (Greenspon, 2016). Guide them to be mindful of their present emotions and thoughts and to look for moments of joy. A student may have just successfully finished a challenging concerto; support the student to enjoy this moment instead of worrying that he will not be able to handle his next musical piece. An antidote for anxiety or uncertainty is having a sense of control. Because fear of what will happen in the future can manifest as anxiety, providing a sense of control through a focused awareness of the present can minimize such anxiety.
7. Celebrate success by acknowledging growth and learning. Although we have cautioned against excessive praise for accomplishment, it is still important to celebrate the means toward accomplishment. In doing so, the focus should be on the incremental achievements along the way and celebration of learning involved.
8. Watch what you say. Teachers and parents can unintentionally model perfectionistic thoughts and behaviors. Take a reflective glance at your ambitions toward high standards or how you might openly criticize yourself or others. Although unintentional, the verbalization of critical evaluations convey shame (on self or others), which reinforces the perfectionist's belief system to protect one's self-worth by avoiding the threat of shame.
9. Understand and work with the gifted perfectionist's intensities. Intellectual and emotional intensities can be channeled into a tenacious striving toward high levels of accomplishment. Help students understand and embrace their uniqueness as an asset that can propel them to high levels of achievement without self-criticism and self-doubt. If a young student is interested in molecular biology, support and fuel this unique passion. Connect the student with an intellectual mentor, perhaps a graduate student who is studying molecular biology or an adult in the community whose profession required studying the subject. Ask a local college or university if your student can check out materials that will allow the student to really dig deep and learn more than could be done otherwise. The student can connect with the mentor, who can share the interest and learning at a level of passion that others may not experience or understand. The mentor can also share the process and path to further interests and expertise through college, graduate school, or pursuits.
10. Teachers may apply evidence-based strategies for addressing perfectionism as part of an affective curriculum. This may include using bibliotherapy to discuss characters' experiences with an issue of concern, teaching approach-oriented coping (e.g., problem-solving, seeking social support) in response to stress, applying realistic and achievable goal-setting, developing self-awareness of perfectionistic tendencies and personal strengths, and practicing relaxation techniques (see Mofield & Chakraborti-Ghosh, 2010; Mofield & Parker Peters, 2018b). With a more recent emphasis on talent development and achieving at exceptional levels of high performance, psychosocial skills such as developing a growth mindset, enhancing resilience in response to failure, and learning to regulate emotions (Subotnik, 2015) can be deliberately taught as ways to address perfectionism and related issues that inhibit achievement.

Toward Mindful Excellence

Because perfectionism is in part a learned behavior, the good news is that perfectionistic tendencies are mutable. A perfectionist's thinking can be restructured to alternative rational thoughts, and adults can influence behaviors through modeling how to handle mistakes and respond to both success and failure in positive constructive ways. In summarizing the most pertinent suggestions for addressing perfectionism, we emphasize that through supportive guidance, rigid perfectionistic thinking can be transformed to mindful excellence.

We define mindful excellence as the skill of being mindful (or self-aware) of how one's thoughts, emotions, and beliefs about ability influence the pursuit of excellence. Such self-awareness is the precondition for change. Students must be aware of their fears before they can change. An unhealthy

perfectionist can be mindful of how his or her motives toward high standards are rooted in managing the unpleasant emotion of shame, then, be empowered to change thoughts to those that are more adaptive. A covert underachiever can become reflective of the fear associated with making a B in a difficult class but also contemplate the benefits of long-term learning over a performance-based grade. Those with emotional intensities can be mindful of how their heightened awareness of others' expectations may ignite a sense of fear, influencing feelings and behaviors toward the future. Being mindful of one's motives for excellence can free one from self-judgment and motivate one to seek out rather than fear and avoid challenges. Mindful excellence brings discernment to perceive challenge as necessary for unleashing one's true potential, potential that could not be realized if the challenge had not drawn out one's greatest effort.

Teachers can guide students to mindful excellence by helping them become aware of their thoughts. For example, when talking with perfectionistic students, teachers may ask them to explain their thinking. They can help them reframe automatic negative thoughts (*should* thinking), guiding students to understand it is the awareness of the thought that empowers the change. When teachers notice perfectionistic students overreacting to a stressor (e.g., making a B), they can help guide awareness of emotion so that students gain control and regulate that emotion with appropriate coping responses (take a deep breath, lean into the unpleasant emotion and push through, make a plan for a next step). When teachers notice students avoiding a challenge (such as choosing not to take an honors course), they can seek to understand students' assumptions about ability and teach mindset principles—challenges are opportunities to grow. These examples build an awareness of how emotions, thoughts, and beliefs about ability influence pursuits toward excellence.

Students need to be seen, heard, and valued. Teachers want their students to know that they are important and that their ideas and actions matter. For those of us who work with perfectionistic students, let us help them see the inner strength they may not see, hear their confident voice that is too often quieted by self-judgment and doubt, and know they are valued even when the outcome is not perfect.

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Recommended Resources

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Bios

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