



CHAPTER 1

TEMPERING PERFECTIONISM

What Is “Good Enough”?



Does your child

- Fret and worry about minor mistakes?
- Focus on the one thing that’s wrong rather than everything that’s right?
- Act as his own worst critic?
- Make snap judgments and all-or-nothing pronouncements about whether she is “good at” some activity?
- Insist, “I’m so stupid” after making a mistake?
- Tend to make excuses and blame others for failings?
- Become teary or furious when some skill or activity doesn’t come easily?
- Often forgo sleep, relaxation, and time with others because there is “too much work to do”?
- Procrastinate about big projects?
- Have trouble letting go and finishing projects?

When children are very capable, it’s all too easy to fall into the trap of perfectionism. Because they *can* do extremely well, they come to believe that they *must* do everything flawlessly. Because they *have* done extremely well, they conclude that they

must always meet or surpass the highest standards. Their self-worth depends on it.

THE FEELINGS AND BELIEFS UNDERLYING PERFECTIONISM

On the surface, perfectionism seems like a work issue, but it's really a relationship issue. Perfectionistic children (or adults) feel as though they live their lives on stage, in front of a harshly critical audience. The expectations stemming from their high abilities somehow become twisted and distorted into unyielding internal demands. When they fall short, perfectionistic children may respond with anger, tears, blame, or withdrawal, but fueling these reactions is an underlying sense of worthlessness. Perfectionists believe that their value lies not in who they are but in what they produce. In their hearts, perfectionists believe that love has to be earned and that nothing less than 100 percent will do.

Perfectionism Versus Healthy Striving

Researchers disagree about whether perfectionism is simply “too much of a good thing” or whether it's completely separate from healthy ambition and a desire to do a good job. On the one hand, having high standards is associated with better performance. On the other hand, studies show that perfectionism is linked to depression, suicidal thoughts, anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders, and various physical symptoms. The critical factor may be whether there's a mismatch between expectations and self-evaluation: when kids believe that they *must* perform extremely well but also think they *didn't* or *can't*, they're likely to feel bad about themselves and to respond with either hopeless withdrawal or desperate efforts to measure up.

We're convinced, based on our clinical experience, that there's a blurry but important line between healthy striving for

excellence and unhealthy perfectionism. This distinction is easiest to see at an emotional level. Healthy striving feels hopeful, engaged, optimistic, energetic, and enjoyable. It requires effort, but that effort feels satisfying and voluntarily chosen, and the goals feel achievable. Perfectionism, in contrast, is driven by dread of humiliation and fear of failure. The effort seems forced, painful, and imposed rather than chosen—and it never ends. The goals are moving targets, and the performance could always be better. By anyone else's standards, perfectionistic children may be performing extremely well, but it's heartbreaking to hear the self-contempt they feel, as they struggle to meet their own impossible expectations. It's this unhealthy form of perfectionism that we consider in this chapter.

The Lure and Pitfalls of Perfectionism

Rigid, unrelenting perfectionism makes people miserable, yet they cling to it. If your child has perfectionistic tendencies, it won't be easy to temper them. Letting go of unrealistically high standards may seem like a sensible thing to do, but it's terrifying for perfectionists. Despite the personal cost, striving to perform perfectly gives them a sense of control. They worry that if they let up an inch, their secret inadequacy will be exposed, they'll never achieve anything, and they'll earn the scorn or disappointment of others.

Grades, contests, rivalry with peers, and spoken or unspoken demands from teachers and parents can contribute to this all-or-nothing thinking. Smart kids get a lot of praise and recognition for performing perfectly. They don't often hear, "Wow, you did a great job of setting sensible limits and refraining from overdoing."

Sometimes the pressure to perform comes from inside. Bright children are often proud of their perfectionism, seeing it as central to who they are and what they've achieved. They would be ashamed to do a less than perfect job. Mistakes seem

like personal failings and signs of a frightening loss of control. To perfectionists, the suffering that comes from striving to perform flawlessly seems necessary and unavoidable. They are convinced that perfectionism is desirable and the only path to success.

But the fact is that people generally achieve *despite* perfectionism, not because of it. Perfectionism can stifle output by leading to paralyzing procrastination that makes it hard to start, work on, or finish projects. It can waste energy when it causes children to worry, rather than take action. It often leads to excessive focus on trivial details. Perfectionism also kills creativity. When children are anxiously focused on judging the merit of their work and fretting about the possible reactions of their real or imagined audience, they are not free to invent, discover, or try new approaches.

Tempering Perfectionism

To make the most of their abilities, smart children need to embrace high standards but move beyond rigid perfectionism. They need to understand that it's possible to be capable and accomplished without being perfectionistic. They need to learn to treat themselves with compassion and open their eyes to the possibility that relationships don't have to be earned. In this chapter, we'll describe some common scenarios involving perfectionistic children and offer ideas about how you can help.



MICHAEL: FOCUSING ON FLAWS

“I blew it! I totally blew it!” Michael whispered, as he sat down next to his parents in the auditorium. He crumpled the program for the piano recital, wishing he could rip it into shreds.

“I think you did a wonderful job, honey,” his mother insisted.

“Are you kidding? I messed up the beginning of the second piece.” Michael blinked frantically, trying not to cry.

“You’re the only one who noticed. Didn’t you hear the applause?”

“They clap for everyone, Mom,” Michael insisted miserably. “They probably felt sorry for me. I’m just no good at piano. I’ve been practicing for weeks for this stupid recital, and I totally messed up. I’m never doing another piano recital as long as I live. Can we leave now?”



The only thing that Michael remembers about his performance is his mistake. It eclipses everything that came before or after. He’s also convinced that that’s all anyone else heard, so his mother’s praise feels empty and unbelievable.

