

# Dealing with Perfectionism: Strategies for Parents

By Ann Dolin

Does your child struggle with perfectionism or anxiety? If so, here's help. Read on for a revealing interview with Dr. Michelle Mullaley, a specialist in the Washington DC area.

## What are some common symptoms of perfectionism?



“People with perfectionist thinking tend to set overly ambitious goals, have unrealistic expectations, and fear failure. They tend to exhibit “All-or-nothing thinking”, either “I’m a success” or “I’m a failure.” Students with perfectionist thinking focus on their accomplishments and their successes, wanting to be the best or get the highest grade possible. If they think they won’t be the best, often times they won’t even try or

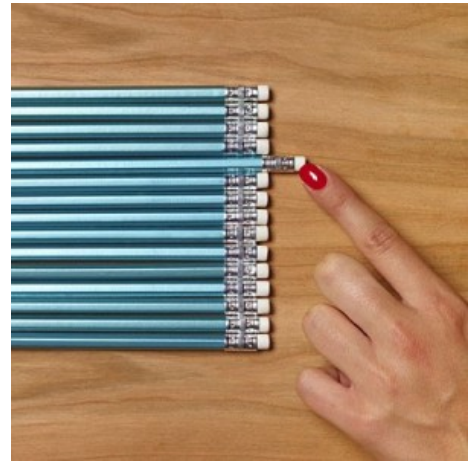
demonstrate effort. For these students, finding the middle ground is difficult, and anxiety is triggered when they are asked to work quickly or “just get it done.” Students with perfectionist thinking are critical of themselves and over-focused on imperfections or mistakes and the need to fix them, rather than being able to appreciate their accomplishments or hard work. As a result, they may not do their homework if it is a subject that is not easy for them and their schoolwork may take them much longer than necessary. They also may avoid getting started, erase perceived mistakes on a page until it rips, and in extreme cases refuse to turn in work that does not meet their unrealistically high standards.”

## What causes perfectionism?

“Many people who struggle with perfectionism possess a core belief that their value is directly related to their accomplishments or the approval of others. They tend to have a strong desire to please others and a fear of disapproval, as their self-esteem is dependent on external standards rather than on an inner sense of being valuable. These beliefs can be fostered inadvertently by being overly praised for intelligence. Students who are used to success coming easily are less prepared when confronted with a difficult task or subject. They often do not have the same understanding of the value of effort, practice, and trying and failing as part of learning. For these students, their anxiety can peak when confronted with a difficult task. Fearing failure, they often do not try or put in the necessary practice needed. Perfectionism can also be influenced by genetic factors in families with a history of anxiety or perfectionism, excessive criticism, and competitive societal pressures.”

How can parents help students who struggle with perfectionism?

“Although students with perfectionistic thinking are often responding to internal pressures, parents can be mindful about the messages that they send to their children about their child’s worth or work. It is most helpful to focus on effort and life balance rather than solely on school accomplishments, grades or how many AP classes their child is taking. Although parents understandably want to praise their children and want them to do their best in school, this approach can backfire with a perfectionistic child who may feel she is not smart enough if she struggles, or if her work is not her “best.” She may be left stuck in search of the elusive “perfect” product. For these students, learning that “good enough” and getting the work completed is sometimes the goal.”



### **What are the next steps?**

“Parents can model humor at their own mistakes to help their child learn to take themselves a bit less seriously. Parents can also talk with their children about their expectations and help them to adjust them to be more realistic, flexible and self-forgiving. For many youngsters with perfectionistic thinking, learning ways to de-stress and take care of themselves is also critical, such as eating well, getting out to exercise a little each day, allowing time for social support, and getting enough sleep. This may mean helping your child to set limits on how long they will spend on homework, setting time aside for other pursuits, and sticking to bedtimes that allow enough sleep. All these things teach life skills that will benefit their child now and in the future.”

### **Perfectionism in students: How does a parent know when to get help?**

“While many students who have a perfectionistic streak manage well with support at home, there are times when the need to be perfect or being so self-critical can begin to take over the homework process or a student’s overall happiness, which can signal a need to reach out for help. A parent might notice that, despite their encouragement to the contrary, their student repeatedly stays up late into the night to finish their work because it is not “right,” has to start assignments over because they are not good enough, repeatedly procrastinates and avoids starting homework or projects out of fear they “can’t do it,” refuses to turn in work that is completed because it is not “good enough,” or asks to stay home from school because their work is not done and they cannot face their teachers without it.”

### **How can a therapist help with perfectionism?**

“A therapist can help a child to pay attention to their thinking patterns related to their work and achievements, helping them to notice some of the self-sabotaging thoughts or unrealistic expectations they likely hold for themselves. Therapists can use cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and supportive strategies to help youngsters reset some of their expectations, develop more adaptive thinking about their work and themselves, and to find value in themselves through other, non-achievement related aspects of their life (e.g., art, cooking, family and

friendships, appreciating a good book). This can help students to focus on creating balance in their life, which we know is a greater contributor to overall health and happiness than are grades or accomplishments alone.”

Source; <http://ectutoring.com/dealing-perfectionism-strategies-parents>