*By Joan Franklin Smutny*

When parents and teachers talk to me about perfectionism—usually in regard to gifted children, as that's my specialty—they invariably ask, "How do we know if a child is a perfectionist and not just working hard?" Sometimes self-worth has become entangled with a narrowly defined sense of achievement (usually good grades and evaluations). A preoccupation with the expectations and judgments (real or imagined) from people around them has made these children their own worst critics. Such characteristics are indicators of perfectionism.

**What a perfectionist stands to lose**

The danger of perfectionism is that it disrupts children's natural curiosity to learn and robs them of the joy they used to feel in the presence of a new discovery, inquiry, or invention. Sadly, these children often become chronic underachievers who are too afraid to take a risk or try anything new.

The following list of behaviors shows how perfectionism creates a loss of this natural, inner drive and motivation to learn. Children who are perfectionists tend to:

* Avoid trying new things for fear of failure;
* Procrastinate and leave work unfinished out of fear it won't be good enough;
* Focus on mistakes, rather than on what they did well;
* Set unrealistic goals and then condemn themselves when they don't achieve them;
* Have trouble accepting criticism;
* Find it hard to laugh at themselves;
* Focus on end products, rather than on the process of learning;
* Approach assignments with an inflexibility that insists on one "right" way to do or be;
* Judge themselves severely whenever they get a grade below an "A";
* Lose their former enthusiasm for learning because of an obsession with what "good work" should look like; and
* Underachieve because of an inability to complete projects considered less than "perfect."

A number of factors may contribute to perfectionism. Typically, there is a heavy emphasis on performance, both at home and at school. In addition, our society is conditioned to judge one's level of intelligence according to test scores and grades. When young children feel put on display and praised for their achievements, they naturally conclude that their value as people lies in what they can produce. As time passes and the children continue to excel, they feel less free to strike out in new directions and more pressure to get the grades that will ensure everyone's approval.

Even young children may deny themselves permission to make mistakes and may avoid experiences that could show their weaknesses. Often, they hide the gaps in their knowledge because they think they'll disappoint the people who admire them. This true story illustrates the common dilemma of perfectionism for a gifted child:

**What parents and teachers can do**

As parents and teachers, we want children to live up to their potential. The key, though, is defining "potential." Striving for excellence shouldn't be a quest for perfection. "Their potential" means the children's potential to explore and develop the fullness of their own talents, interests, learning styles, and so on. We know from experience that gifted children, in particular, naturally strive for excellence, and that they need specific guidance in navigating the ups and downs (successes and failures) that accompany their level of accomplishment.

There's a big difference between wanting children to develop their potential and expecting them to be at the top in everything they attempt. When you're clear that inner achievement—the development of high-level thinking skills, the expansion of creative imagination, the ability to take risks, and the joy of discovery—is far more important than high grades and awards, you'll be able to help children combat perfectionism.

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**Putting the Brakes on Perfectionism**

* Show children that you value them more for who they are as people than for what they can do.
* Help children separate themselves from their products, particularly their grades.
* Help them understand that mistakes are a normal part of learning.
* Encourage them to distinguish between the more important assignments (or parts of an assignment) and the less important ones.
* Provide a structure that allows them to set realistic goals and create a plan of action.
* Help them understand that achievement happens in incremental steps over time.
* Explore the lives of great achievers: learning about the challenges many high achievers have faced helps children re-evaluate their expectations about achievement and their attitudes about themselves.
* Applaud children's efforts, especially when they take risks or overcome obstacles.
* Celebrate creativity and originality.
* Involve them in activities that aren't graded or judged.
* Help them plan for new challenges: Talk to them about their concerns, what difficulties they might encounter, and what actions they can take, even in the "worst case scenario."
* Encourage a sense of humor.
* Communicate with the child's teacher.