Michael’s story is about a musical performance, but this kind of overfocusing on flaws can involve schoolwork, athletic events, or even social interactions. Perfectionistic children constantly and harshly critique their own behavior.

Magnifying Mistakes

If pressed, Michael would probably admit that he was not the only child to make a mistake during the piano recital. But somehow, although other children’s errors seem excusable or understandable, his own mistake feels humiliating. He sees it as proof of his inadequacy as a pianist. He cringes as he imagines his audience’s pity and disdain, and he longs to escape. In Michael’s view, the only possible and appropriate response to errors is to slink away alone in shame. For perfectionists like Michael, mistakes that other people would shrug off, or perhaps not even notice, fuel their vicious internal litany: “I shouldn’t have done that. I’m no good.”

The Slippery Slope Theory

Matt Stone, the cocreator of *South Park*, once remarked,

I remember being in sixth grade and I had to take the math test to get into Honors Math in the seventh grade. And they're, like, "Don't screw this up. Because if you screw this up, you won't get into Honors Math in seventh grade. And if you don't get in in seventh grade, you won't in eighth grade, then not in ninth grade. And tenth and eleventh grade and you'll just die poor and lonely."

This seems laughable, yet it's exactly what perfectionists fear—that a minor slipup now could irrevocably destroy all opportunities for future success and happiness.

Kids, by definition, lack perspective. No matter how smart they are, they just haven't been around long enough or seen enough of the world to be able to understand events in any kind of broad context. The narrowness of their experience contributes to perfectionistic children's "step off the path and it's all over" fears.

Yes, it's important to do well in school, but "do well" doesn't have to mean performing flawlessly at all times. Research consistently shows that grades and test scores are not the whole story when it comes to predicting adult accomplishment. This is probably because adult job performance has nothing to do with taking multiple-choice tests and everything to do with being able to solve problems, adjust to changing circumstances, think critically, communicate effectively, work dependably, and get along with clients, colleagues, and bosses. These are the real lessons that your child needs to learn from school and from life.

The fact that your son got a bad grade on a fourth-grade math test doesn't mean that he's destined for a life of failure any more than the fact that your daughter liked to run around naked when she was two means that she's destined for a career as an

exotic dancer. Children are constantly growing, learning, and developing.

One of the most precious gifts that we can give our children is to share our confidence in their growth and their ability to surmount difficulties and move beyond disappointments. Believe in your child's future. Convey your faith that even if there are some stumbles along the way, your child will find a path that's right for him or her.

STRATEGIES TO HELP YOUR CHILD TEMPER SELF-CRITICISM

Children like Michael need to learn to temper their internal critic, so that their inner voice is inspiring rather than self-defeating. They need help managing their feelings of anxiety or disappointment, and they need to develop a more compassionate, multifaceted view of their work. Here are some ideas about how you can help.

Reflect but Downshift

When smart kids are convinced that they “totally messed up,” loving parents instinctively want to respond with reassurance. The problem is that the more we insist, “Oh, sweetie, of course you're not stupid! How can you say such a thing? You know that's not true!” the harder they argue the contrary.

A basic principle for working with children is to start by meeting them where they are. This means that if your child is upset about a perceived failure, you need to acknowledge that upset before you can help your child move on. Obviously you don't want to agree with outrageous statements (“Yes, your life truly is over”), but you can help wrap feelings in words. Name feelings. Summarize facts. Describe wishes or fears. Offer affection. Your goal is to stay true to your child's emotional reality while gently shifting the reaction in a less extreme direction. Here are some examples of how you might respond:

<i>Child's Comment</i>	<i>Parent's Reflection</i>
"I totally blew it!"	"You didn't do as well as you'd hoped."
"I'm such an idiot!"	"You're feeling frustrated about your mistake."
"I'm no good!"	"You're disappointed."
"My life is over!"	"You sure had a rough day."
"I'll never be able to show my face in public!"	"You're worried about how they'll react."
"I messed up!"	"Do you need a hug?"

This strategy of reflecting but downshifting can help children see their feelings as more manageable. While children are emotionally wound up, they simply can't hear reason, so hold off on any reassurances or suggestions. Just keep listening and reflecting until your child is in a calmer frame of mind.

Resist the Temptation to Offer Pointers

It's natural for parents to want to share their wisdom with their children. Unfortunately, children under the age of thirty usually don't respond well to this. Although our intent is to offer the benefit of our learning and experience, kids tend to hear our helpful tips as personal criticism and rejection. This is especially true when children are feeling vulnerable because they're disappointed in their performance.

In general, it's best to leave the teaching and coaching to your child's teachers and coaches. It's just less complicated, psychologically, for children to accept criticism from nonparents. Research suggests that children do better in school and feel happier when they perceive that their parents have high expectations for them in the sense of generally wanting them to do well, but chronic parental criticism is linked to anxiety,

depression, and poor school outcomes. It's painful for children to feel as though they can't live up to their parents' standards.

What if your child specifically asks you for feedback on a performance? Resist answering. This is a no-win situation for parents. If you say something good, your perfectionistic child will discount it; if you say something bad, your child will feel wounded. So give a hug and toss the question back. "You tell me. What were your favorite parts?" Be careful not to get sucked into arguing about your child's evaluations. Either reflect (as described earlier) or respond with an interested but noncommittal "Hmm."

If you must say something, stick to encouraging comments about process: "It looked like you were having fun." "I could tell you were really concentrating." "You were really trying hard." You can also offer an affectionate comment like, "I always enjoy hearing [watching] you play."

