

Parent Information Session:

Perfectionism

Deirdre Kelly, M.Ed., NBCT
Teacher of Gifted Services

7:00 – 8:00 PM

March 23, 2010

Lake Sybelia Elementary
Orange County Public Schools

“The blessed work
of helping the world forward,
happily does not wait
to be done
by perfect men.”

- George Eliot

What Are You Seeing?

Frustration

Starting Over

Erasing

Worry

Inflexibility

Determination

Procrastination

Underachievement

Checking

Self-Criticism

Comparing

Self-Image

Lack of Joy in Work

Judgments: Self, Others, Interpretations

Approval Seeking

Unrealistic Expectations

Fear

Definitions of Perfectionism

~ “... a combination of thoughts and behaviors generally associated with high standards or expectations for one’s own performance.” (Burns, 1980; Hamacheck, 1978)

~ “... both a manager of behaving and a manger of thinking about the behavior...” (Hamacheck, 1978)

~ “...one who sets exceptionally lofty standards for performance and who is also excessively critical of his or her performance attempts, which can lead to high levels of anxiety and distress.” (Schader, 2007)

~ “the feelings, thoughts, and actions” of high expectations

The irrational **belief** that you and/or your environment must be perfect.

The **striving** to be the best, to reach the ideal, and to never make a mistake.

An all pervasive **attitude** that whatever you attempt in life must be done letter perfect with no deviation, mistakes, slip ups, or inconsistencies.

Being constantly alert to the imperfections, failings, and weakness in yourself and others.

The underlying **motive** present in the fear of failure and fear of rejection, i.e., if I am not perfect I will fail and/or I will be rejected by others.

A rigid, moralistic **outlook** that does not allow for humanism or imperfection.

The belief that no matter what you attempt it is never “good enough” to meet your own or others' expectations.

“It is concern over mistakes,
rather than pride of
accomplishment, that most
accurately characterizes
perfectionism.”

“At its core, perfectionism is a no-win approach to life.

If perfectionists make mistakes, their self-criticism is harsh.

Yet if they do well, they can't bask in the glow of good feelings, since any job could always have been done better.”

Three Dimensions of Perfectionism

- | | |
|-------------------------|--|
| 1 – self-oriented | being hard on oneself |
| 2 – other-oriented | being hard on others |
| 3 – socially prescribed | struggling to meet standards set by others |

Types of Perfectionism

- ~ The Academic Achiever “Must Achieve 110%”
- ~ The Risk Evader “All or Nothing”
- ~ The Aggravated Accuracy Assessor “Exactness and Fixation on ‘Redos’”
- ~ The Controlling Image Manger “I Could Have Won if I Wanted to”
- ~ The Procrastinating Perfectionist “If It Stays in My Mind, Then I can’t Fail”

Causes of Perfectionism

~ “Although many perfectionist children have at least one perfectionist parent, it may never be possible to know how much the perfectionism is the result of genetic inheritance and how much is the result of environmental influences.”

~ “Perfectionism isn’t a basic temperament like assertiveness or avoidance.”

~ Contributors:

- a desire to please others (praise, prizes, grades, etc.)
- easy successes at a young age
- difficulty setting realistic goals

Our Perfectionist Culture

- ~ Our culture is littered with:
 - messages of perfection
 - value placed on flawlessness
 - the drive for the next better thing

- ~ The Winner-Take-All-Attitude

- ~ Doing things for the sake of joy or themselves is not enough in our culture.

Perfectionism & Giftedness

- ~ “Chiefly an affliction of the gifted...” (Silverman, 1999)
- ~ “Gifted kids are no more prone to perfectionism than other kids.” (Greenspon, 2002)
- ~ “Perfectionism is the most noteworthy personality characteristic associated with giftedness.” (Silverman, 1999)
- ~ “As a group, gifted students are perfectionistic... they seem to be more perfectionistic than average-ability peers...” (Schuler, 2002)
- ~ “Gifted kids who feel unacceptable may come to believe that their ability to do things like schoolwork perfectly offers a road to acceptance.”

Why Gifted Children Are Perfectionistic:

1. Perfection is an abstract concept.

- It takes an abstract mind to grasp the idea of perfection and to cherish a vision that does not exist in the concrete world.

