How to handle your child's perfectionism

Tips and strategies to help your little perfectionist deal with anxious thoughts and frustrations.

BY ABIGAIL CUKIER | AUG 26, 2017
One night, while my six-year-old son, Evan, was doing homework, I gently pointed out that he’d written the number five backwards—and he immediately threw himself on the floor, banging his fists and loudly whining about not being able to do it right. Believe it or not, this reaction was a bit of an improvement. When Evan was learning to print the alphabet a couple of years earlier, he’d rarely get past the letter C—if he didn’t write each letter perfectly, he’d give up in a huff. Sound familiar? If so, chances are you’ve got a pint-sized perfectionist on your hands.

“Perfectionism is an attempt to control circumstances that make kids uncomfortable,” says Michele Kambolis, a child and family therapist in Vancouver and author of *Generation Stressed: Play-Based Tools to Help Your Child Overcome Anxiety*. “For the perfectionist, this control gives some short-term relief.”

While high achievers are motivated by the pleasure of doing their best and aren’t too bothered by setbacks, a perfectionist is motivated by a fear of failure and the desire to gain acceptance, says Kambolis; mistakes are seen as evidence they are not good enough. Anxiety is the root of the issue, she adds, and recent studies suggest genetics play a role.

Simon Sherry, a clinical psychologist and associate professor in the department of psychology and neuroscience at Dalhousie University in Halifax, notes that in some cases, kids can internalize the pressure to be perfect from parents and society.

**The perfect storm**
Perfectionism can have a significant impact on kids’ well-being and relationships. Self-criticism can eventually lead to low self-esteem, says Sherry, and in the short term, adds Kambolis, frequent frustrations can result in power struggles and tantrums, stressing out kids and exasperating everyone around them.
missing the net in soccer, I sometimes have to fight the urge to yell, “It’s no big deal!”

But one of the biggest issues for perfectionists is that worries they won’t excel often lead them to give up on tasks or avoid taking risks, which can keep them from reaching their full potential. Jessica Binstock, a mom in Montreal, notices this with her son Ethan, 8.

“My youngest will start breakdancing in front of anyone, but Ethan would never do that. He’d be too nervous about being laughed at,” says Binstock. “He always wants to do things right, or he won’t do them.”

Ethan is still stuck on a moment three years ago when kids giggled after he gave a wrong answer at day camp. Binstock talks with him often about how it’s OK to make mistakes and shares examples of when she was laughed at in school. “He puts so much pressure on himself,” she says. “It breaks my heart.”

Another issue to watch for: “Perfectionist kids are master procrastinators,” says Kambolis, noting it stems from a fear of an imperfect outcome. Ethan puts off doing homework, though Binstock says she’s seen some improvement, in part because she’s convinced him to do it right away and she no longer nags him to get it done.
Taking the pressure off

Avoiding taking risks or finishing tasks can be very limiting, and may even contribute to lower self-esteem, says Sherry. “It backs them into a narrow life space and doesn’t leave much room for purpose, joy or pleasure,” he says.

What’s a parent to do? Sherry suggests encouraging (or even requiring) kids to take on challenging situations—such as playing a sport they don’t excel at—simply for the fun of it.

“Allow them to accept failure and learn that it is possible to be imperfect and still have a good life.”

Something else to keep in mind: Kids learn from what they see, so Sherry recommends parents model trying new things. “Take risks, go into situations that might be uncomfortable, and if you make a mistake, say ‘I really goofed.’ If we can laugh at our own imperfections and show that we are OK with ourselves, children will pick up on that.”

Another way parents can help reduce their little perfectionist’s worries is to set reasonable standards, says Kambolis; reduce academic pressures by de-emphasizing the importance of performance and tests, and scale back on extracurriculars.

When your child tells you he ran a race in gym class, focus on his hard work, sportsmanship and determination rather than asking how he placed—otherwise, he’ll think winning is all that matters to you. And Kambolis says you can nip procrastination in the bud by making assignments seem less overwhelming: “Teach them to break tasks into chunks and encourage them to take one piece at a time.”
Silencing anxious thoughts

When your child’s having a fit (like the night Evan lost it after printing a number backwards), Kambolis says it’s important for parents to stay calm. “In that moment, the perfectionism is in control of them. They need your understanding and patience. Soothe that discomfort and frustration,” she says.

Take a deep breath and make sure you’re calm. Then you might say something like, “I know you’re frustrated and upset with yourself because you want this to be perfect. It’s OK to make mistakes. We all make mistakes.”

Once your child has settled down, talk about how to deal with anxious thoughts. “Tell them, ‘Sometimes we have this voice that tells us to do things perfectly and if you don’t, you are a failure. This voice makes it really scary to make mistakes and gets in the way of feeling happy,’” says Kambolis. “Teach them to challenge that inner voice or stop listening to it.”

Young kids can benefit from the “balloon trick”: Have your child catch a negative thought and imagine blowing it into a balloon and letting it go. He can then replace that negative thought with a more positive one.

For older kids, Kambolis suggests prompting them to ask questions like, “What’s the worst thing that can happen?” She also suggests older kids keep a log of the times their perfectionist thinking appears in order to help them understand the patterns and learn to counteract them with strategies, like imagining deleting the thought from their minds or telling themselves “good enough really is good enough.”

Finally, learning to be in the moment can also help ease the stress over what will happen next. The Five Senses Game—where a young child focuses on what he can
“Older kids can simply ask, ‘What part of this problem can I solve right now?’” Kambolis says. Or they can choose one time during the day to dedicate to their perfectionist worries. The rest of the time, they can remind themselves to save the negative thinking for later.

When should you worry? Take note if your child has headaches, stomach aches, sleep problems, unrelenting anger and tantrums, or difficulty at school. “If perfectionism is really interfering with their happiness and development, it’s time to seek help from a professional,” says Kambolis. Start with a visit to your family doctor or paediatrician and be ready to describe your child’s thinking and behaviour, and give specific details about how your child is eating, sleeping and doing in school and with peers.

As for Evan, we often discuss that it’s OK not to be perfect. He’s working on taking deep breaths to calm his frustration, and we’re careful to praise his effort and focus rather than correctly spelled words. These days, I often let his mistakes slide to help him learn to accept feedback from his teacher. And besides, I don’t want him to think I expect perfection.

**What perfectionism looks like**
By age six, researchers can see meaningful patterns in perfectionist behaviour, says Simon Sherry, a clinical psychologist in Halifax, including the following:

- being overly cautious
- focusing on mistakes rather than successes
- setting unrealistic goals and getting upset if they are not reached
- needing to ask a lot of questions
- being inflexible
- believing there’s only one right way to do a task