The temptation to offer pointers is especially great when children are working in fields where their parents excelled. Whether or not anyone acknowledges it, there is an underlying current of comparison and even competition when kids work in their parents' talent areas. Kids wonder if they can measure up to their parents' accomplishments. They may feel worthless if they fall short of their parents' high levels of achievement, even if, objectively, their performance is excellent. Parents hope that their children will surpass what they have done. When parents are disappointed in their own accomplishments, there is a danger that they will consciously or unconsciously push their children to fulfill the parents' own frustrated dreams.

A shared interest can be the basis of a wonderful bond between kids and parents, but only if parents can resist entering the role of chief judge and critic. Never offer pointers immediately after a performance or test—children are just too vulnerable at that point. Concentrate on sharing your enjoyment and interest rather than your performance standards. If you do offer tips, make sure you do so in a casual way, in a relaxed setting. "I've found it helpful to . . ." "You might want to try . . ."

Keep a close eye on your child's emotional reaction. If your child seems interested and encouraged, you're doing fine. If you sense your child becoming upset, say "Let's take a break" or even "Why don't you talk to your teacher [coach] about that?"

Identify What Went Right

Perfectionistic children tend to be black-and-white thinkers: either something is perfect or it's worthless. Helping your child recognize partial success can ease some of the sting that comes when they fall short of perfection.

Talk with your child to come up with a list of qualities that make up a good performance. For instance, a fine musical performance could involve

- Having the courage to get up on stage
- Playing the notes without error
- Getting all the way to the end of the piece without stopping
- Phrasing the melodies correctly
- Using changes in volume or tone to highlight melodies
- Coordinating with other musicians
- Conveying the emotional feel of a piece

A fine work of nonfiction writing could involve

- Accurate spelling
- Correct grammar
- Clear organization
- Use of transitions
- Precise or intriguing word choice
- Compelling arguments
- Natural, readable phrasing

Your goal is to come up with a bunch of criteria so that your child can gain a multifaceted view of the performance. Be sure to “stack the deck” so that most of the criteria are things that your child does well and only one or two pertain to areas of difficulty.

Tell your child, “It’s true that recognizing and correcting mistakes are important parts of improving performance, but so is recognizing what went right. You need to acknowledge the things you did well, so that you can continue to do them.”



KIRSTEN: DEFLECTING BLAME

“My math teacher is a complete idiot!” Kirsten snarled as she flung her backpack down. “I don’t know why they even let her teach! I mean, could they find anyone stupider? I hate her stupid voice. She talks to us like we’re kindergartners. And she’s so boring. Plus, she dresses like a flight attendant, and she has a really big butt.”

“Did something happen in math class today?” Kirsten’s mom asked cautiously.

“She’s such an idiot! Mrs. Warner gave us a test, and it was all on stuff that she didn’t even cover in class. She’s so unfair!”

“Well, how badly did you do?”

“I did terribly. It’s the worst grade I’ve gotten this whole year. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Did you fail the test?”

“Just about!”

“What did you get?”

“I said I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Kirsten, show me the test.”

“Fine, but then I’m going to burn it.”

“It’s a B! That’s not so bad!”

“Yes it is. Only stupid people get B’s. It’s not fair!” Kirsten burst into tears and ran up to her room.



Kirsten rants about the teacher. She bemoans the unfairness of the test. This is all just noise to cover up the fact that, for her, a B feels like a personal failure.

Lashing Out in Response to Failure

Like Michael in the first story, Kirsten is intolerant of her own mistakes, but instead of responding with self-criticism and withdrawal, her first impulse is to lash out. Her angry, defensive accusations are a short-lived attempt to cover up the fact that she feels very, very bad about herself.

The challenge for Kirsten's mom is to avoid being diverted by her daughter's anger. Kirsten is looking for a fight. There's a natural temptation to meet anger with anger, but for now, Kirsten's mom needs to bite her tongue. This is not the time to confront Kirsten about her outrageously rude comments or her annoying tendency to blame others for her mistakes. Kirsten is spewing venom, looking for a target for her frustration and disappointment. If Kirsten's mom tries to address the rudeness now, Kirsten is likely to respond by blaming her mother for her difficulties. Until she calms down, Kirsten just isn't capable of thinking clearly about the situation or responding in any kind of productive way.

Avoiding Getting Pulled into the Fight

It would be counterproductive for Kirsten's mom to join her daughter in raging at the teacher and the unfairness of the situation. Although this might seem like a supportive response, it actually hurts Kirsten because it validates her excuses and prevents her from taking responsibility for her actions.

Even if Kirsten's complaints about the test have some validity, it would be a mistake for Kirsten's mother to call and angrily demand that the teacher change Kirsten's grade. Complaining

about a grade comes across as disrespectful and intrusive, and it's sure to antagonize the teacher. It also shifts responsibility for the unsatisfactory performance away from where it belongs—with the child. What's more, it completely misses the point. In the long run, the fact that Kirsten got a B on a test when she was a kid has absolutely no significance, but her ability to cope effectively with disappointment will be relevant throughout her life. Save your advocacy efforts for the more serious or ongoing issues that are beyond your child's ability to handle.

Kirsten's mom should also think carefully about how she usually responds to her daughter's mistakes. Harsh responses to children's errors can fuel perfectionism. Sometimes bright children have emotional outbursts in an effort to head off their parents' intense displeasure. At some level, these children think that if they are already upset, then their parents won't scold or punish them, or their parents' disappointment will be diverted away from them and toward the teacher.

STRATEGIES TO HELP YOUR CHILD RESPOND TO MISTAKES PRODUCTIVELY

Children like Kirsten need help learning to tolerate the hurt and disappointment behind their anger. They also need to develop more adaptive ways of responding to setbacks. Here are some ways you can help your child see mistakes as manageable.