2. Perfectionism is a function of asynchrony (uneven development)

- Set standards according to mental age, not physical.

3. Older playmates

- Tend to set standards appropriate for older kids.

4. Early successes lead to expectations of the same.

- From their earliest years, they have been able to avoid failure and act in a manner that will assure success in their endeavors. Leads to failure-avoidance.

5. Attraction to complexity.

- Crave challenge and stimulation and will create it when it's not available – sometimes by requiring perfection.

(Silverman, 1999)

Healthy – vs - Unhealthy?

Normal – Neurotic

Enabling – Disabling

Adaptive – Maladaptive

The Debate Goes On...

Healthy Perfectionists:

- Strong need for order & organization.
- Accepted mistakes.
- Enjoyed the fact that their parents held high expectations for them.
- Had positive ways of coping with their perfectionism.
- Had adults who modeled doing their “best”.
- Viewed effort as an important part of their perfectionism.

Dysfunctional Perfectionists:

- Continuously anxious about making mistakes.
- Held extremely high standards for themselves.
- Perceived that others held excessive expectations for them and internalized negative remarks from others.
- Questioned their own judgments.
- Lacked effective coping strategies.
- Exhibited a constant need for approval.

“Olympic champions, scientific breakthroughs, great works of art are all products of the perfectionistic personality gone right.”

(Silverman, 1999)

“... perfectionism (like its sisters, intensity and sensitivity) tends to be mistreated by those who counsel the gifted. But perfectionism is not a malady; it is a tool of self-development. The drive for self-perfection manifests as dissatisfaction with ‘what is’, and a yearning to become what one ‘ought to be’.”

(Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977)

“In actuality, perfectionism must be seen as a potent force capable of bringing intense pain, frustration and paralysis, or incredible satisfaction and creative contribution, depending upon how it is channeled. It has the potential to lead to professional fulfillment and spiritual development, but if the energy is diverted by self-doubt and lack of faith, it can be agonizing and debilitating...”

(Silverman, 1999)

So – what does all of that tell us?

When harnessed or applied thoughtfully, high expectations can be fulfilling and bring joy. When misapplied or badly appointed, high expectations, combined with a fear of failure, can be hurtful and problematic.

Dealing with Perfectionism

- ~ Acceptance and love above all else. 😊
- ~ Value effort, not always results or end-products.
- ~ Help them to redefine “success”. (laser beam/flood light)
- ~ Value mistakes as an important part of accepting challenge.
- ~ Setting attainable goals.
- ~ Setting priorities. (instead of needing to be good at everything equally)
 - channel their efforts into what they care about most
- ~ Help them to take pleasure in their accomplishments and see setbacks as learning opportunities.

Dealing with Perfectionism

- ~ Story telling
 - from your world – how do you handle mistakes
 - Bibliotherapy – books that feature perfectionists
- ~ The Most Effective of All Strategies: Modeling.
- ~ Don't compare people. (kids, co-workers, anybody)
- ~ Express your appreciation for them. Keep it real.
- ~ Celebrate progress. (On their terms, not always ours.)
- ~ Talk with your child about hopes and fears.
- ~ Help your child manage the culture. (winner-take-all)
- ~ Teach problem-solving strategies.
- ~ Emphasize their failure/rejection experiences as well as their successes.

Dealing with Perfectionism

~ Reduce the stress that results from unhealthy perfectionism:

- reflection - relaxation - pursue passions

~ Explain that there is more than one correct way to do most everything.

~ Be a model of healthy excellence. Take pride in the quality of your work but don't hide your mistakes or be constantly self-critical.

~ Praise statements which are enthusiastic but more moderate convey values which children can achieve: "You're a good thinker" is better than "You're brilliant". "Excellent" is better than "Perfect".

~ Teach appropriate self-evaluation – encourage children to learn to take criticism well and to criticize others sensitively and constructively, as well as how bragging affects others and how to congratulate others on their successes.

~ Teach routines, habits, and organization, but help them to not be so rigid that they can't be altered when needed.

Praise – vs - Encouragement

- ^ Praise is focused on the outcome of a task.
- ^ Praise focuses on our judgment of the person's performance.
- ^ “You get an A+ on your room!”

