

Perfectionism

By Angela Micallef

Perfectionism can be an asset to one's development or debilitating to one's growth. There are those children who set their standards high and aim to achieve everything at the best of their ability but also manage to keep the reins tight so as not to turn achievements into unrealistic expectations. Then there are children whose standards are set beyond what they might mentally and physically be capable of accomplishing. Such individuals strive for greatness but may never achieve it because their expectations are set too high. These children are in our classrooms and homes and not only do they need to meet their own expectations but they often force themselves to meet the standards of others.

'Perfectionism is the least understood aspect of giftedness...perceived by most people as a problem to be fixed' (Silverman, 1995, p.1, cited in Peters, 1996). Certain issues need to be addressed in order for children to understand that it is OK to be who they are and that they are not seen as someone needing to be fixed.

In an article written by Davies (2005), two ends of the spectrum for perfectionism are presented. There are those individuals who take pleasure in completing difficult tasks, setting high standards and putting in whatever energy is required to succeed. Alternately there are those who can't get any satisfaction from their efforts because they set unrealistic goals. Such people find it unacceptable to make mistakes making their perfectionism unpleasant. Working out whether children are perfectionists or not, and if so what type, can make an enormous difference in the way these children are perceived and reacted to at home or in the classroom. Silverman (1995) believes that being a perfectionist comes with being gifted.

If the perfectionist is to truly be encouraged, parents and educators need to consider a number of contributing factors.

- The language used in front of and directly to children can influence the child's self perception and their perfectionism.
- Expectations placed on children, subconsciously or deliberately, might exceed the standards they set for themselves.
- The attitude towards learning and expectations that educators and parents model play a vital role in shaping what children might see as acceptable.

Language

Parents and educators do have control over the language used with children. Statements such as ‘Pencils down and we’ll finish this later’, or “You’ve spent too long on that already” can be detrimental to the emotional well being of the gifted perfectionist simply because their goal in mind for that task has just been abolished. Commenting on work in front of other students can also prove to be a negative experience. Teachers need to exercise caution in the way that gifted students (or any student for that matter) with perfectionist tendencies are approached.

Organising meetings, (Davies, 2005) with the student to discuss their work can be a positive way of understanding their needs and feelings successfully. Giving children alternative times to complete unfinished work might also be less stressful for them than insisting things be done in an allocated time. Instead of criticising a child’s work, (Scholastic, 2005) it would be better to implement positive phraseology such as saying “Why don’t you have another look at this sentence” or “How did you come to that conclusion?” When children are upset over grades or work achievements empathise, (Scholastic, 2005) by saying things like “I know you feel bad about that” or “How might you do things differently next time?” Listening to perfectionists can open a door to conversations relating to fear or failure that the child might not otherwise initiate.

Expectations

Adults often expect certain children to achieve certain objectives. It is easy to find ourselves saying things like “I would have expected you to do better than that” or “Is that the best you can do?” Setting standards for children, rather than having them set their own, paves the way for a life of consistent failure. Showing children that important adults in their lives value them for more than their achievements is a positive technique. Such an attitude assures child that who they are is good enough. ‘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’ (Smutny, 2000-2005). Parents and educators must remember to plan for children’s individual level of development in order to help children succeed. Standards that are achievable must be set, so as not to set the child up for disappointment.

Silverman (1995, cited in Peters, 1996) presents a number of useful guidelines in encouraging the gifted perfectionist. Helping children to strive even if they do not succeed the first time is an admirable trait in developing their ability to persist. Believe in their ability to achieve so that they too will believe in themselves and see the positive side of their perfectionism. “We need to reassure the gifted that perfectionism is an integral part of their giftedness and that the ‘pain’ is unavoidable in the pursuit of excellence” (Peters, 1996).

Attitudes Toward Learning

Adults are a powerful force in determining a child's self perception about what is acceptable. Making mistakes is foreseeable for anyone. A big difference can be made to a child just by adults openly acknowledging their mistakes and encouraging children to realise that mistakes are fundamental to the learning process. Since many gifted perfectionists focus on what they produce rather than the process they take, (Smutny, 2000-2005) adults could facilitate their acceptance of enjoyment for the learning process. This includes modelling coping skills that are constructive for these children in order to emphasise that mistakes are a part of everyday processes (Davies, 2005). Positive verbal communication, with and around children, can assist in the development of the positive thoughts kids use to define themselves.

Perfectionism can lead to pessimistic feelings, beliefs and actions (Freedman and Jenson, 1999) so adults need to teach children how to be optimists in the face of not meeting their own expectations. If children are optimistic they will hopefully begin to realise that failure is only a temporary feeling about a certain aspect of their lives and it does not constitute the person they are.

Conclusion

Pyryt (1994) reminds us that there is a fine line between striving to reach high standards of excellence and feeling self-defeated through the inability to reach unreasonable expectations. Adults in a gifted perfectionist's world, need to help define these lines and standards and turn them into positive objectives for healthy achievement. The path paved for children needs to be realistic, open and positive should be accessible and encouraging so that children encountered, in careers or families, learn to accept themselves.

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