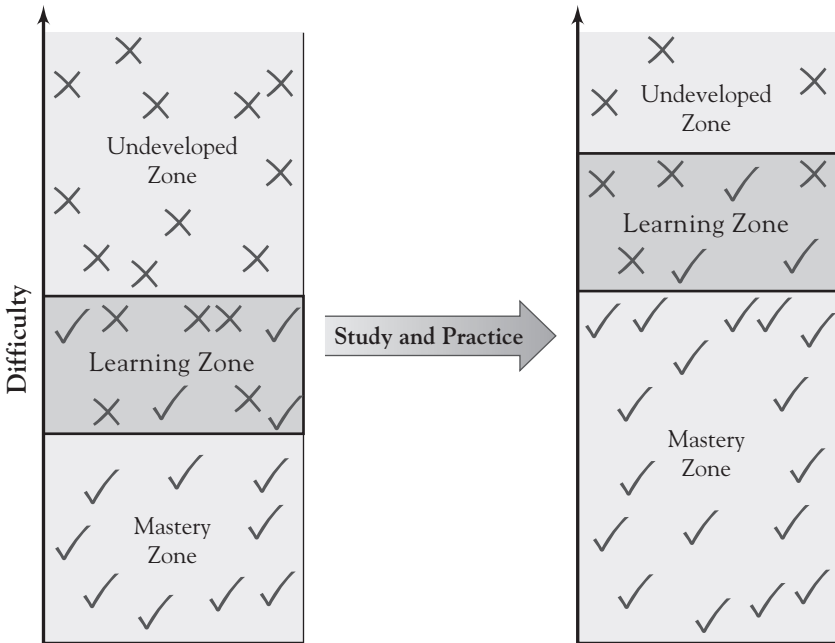
Highlight the Learning Zone

Bright children often hear, "Mistakes are part of learning," but, in general, they don't believe this. Perfectionistic kids are convinced that mistakes should be avoided at all costs. Helping them understand more about the learning process can alleviate some of their anxiety and dread about mistakes.

Show your child the diagram here, and explain, "This is a picture of how you learn." The vertical arrows show difficulty—

higher up means harder problems. The left column shows the starting point. The lower rectangle, filled with check marks, is the mastery zone. That's the easy stuff that your child knows well and gets right every time. The upper rectangle, filled with X's, is the undeveloped zone. That's the stuff that's too hard. Your child just hasn't developed the ability to do these tasks yet. The most important part of the graph is the center rectangle, the learning zone. This rectangle is filled with both checks and X's, to reflect both right and wrong answers, because your child can do some, but not all, of the tasks at this level.

Work in the learning zone to expand the mastery zone.



Explain to your child that kids who stick to the mastery zone are playing it safe. They never make mistakes, but they also never learn.

Kids who are brave enough to work in the learning zone are going to make mistakes. But that's okay, because through study and practice, they're going to learn from those mistakes.

They'll figure out how to turn all those X's into checks. They'll move over to the column on the right, which shows an expanded mastery zone and a new, higher-level learning zone.

Tell your child, "To learn, you have to be brave enough to make mistakes." When your child comes home with red marks on a school paper, say, "It looks like you're in the learning zone. Have you figured out yet how to fix the mistakes?"

Don't Correct Your Child's Work

Parents of bright children tend to be very conscientious. They are strongly invested in doing a good job as parents. They want to do everything they can to help their children succeed. But sometimes the best thing a parent can do is to take a giant step back.

Don't correct your child's work. This advice runs counter to what you might expect and to what you probably see most parents doing. But we believe it's one of the most important things you can do to benefit your child in the long run.

Parents who are actively involved with their children's homework every night, or who check over their children's work before they turn it in, are establishing a dangerous pattern. First, they're creating confusion about whose responsibility the homework really is. Second, they're cutting off essential feedback that teachers need about what children do or don't understand on their own. Third, they're unwittingly criticizing their children's abilities, implying that what their kids can do alone isn't good enough to be seen in public. Parents who correct their children's homework are trying to be helpful, but they're unintentionally communicating to their children that mistakes are intolerable and must be hidden. This can be particularly harmful for perfectionistic children.

If you're in the habit of correcting your child's work, it may be hard to refrain from doing so. You may feel (and your child may argue!) that you're abandoning your child. You may worry

that the teacher will think you're a bad parent for letting your child turn in less-than-perfect work. You may feel embarrassed at back-to-school night, when your child's sugar cube sculpture looks like (and was!) the work of a third grader, whereas many classmates' projects look like (and were!) the work of professional engineers. These feelings are understandable, but try to take a long-term perspective. Whatever short-term pain might be involved now in changing this pattern of schoolwork overinvolvement is worthwhile in the long run. It's an investment in your child's future coping abilities.

Children need to take responsibility for their own learning. They need to experience that the world won't end if they make a mistake. Allowing children to experience and overcome many small failures leads to real learning and resilience. And when they do well, the victory will be sweeter and more satisfying if they know they did it all by themselves.

The phenomenon of parental involvement with homework is fairly recent. Most of us grew up with parents who expected us to do our homework by ourselves. Yet parents today have somehow gotten the idea that to be a good, supportive parent, they need to actually sit down and do homework with their children. Often this doesn't go well. One of the most frequent complaints that we hear from the families we work with is frustration about the tension surrounding homework time. In general, our recommendation is that parents do less so that more of the onus falls on their children.

Does this mean you should never do anything to help your child with homework? Not necessarily, although most of the time having no parental involvement with homework is perfectly fine and even desirable. If you do help, the key is to make sure that your child retains ownership of the work. Providing structure and limits for children, such as a rule that there's no TV until homework is done, is often helpful and sometimes essential. Kids with attentional issues may do better doing their homework in the dining room or kitchen, where an adult is nearby, rather than

disappearing into their room, where the temptation to do other things is too high. But even with these kids, hovering or sitting next to them is likely to create unnecessary and unproductive tension. An occasional one-word reminder, “Focus!” is likely to work better.

