

# The Complexity of Perfectionism in Children

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the complexity of perfectionism in children. Considering the recent rise in the proportion of unhealthy perfectionist students in the world and the severe lack of consideration on this issue, it is important to write about this topic to bring awareness about its negative impact on students, and to contribute to the ongoing discussions. The main aim of this paper is to explain three types of perfectionism and focus more on the negative impact of dysfunctional perfectionism in students, besides providing suggestion. By doing so, the paper anticipates to draw the attention of school counselors, psychological researchers and parents reading this serious issue. The paper starts with a brief introduction regarding perfectionism, followed by the development of perfectionism, negative effects of dysfunctional perfectionism, and its treatment by therapists. At the end of the paper is given some suggestions regarding the issue.

**Key words:** Perfection in children, development of perfection, dysfunctional perfection

## INTRODUCTION

Perfectionism can be seen as a personality trait, a drive, a behavior, or an illness. The concept is not new because it has been studied from many angles since the beginnings of modern psychology. Adler, (1956) the father of individual psychology, described the search for superiority as one of the main motivations shared by all.<sup>[1]</sup> According to him, this quest for perfection aims to overcome a feeling of inferiority regarding an aspect of one's person, to achieve a power of control over the environment. Psychoanalytic theory also associated perfectionism with the development and maintenance of neuroses. Horney (1950) described what she called the "tyranny of should" as a characteristic of the pathological perfectionism underlying certain neurotic states.<sup>[2]</sup> She referred to the tendency to feel excessively obligated and to feel that no matter what the individual does, it is never enough. Perfectionism is also part of the behaviorist model, since the individual who is rewarded only for perfect performance will be motivated to behave according to high standards to avoid imperfections and the disapproval of others.<sup>[3]</sup> However, being highly perfectionist might lead to some issues such as physical, psychological, and healthy life problems.<sup>[4]</sup> Furthermore, perfectionist students imposes on themselves standards

of excellence that are extremely difficult, or impossible, to achieve; they do not know how to balance their efforts, sometimes over-investing in activities of lesser importance to the detriment of certain higher priorities.<sup>[5]</sup> For them, details matter as much as the whole and they remain inflexible in their choice of priorities and ways of doing things.<sup>[6]</sup> The perfectionist has difficulty working in a team and delegating; They constantly doubt about themselves and do not accept their personal limitations and imperfections.<sup>[7]</sup> Their value as a person depends on their successes and achievements. They judge themselves harshly and do not accept criticism, and even the smallest mistake is seen as a stinging defeat. Perfectionist is eternally unsatisfied and very often feels very anxious, ashamed, and guilty.<sup>[8]</sup> Moreover, in a recent research directed by Parker in a gifted middle school; he has found.

Three type of perfectionist students. These are non-perfectionist, healthy perfectionism, and dysfunctional perfectionist students. For students categorized by Parker as "non-perfectionist," no perfectionist bias was found.<sup>[9]</sup> Such students are more likely to report themselves as being unorganized, distracted, and with broad interests; the second group of the students who were categorized as "healthy perfectionists," has indicated high personal standards. Such students were not supportive

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of some items in the test that indicated an excessive concern about parental mistakes, or parental criticism, and the last group whom describe as “dysfunctional perfections” have the perception of criticism, doubt, and there are more anxious and uncertainty about action; they do not like mistake and they have to make everything without any sign of error.<sup>[10]</sup> Some of these often cried or feel psychologically ill when they do not achieve their goal as they want.<sup>[11]</sup> Being a perfectionist students is a power, but being over perfectionist can lead to some psychological issues including depression, social anxiety, self-harming, or chronic stress.<sup>[8]</sup>

## DEVELOPMENT OF PERFECTIONISM IN CHILDREN?

Perfectionism is believed to develop under the influence of three factors: Genetic, familial, and cultural.<sup>[4]</sup> Much research tends to show that many personality traits, such as perfectionism, are hereditary.<sup>[12]</sup> We come into the world with a temperament and some people are more predisposed to perfectionism than others. Subsequently, however, our personality is formed from experiences in our environment. Many perfectionists are raised or brought up by parents who have very high personal standards.<sup>[13]</sup> These parents can pass on their views and behavior in a direct or subtle way. Their children then often grow up in fear of not being able to meet their expectations and of disappointing them; in fact, many perfectionists, feel that their parents will only love them if they meet their criteria for success.<sup>[14]</sup> Moreover, perfectionist students often believe that if they produce quality work, it means that they are good students. It is important to distinguish our personal value from our actions. Every human being has value even though they may sometimes fail. Furthermore, we have to admit that we now live in a society that is more excellence and value sit. This search for excellence is very much present in the school environment where success is encouraged and rewarded. However, while it is important to recognize and reward people with great effort and hard work, have achieved great things, it seems imperative to ask ourselves about the consequences of this quest and this continuous demonstration of excellence.