- ~ Encouragement is focused on the enjoyment your child experiences when doing an activity.
- ~ Encouragement is an expression of confidence in, and appreciation of, another person.
- ~ Gestures of connection that say “I’m with you”.
- ~ “I really appreciate all the effort you put into straightening your room.”

Acceptance

- ~ The terminology of acceptance:
 - Psychology: validated, affirmed, mirrored, understood
 - Them: heard, worthwhile, helpful, cherished, loved

- ~ Acceptance isn't determined by what you've done or said, but rather by what they perceive.
 - If they don't feel it, then you've got more work to do.

- ~ Acceptance given to them and coming from them.

Risk Taking

*“The dangers of life are infinite, and among them is safety.”
— Goethe*

“It’s easier to try new things and risk making mistakes if you already know you’re acceptable.”

Start with training-wheels, (togetherness, privacy, baby-steps).

Encourage them to take risks in high-interest areas first.

Modeling the every-day-ness of risk-taking. It doesn’t have to be jumping off a plane.

Bibliotherapy – stories with characters who take risks.

A few thoughts on “competition”...

(The topic of competition is an area of interest for me, so I've done a bit of reading and listening and thinking about it. Here are a few things I've come across... but I'm still percolating on this... there's more out there, I'm sure...)

Taking a Page from the World of Sports

Elite athletes focus on...

- ... attaining their personal best.
- ... working to improve a specific skill/element.
- ... taking thoughtful risks.

If you're going to compete, you need to know or be prepared to learn...

- ... how to define and redefine success.
- ... how to be reflective of your efforts.
- ... how to be resilient.
- ... how to be socially appropriate (the "manners" of competition).
- ... how to function as part of a team.

Healthy Competition...

- ...focuses on “My Best” (personal best)
- ... is skill-centered
- ... is chosen by the person
- ... is situation specific
- ... includes a reflective process
 - Goal setting & resetting
 - No generalization
- ... has varied and reasonable results
- ... uses a meaningful measure of success
- ... is varied in type (solo, group, team, short-term, long-term, seasonal, etc.)

Unhealthy Competition...

- ... focuses on being “The Best”; winning is more important than participating
- ... is person-centered
- ... is forced; not elective
- ... is constant; ever-present
- ... does not include a reflective process
 - No goal setting/resetting
 - Student generalizes
- ... has unvaried and unreasonable results
- ... uses an inconsistent measure of success; uses comparisons to others
- ... is constant in type (solo, group, team, short-term, long-term, seasonal, etc.)

In a Nut Shell

Whether by choice or happenstance, the world is a place of complexity, ambiguity, and risk.

These are frightening, sometimes overwhelming, things for perfectionists and they need support and skills to manage them in the healthiest way allowable for them.

Your Mission

Acceptance & Encouragement

“The seedling does not know that it is a mighty oak in the making. If it obsesses over what it is not, it may not survive and grow to what it can become.”

(Silverman, 1999)

Willingness to pursue one's goals
in the face of obstacles, setbacks
and failures is commendable.
And living each moment as if it
were important can change the
consciousness of the planet.

(Silverman, 1999)

A Few Resources

Freeing Our Families from Perfectionism Greenspon

The Academy of Achievement website

Some of My Best Friends Are Books Halstead

Positive Self-Talk for Children Bloch

What's Bad About Being Too Good? Adderholdt

There are oodles and scads of articles available online.

Bibliography

Content for this presentation was taken (without permission but within fair use) from:

Articles:

Perfectionism: The Crucible of Giftedness - Silverman
<http://nmgifted.org/GAC%20Resources/Perfectionism%20The%20Crucible%20of%20Giftedness-SILVERMAN.pdf>

What's Wrong With Perfect? - Rimm
<http://www.parentingbookmark.com/pages/SR02.htm>

Perfectionism and Giftedness: Examining the Connection - Pyryt
<http://people.ucalgary.ca/~gifted/resources/articles/PerfectionismMP.pdf>

Working with Perfectionist Students - Brophy
<http://www.vtaide.com/png/ERIC/Perfectionist-Students.htm>

Books:

Counseling the Gifted & Talented - Silverman

The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children: What Do We Know? - Neihart, Reis, et al

Stand Up for Your Gifted Child - Smutny

Some of My Best Friends are Books - Halsted