When your child is about to start a big project, you can offer various ideas (“How about writing about the Japanese internment or the Tuskegee airmen?”) or suggest possible approaches (“Do you want to use Model Magic or papier-mâché for the diorama?”), but avoid physically touching the work. If your child doesn’t understand the instructions on a worksheet or doesn’t know how to do a math problem, you can explain, but let your child come to you asking for help; don’t offer help before it’s needed.

If your child likes to review spelling words aloud with you, that’s fine, but again, let your child come to you. What if your child doesn’t remember to study and does poorly on a test? Well, that’s an important life lesson for your child about responsibility. Next time your child can make a better choice. You can also help your child come up with a more effective study plan.

Written assignments can easily lead to overdoing parental help. Ask your child’s teacher whether you should even read your child’s papers before they are handed in. The teacher may prefer that you do nothing, or the teacher may appreciate your helping your child with spelling or organization. If you do get involved, stick to consulting and let your child do any revising. Point out the misspelled words, but let your child fix them. Ask questions (“What are your three main points?” “What is your topic sentence?”) rather than give answers. Make general comments (“I’m having trouble following you here”; “This seems like it fits better with your earlier point”), but don’t rewrite anything. Also, don’t read the books or articles that your child is using as a basis for the paper. This ensures that your child is the expert on the topic, rather than you.

Although it may make you uncomfortable to let your child turn in less-than-perfect work, when you refrain from fixing the mistakes, you send your child a powerful message about acceptance and bravery and love.

Don't Protect Your Child from Disappointment

When our children suffer, our protective parental instincts automatically kick in. Our first impulse is to do whatever we can to make things all better, just as we did when they were babies. But allowing children to cope with ordinary disappointments can help them become more resilient. It lets them discover that setbacks are unpleasant but tolerable and often temporary.

If your child is upset about a grade or the results of a contest or audition, don't make it your job to fix it. Acknowledge your child's frustration or sadness, but also communicate that setbacks happen to everyone. That's just the way the world works. All we can do is lick our wounds and get up, determined to face another day.

Insist on No Excuses, Only Plans

When kids are convinced that mistakes are unacceptable, they often respond defensively by blaming everyone in sight for their failings. This behavior is counterproductive, and it can also come across as obnoxious.

If your child is very upset, wait for a calmer moment to discuss this, but if your child is just whining, put a stop to it. Say, matter-of-factly, "Excuses don't help. If you're not happy with how you did, then you need to come up with some plans about how you can do better. What could you do that might help?" If your child continues to whine, remain unimpressed. Say, "You can't change the situation; you can only change how you respond. Let me know when you're ready to talk about plans." Then walk away.

For some children, making excuses has become a habit. They do it automatically to explain away disappointment. If your child

has this tendency, you may want to agree on a nonverbal signal, such as crossing two fingers to make an X, as a gentle reminder to avoid excuses. You could also discuss with your child how *excuses take away our power to make things better*. Have your child explain what this means. You may even want to post this as a motto on your refrigerator.

Coach Coping Efforts

Because they haven't had much experience "messing up," smart kids may not know how to cope when they do badly. We've been surprised to hear how many bright children secretly fear that they are not really as smart as other people think they are. They see poor performance as a threat to their whole identity. With their self-worth hanging in the balance, they may resort to casting blame or giving up simply because they don't know any other options for coping with setbacks. They just want to erase their error.

You may need to coach your child about possible coping strategies. Take a problem-solving approach. Help your child brainstorm possible responses, then choose the best ones. Be sure to generate a list of alternatives before evaluating them. Otherwise your child is likely to dismiss each option as it comes up ("That won't work because . . ."). Try to ask questions more than you give suggestions, because coming up with alternatives is a good learning experience for your child. Also, your child will be more invested in trying ideas that he or she generates. Stay focused on ideas about what *your child* (rather than you or the teacher) can do to improve the situation, and let your child make the final decision regarding which plans to implement.

Here are three general coping options that you'll want your child to consider:

1. *Clarify expectations*. Sometimes children fail to do well because they don't know what the teacher wants. They ignore or misinterpret directions, which hurts their performance.

Reading the instructions and grading criteria before starting and talking with the teacher are ways that your child can clarify expectations. Understanding expectations ensures that your child's efforts are focused in the most important direction.

2. *Change strategy.* Sometimes children need to learn a different approach to tasks. For instance, many smart kids eventually reach a point in school where their usual study strategy of casually flipping through notes right before a test or relying on their memory of what a teacher said in class just isn't enough anymore. They need to learn more effective study skills involving active learning, deliberate memorization, and thoughtful synthesis of material. Similarly, many smart kids are convinced that they can count on their "muse" to strike if they put off starting a written assignment until the last minute. With larger or more complicated writing assignments, this strategy won't work. Children need to plan out their efforts, setting mini-deadlines to keep themselves on the path toward completion.

If your child protests, "That's not the way I like to do things!" point out that the old strategy isn't working. Tell your child that there's a mountain of research showing that several shorter learning sessions work better than one long memorization marathon. There's also ample evidence that a steady approach to writing yields more output and higher-quality work than do frantic writing binges.

Your child might find it helpful to read a book about strategies for studying, taking tests, or writing papers. We like *How to Do Homework Without Throwing Up*, by Trevor Romain and Elizabeth Verdick, for younger children or *Super Study Skills*, by Laurie Rozakis, for older students. Don't assume that your child knows these strategies just because he or she is intelligent. In fact, other children might be ahead of your child in learning study skills because they had to learn them earlier, so they've been using them longer.