## THE NEGATIVE EFFECT OF DYSFUNCTIONAL PERFECTIONISM

Students are affected by the unbridled pursuit of perfection. It is common to see a decline in performance among these perfectionists, some of whom may even drop out of school. Health problems frequently arise. Unhealthy perfectionists often have depressive symptoms; nothing satisfies them anymore, they withdraw and are no longer interested in meeting people.<sup>[15]</sup> Because their goals are never achieved because they are too high, they are unable to develop self-confidence.<sup>[5]</sup> These students can also develop significant anxiety problems

that lead to difficulties in concentration and memorization.<sup>[16]</sup> This makes studying more difficult and less effective, and as a result, many will tend to postpone their education.<sup>[17]</sup> On the other hand, others will be relentlessly trying to complete their studies without being able to concentrate adequately. They will sometimes develop an anxiety problem at exams, characterized by attention problems and memory lapses.<sup>[18]</sup> They can no longer succeed in writing what they have learned well and obtain results that are much lower than they could have obtained. In short, when perfectionists realize that their results will not allow them to achieve their dream of exceptional excellence; they react with feelings of frustration, anger, depression, social phobia, eating disorder, or panic.

## HOW A COUNSELOR CAN TREAT DYSFUNCTIONAL PERFECTIONIST STUDENTS?

School counselors need to consider the ways in which children might express the healthy and unhealthy features associated with perfectionism in the school setting. Counselors may assist perfectionist children and youth by providing two separate services; consultation and advice.<sup>[19]</sup> Counselors can use psychoeducational approaches when consulting teachers and parents to deliver educational resources to maximize their interactions with perfectionist students. Through the process of counseling, school counselors may be able to guide perfectionist children and adolescents to develop skills that will help them to benefit from the adaptive tendencies involved in perfectionism and to cope successfully with maladaptive behaviors.<sup>[17]</sup> Moreover, while offering parents and teachers recommendations regarding support for helping perfectionist students to develop better coping skills for the school, the counselor, should highlight the necessity of observing students to determine which characteristics of perfectionism are in effect. For student who are healthy perfectionists, the counselor’s best recommendation is to encourage the student to keep up the practice, and to look out for possible manifestations of stress associated with the discrepancy between the high level of standards and current achievement.<sup>[20]</sup> For those who are not healthy perfectionists, the counselors might provide guidance to the parents or teachers of the child who involved to support the child for changing some of the attitudes as well as the beliefs. One approach which might be effective with such children and adolescents is to help them evaluate their own capacity to conform to their expectations more accurately or realistically; this would mean looking at how they have been performing previously and determining whether or not performance in the future is possible.<sup>[3]</sup> In addition, unhealthy perfectionists students are particularly prone to depression, eating disorders, thoughts of suicide, and a number of other psychological issues which impact all their lives, beyond school performance.<sup>[14]</sup> School counselor may wish to direct

these students to a qualified psychiatric practitioner to assist them on the underlying issues associated with such difficulties. In short, there are great amount of activities such creative drama, and sharing pass experience of famous people who appreciate mistakes which can be apply by the counselor to help the unhealthy perfectionist children.

In short, some scholars perceive perfectionism as something positive; it often leads to a search for excellence, have high standards and work hard for success. Students often have good perfectionism because they believe that it is their own responsibility to do so. It allows them to be efficient, organized, or ready for any success. While having high standards and goals can help perfectionists to achieve their goals, ambitions in life, they compromise sometimes their happiness and performance. However, some see perfectionism as a negative force. The argument is that the excessive desire to reach a higher level of success is sterile since it does not really allow perfectionists to achieve their goals and damages their self-esteem. A such pressure will be a source of nervousness, tension, and stress. In addition, perfectionism can also weaken self-esteem of students by causing a sense of failure when they cannot conform to their own unrealistic standards.

## CONCLUSION

As unhealthy perfectionism is seen as an issue by a great amount of psychological researchers, it is important to take it seriously by the relative of the perfectionism children. To avoid dysfunctional perfectionism in students, the tremendous support of parents and teachers is needed. To do so, it is firmly suggested to parents and teachers to teach children to appreciate the value of mistakes and failures. By teaching them these, they will become healthy perfectionists and live healthy lives. For those who are genetically unhealthy perfectionists, parents should seek help from counselors or psychologist to avoid the negative consequences before it becomes severe. If the parents do not solve this problem early, it may affect the lives of the children negatively in many different ways such as making them to be unsuccessful in their academic lives; it might even push them to the wall of committing suicide. For the healthy perfectionists, parents, or teacher should help these children to maintain their healthy perfectionism by supporting them in positive manners.

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