

Maladaptive Perfectionism

Recent studies have shown that younger generations experience higher expectations from others and set higher expectations on themselves compared to previous generations (American Psychological Association). In today's hectic world, children and teens are often juggling the demands of academics, sports and other extracurricular activities, friendships, social media and family. The expectation to excel in multiple areas of life can be challenging for children and adolescents, and for youth who strive for perfectionism, these demands can be even more overwhelming. In fact, perfectionism in children and teens has increased by 33 percent over the last three decades. Family pressure to achieve can no doubt affect children, but social influences outside of the home also play a role. Researchers highlight the influence of several contributing factors including increased competition for admission and scholarships to college, the rising cost of education, more controlling parenting styles, and comparisons promoted by social media. It is estimated that 30% of teens and young adults struggle with unhealthy forms of perfectionism.

Experts agree that it is reasonable for kids and teens to have high standards and to work hard to meet personal goals. However, the drive for achievement can become problematic when it results in unhealthy perfectionism that involves a fear of failure and mistakes, unrealistically high standards, and a feeling that performance is part of one's self-worth (Psychology Today). As such, perfectionism can become maladaptive when it interferes with social, emotional, and/or occupational functioning.



Unhealthy perfectionism can result in several adverse outcomes for both children and teens. It is not uncommon for young people who strive for perfectionism to mask their pain and turmoil. They may appear to have it all together on the outside in an effort to appear perfect but silently suffer when problems arise. On the inside, a young person struggling with perfectionism may be fighting a daily battle against nerves, anxiety, and an intense fear of failure. This fear of failure, combined with a desire to avoid mistakes, can result in chronic stress. Additionally, perfectionism may impact a young person's mental health. If left unchecked, perfectionism is a risk factor for clinical depression, anxiety, and in extreme cases, suicidal ideation.

Warning signs of perfectionism vary depending on a child's age, but in general symptoms of perfectionism may include:

- Dissatisfied with a standard of work others view as acceptable (even exceptional)
- Difficulty completing assignments because the work is never "good enough"
- High anxiety around failure (interpreting mistakes as failure)
- High sensitivity to criticism
- Low frustration tolerance when a mistake is made and/or struggles to cope with mistakes

- Self-critical, self-conscious, and easily embarrassed
- Trouble making decisions or prioritizing tasks- always seeking out the perfect solution
- Procrastinating to avoid difficult tasks
- Inability to be happy or satisfied with accomplishments

Parents and other caring adults can help address unhealthy perfectionism in a variety of ways including:

- Focus on efforts, not outcomes- instead of focusing on what a child/teen has achieved, look at the effort they made to get there. Make it clear that achievement isn't the only important thing in life.
- Share stories of your own failures or mistakes- teaching kids how to fail is one way to help curb perfectionism. Share personal examples about a time you didn't get a job or you failed a test and explain how you coped with your failure or what you learned from your mistakes.
- Teach healthy coping skills- while failure can be uncomfortable, it doesn't have to be intolerable. Help kids foster skills to deal with disappointment, rejection, and mistakes in a healthy way.
- Help them stay focused on what they can control. Remind youth that there are things they can control such as their attitude, their effort, and their actions. Help them to understand that there are many aspects of success (and failure) that are outside one's personal control.
- Celebrate growth that comes from mistakes-let kids know that you value their good effort regardless of the outcome. Reinforce to kids that a healthy lifestyle involves being able to learn from the lows as much as celebrating the highs.

Finally, don't be afraid to enlist professional help. Perfectionism can result in a cycle of negative thought patterns that can lead to obsessive thinking, making it more difficult to cope. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is one of the most effective approaches to help a child with perfectionism. Talk to your family doctor or seek out help from a mental health professional to get extra guidance.

References: American Academy of Pediatrics; American Psychological Association; Child Mind Institute; National Institute of Health; Psychology Today; Verywell Family