3. *Get help.* It's not easy for smart kids to ask for help. They believe that needing assistance implies failure because

they couldn't do it by themselves. Explain to your child that in the adult world, very few people work completely on their own, so knowing when to ask for help is an important life skill. Encourage your child to think about who might be able to help and how. Don't forget peers—having a study buddy can be both productive and fun.



SAM:
**AVOIDING ACTIVITIES AT
 WHICH HE DOESN'T EXCEL**

"Swimming lessons are stupid." Sam grumbled from the backseat of the car. His father ignored him. "I mean, who even cares about different strokes? As long as I can save myself, why do I have to do that breathing? If I get thrown off a boat, which is not likely to happen, since we live three hundred miles away from any body of water, I'll do backstroke."

"Swimming is a basic life skill. Everybody needs to know how to swim. Besides, it's a good way to make friends."

"No, it isn't. How can I make friends if they make me put my face in the water? Am I supposed to talk to people underwater? Besides, I'm the only one in the class who can't do stupid freestyle."

"That's why you're taking lessons. I'm sure you'll figure it out."

"No, I won't. Some people are born to be swimmers. Others are not. I'm not."

"Sam, it just takes practice. We don't expect you to be an Olympic swimmer, but if you keep at it, you'll definitely improve. Besides, once you can swim, you won't feel shy about going to the town pool this summer."

"I don't want to go to the town pool. It's hot. The chlorine smells. The sunblock gets in my eyes. And anyway, it's boring."



Sam offers a laundry list of elaborate excuses about why he doesn't want to go to swimming lessons, but the real reason is

that he's uncomfortable doing an activity in which he doesn't immediately excel.

Expecting Instant Success

Because they are used to doing well with minimal effort, bright children are often quick to conclude, "I'm no good at this" when they aren't instantly accomplished at some task. Their impulse is to give up rather than to try harder. These children have little tolerance for the process of developing skills. Because they've rarely experienced it, they don't grasp and may even actively resist the idea of step-by-step improvement.

Fearing Exposure

When perfectionists balk at doing something new or difficult, it may be because they fear exposing what they consider their inalterable weaknesses. This kind of perfectionistic thinking fits with what Stanford University psychology professor Carol Dweck calls a *fixed mindset*. Children with a fixed mindset believe that abilities are innate. They think that people are born with a certain amount of talent or intelligence, and their performance "proves" how capable they are. In contrast, children with a *growth mindset* believe that innate abilities can be expanded through learning. For them, performance is a measure of a temporary state rather than a permanent trait. Whereas fixed-mindset children feel compelled to guard against looking stupid, growth-mindset children are more willing to take chances, ask questions, and try harder in order to expand their abilities.

STRATEGIES TO HELP YOUR CHILD BECOME LESS AFRAID OF TRYING

Ability is not something that's either present or absent, like the answer to a true-false test. Children like Sam need to understand that knowledge and skills develop with effort over time. The

following strategies can help your child become less afraid of trying.

Read About Famous People's Path to Success

Bright children tend to assume that high ability should translate into instant and consistent success. They're quick to conclude that a lack of success means a lack of innate talent. A look at the lives of eminent people shows that none was successful 100 percent of the time, many did not show promise initially, and all of them had to overcome setbacks, difficulties, or challenges of some sort. Thomas Edison tried over ten thousand experiments before inventing the incandescent light bulb. Albert Einstein failed the entrance exams for the Swiss Polytechnic Institute. J. K. Rowling was on welfare. Oprah Winfrey was fired from a job as a television reporter. The book *Famous Failures: Hundreds of Hot Shots Who Got Rejected, Flunked Out, Worked Lousy Jobs, Goofed Up, or Did Time in Jail Before Achieving Phenomenal Success* is filled with interesting facts like these. For a more in-depth look at famous lives, have your child read *Great Failures of the Extremely Successful: Mistakes, Adversity, Failure and Other Stepping Stones to Success*, by Steve Young. Biographies of people your child admires can also be inspiring and help temper the naïve view that there's a short, straight line to success.

Emphasize Deliberate Practice

Smart kids often fantasize about success and recognition, but they have no idea what it really takes to make their fantasies reality. Research by Anders Ericsson at Florida State University shows that there are no shortcuts to expertise. He and his colleagues have studied experts in a wide range of fields, including musicians, writers, athletes, doctors, and chess players. They've concluded that it takes a *minimum* of ten years or ten thousand hours of deliberate practice to become an expert.

Usually we think of practice as dull repetition, but that's not what Ericsson and his colleagues are talking about. Deliberate practice involves focused and sustained efforts to learn something that's beyond current competence and comfort. It means concentrating, analyzing, using feedback, and actively working to eliminate weaknesses. Deliberate practice is hard work. It's much easier and often more fun to practice what we already know, but deliberate practice of what doesn't come easily is the only path toward improvement and the deep satisfaction that comes from having worked hard to reach a goal.

Do Something Ridiculous Together

Perfectionistic children fear making fools of themselves. You can help your child reduce this fear by doing something ridiculous together. Try learning to juggle, especially if you think you'll be bad at it. Make up your own silly words to a song. Check out the book *Kids Shenanigans*, by the editors of Klutz Press, for instructions on a variety of silly handshakes, classic tricks like hanging a spoon from your nose, speaking pig latin, and many other fun but pointless activities. Laughing together is one of the best ways to defuse perfectionists' rigid standards.



ANGELA: FEELING INADEQUATE

"I can't do it," Angela thought, as she swallowed nervously. The paper was due tomorrow, and it was already 11:48 P.M. Piles of notes and books lay spread across her desk, but the computer showed only two sentences and a lot of empty space. She'd written and rewritten those two sentences a bunch of times, but they still sounded stupid. All week, she'd been working on the paper, reading and gathering information, but she just couldn't seem to pull it together.

“You’re an idiot!” she said aloud. “Just get it done!” But nothing came to mind. Her stomach churned. Maybe she was getting sick.

She imagined her teacher’s disappointment if she said she didn’t finish the paper. Mrs. McKinley was constantly telling Angela what a good writer she was, but she had no idea what Angela went through every time she had a paper to write. How would she react if Angela turned in a page with only two sentences? She’d probably kick Angela out of the advanced language arts program.

“Write something!” Angela ordered herself, but the thought echoed in her mind, “I can’t. I just can’t.”



Somehow, Angela will manage to finish this paper. She has always done it in the past, so she’ll do it this time, too. But she’s suffering.

Freezing Up

High personal standards are laudable, but for Angela, those standards have slipped into paralyzing perfectionism. She judges herself with brutal harshness, and expects others to do so too. She believes her teacher will kick her out of the advanced program if she messes up just once. The idea of turning in a so-so paper and figuring out a better strategy for next time is inconceivable to Angela. She demands nothing less than 100 percent excellence from herself. For Angela, struggles are a shameful sign of personal inadequacy rather than an indication that she needs help, guidance, extra time, or just a good night’s sleep.

Driving Too Hard

Angela is exhausted and not thinking clearly. The most helpful thing her parents could do at this point is to say, “That’s enough.

Go to bed.” If she wants to, she can get up early in the morning to work. Otherwise, she needs to talk with the teacher about her struggles and work out a plan for finishing the paper and preventing these problems in the future. Angela needs to get the message that nobody expects her to drive herself into the ground. That kind of pushing isn’t appropriate for a child (and it’s not particularly healthy for adults, either).

Perfectionism like Angela’s is common in certain cultures in which a child’s performance is thought to reflect on the honor of the extended family. For these children, anything less than extraordinary performance feels unbearable because they believe they are bringing shame on their family and letting down the people they love. Although a sense of responsibility toward family is desirable and admirable, sometimes these children magnify their parents’ expectations to an extreme degree. If you have a child who seems to be pushing too hard to succeed, you may need to offer a reminder that doing well is important, but not at any cost.

STRATEGIES TO HELP YOUR CHILD ACCEPT “GOOD ENOUGH”

Children like Angela need to develop more compassionate standards for themselves. They need to find a way to embrace effort without pushing themselves to desperate lengths. They also need to learn practical strategies for breaking through procrastination.

Focus on “Reasonable Effort”

Never tell a perfectionistic child, “Just do your best.” Other children hear this as sensible or even reassuring advice, but perfectionists interpret it as “Do the best job you can possibly imagine, even if it kills you.”

A healthier message for perfectionists is, “Make a reasonable effort.” What constitutes a reasonable effort? Well, that’s

a judgment call. It depends on the importance of the task and how much time is available. Just getting your child to think about this before starting a project is an important step in helping your child understand that effort levels can and should vary. Working a certain amount each day on a large project is reasonable. Frequently getting too little sleep or never having time off is not reasonable.

You may also want to help your child identify the vital elements of a task. If it's a school assignment, what parts does the teacher care about most? If the basis for the grade will be 70 percent clarity and organization of writing, 20 percent thoroughness of research, and 10 percent attractiveness of illustrations, those percentages should guide your child's efforts. Obsessing about reading every possible reference or making the illustrations perfectly beautiful would be a mistake, especially if these efforts take away from working on the writing.

Teach Anti-Procrastination Tips

Many perfectionists struggle with procrastination. Their extremely high standards, and their fears about falling short of those standards, interfere with both starting and finishing projects. Here are some strategies that you might want to share with your child for cutting through procrastination:

- *Break down big jobs into small steps.* Help your child make a list of what needs to be done. Having a step-by-step game plan will seem less daunting than a giant leap from nothing to a fully finished project. Crossing off steps on the way to the final goal can also provide a sense of progress.
- *Set mini-deadlines.* Deciding on deadlines for intermediate steps can help your child pace efforts to avoid a frantic rush at the end. Remind your child to allow some leeway for unexpected delays. Mini-deadlines can also be useful for pre-

venting overdoing. Help your child decide how much time a certain task is worth and then do no more than that.

- *Do the most important and most difficult things first.* Once these are out of the way, your child can relax.
- *Set up routines.* Establishing regular times for certain activities avoids wasting time wondering when to do something or what to do next.
- *Take short planned breaks to stay fresh.* Ten minutes of exercise or relaxation at regular intervals or after finishing certain tasks can help your child stay focused and reduce fatigue.
- *Plan the next work session.* Before stopping work on a large project, have your child make some notes about what to do next, so that there's no delay in getting productive at the start of the following work session.
- *Use quick tasks to build momentum.* Doing some small jobs that can be accomplished quickly and easily can help your child get moving on a project.
- *Work on one task at a time and fully finish.* Your child will feel more relaxed with three tasks completely done than six tasks half finished.
- *Get all the way through before polishing.* It's usually more important to finish a task than to do it perfectly. Tell your child to do a full draft or complete rough project, so that there's something to turn in, then revise or improve as time allows.
- *Celebrate accomplishments.* Encourage your child to plan self-rewards for completing intermediate goals and the whole project.

Share a Fable

Throughout history, people have used stories to convey important messages. Try reading this fable to your child:

THE LAST HANDFUL OF GRAIN

Once there was a farmer who had two sons. Early one morning, in late summer, when the grain in the fields was golden and ripe, the farmer said to his sons, "You're old enough now to be trusted with the important work of harvesting. One of you take the east side and the other the west. Go into the fields and gather the grain, and tonight at dinner we'll celebrate your new responsibility."

The sons eagerly gathered their tools and climbed into their wagons. The first son drove to the east fields. He worked for hours, cutting the tall grass and gathering the grain in his wagon. When the whole field was cut, he went over it again, checking for grain that had fallen on his first pass. Then, because he knew the harvest was important to his family, he passed through the field a third time, gathering the gleanings. By then it was late, and the sun was going down. The first son sighed and stretched as he eyed his loaded wagon with satisfaction. He climbed onto the wagon and headed for home.

The second son drove to the west fields. He also worked for hours, cutting the tall grass and gathering the grain. And he too went over the field a second and a third time to gather the gleanings. When the sun was going down, he looked, not at his loaded wagon, but out into the fields, fretting about the grains he might have missed. He was tired, and his body ached from his hard work, but the thought that there might still be some grain in the field gnawed at him. It was too dark now to walk through the fields, so he grabbed a lantern and began to crawl on his hands and knees, looking for fallen grains.

At home, the father waited eagerly for his sons to return. When the first son drove in, the father exclaimed happily over the loaded wagon and hugged him. As the first son went in to get ready for dinner, the father stayed outside to wait for his second son. He continued to wait, as

it got darker and later, and still the second son didn't return. The father became worried. It was hours past sunset. Where was his son? Was something wrong? Was he hurt? The father was just about to send out a search party when he spotted the second son's wagon pulling in.

The second son was covered with scratches, and his shoulders drooped with exhaustion. "What happened?" the father asked, as he rushed to his son.

The son slowly and painfully climbed down from the wagon. "I wanted to do a good job," the son explained. "So I crawled through the field to make sure I didn't miss a single grain. And I did find this last handful."

The father gathered the son in his arms and hugged him tightly. "My son," he said. "You are more precious to me than a handful of grain." The son hugged his father back, and as he did, he opened his fist, and let the last handful of grain . . . go. They walked into the house together.

You can use this fable to open a discussion about perfectionism with your child. Ask questions to help your child figure out what the story means.

What was different about the two sons' approaches to gathering the grain?

Why did the second son choose to go over the field a fourth time?

Why did the first son stop after three times?

How did each son feel at the end of the day?

How did the father feel when each son returned?

Why did the second son let the last handful of grain go?

You may want to explain to your child the idea of diminishing returns: at some point, additional effort yields little

improvement in results. Use examples your child can relate to, such as washing dishes versus scrubbing every plate with a toothbrush, or studying spelling words versus spending every waking moment reviewing spelling words. Ask for your child's thoughts about how to decide when efforts are good enough.

The fable can also be an opportunity to talk about unconditional love. Hard work can be satisfying and rewarding, and it often leads to achievement. But achievement is not what underlies loving relationships. Perfectionistic children need to hear explicitly that they are loved for who they are, not for what they accomplish.



SHOW THE WAY

The best way to teach children to move beyond unhealthy perfectionism is through our own example. Kids learn more from what we do than from what we say. Let your child see you actively choosing alternatives to perfectionism. The next sections offer some ideas about how you might do this.

Put It Away

With our 24/7 access to cell phones and the Internet, modern careers can be all-consuming. Even if you aren't employed outside the home, the to-do list is endless. You really could work every waking hour, but is that what you want for yourself? Is that what you want your child to think is "normal"?

Let your child see you shut down the computer, close your briefcase, or put down the chore list and say, "Well, there's always more I could do, but I've done enough for now." Then relax. Chat with your spouse. Call a friend. Take a walk. Watch a movie. Read a book with no redeeming literary value. Do something fun and completely unproductive with your child.

Try setting up some regular work-free time that you spend doing something you enjoy. Start small if you need to, but guard this time zealously. Tell your child what you are doing and why.

Make the Effort Fit the Task

Be clear about what matters to you, so that you can cut corners on the rest. Question your “shoulds” so you avoid overdoing. Sometimes, through habit or observation, we assume that things have to be done a certain way. Decide what tasks you are willing to do in a quick-and-dirty way so that you can have more time for whatever is more important to you. Share your thoughts with your child. “I have to do this. I could spend a lot of time on it, but it’s not worth that much effort. I’m just going to do the minimum, to get it done.” “In the past, I’ve always done it this way. Now, I’m thinking that I’d rather spend my time . . .” Whether you’re talking about writing a report or making a Thanksgiving dinner, you’re showing your child that a variety of approaches are possible and that it makes sense to match the effort to the importance of the task.

Acknowledge Mistakes and Share Plans

When you acknowledge your own mistakes, you give your child permission to make mistakes. Say you’re sorry, sincerely but simply. Admit it when you didn’t do something as well as you would have liked, but don’t put yourself down. And don’t stop there. Follow the admission by sharing your plan for doing better next time. This shows that mistakes are not an end point.

Try Something New

Young children believe that parents can do everything well and have always been able to do everything well. Let your child see you trying something new, especially something that will take time and effort to master. Talk about how you enjoy the activity even though you’re not good at it yet. Explain how engrossing

the process of learning can be, regardless of the level of performance.



Too many bright children suffer because their self-worth is tied to flawless performance. They believe they have to earn love and approval by being perfect. They respond with vicious self-criticism, angry blame, or painful withdrawal if they fall short of their lofty ideals. Although high standards are laudable, when they cross over to unhealthy perfectionism, they interfere with both productivity and happiness.

Parents can help by leading children toward a more compassionate view of themselves. This can involve tempering children's self-evaluations, expanding their understanding of how people learn, and guiding their efforts to cope with fears and frustrations. Parents need to be especially cautious about critiquing or being overly helpful with their children's work, because these well-intentioned efforts can inadvertently contribute to fear and shame about making mistakes. Above all, parents need to model healthy alternatives to perfectionism through their own choices and actions.

In the next chapter, we describe ways to help bright children make and keep friends.