



[View Cart](#)

- [Home](#)
- [Sylvia's Bio](#)
- [Family Achievement Clinic](#)
- [Speaking Schedule](#)
- [Testimonials](#)
- [Letters from Educators](#)
- [Articles for Parents and Teachers](#)
- [Ask A Family or Teaching Question](#)
- [Books, DVD's, Misc. Products](#)
- [Dr. Rimm's Newsletters](#)
- [See Jane Win](#)
- [How Jane Won](#)
- [Sylvia's Favorite Links](#)
- [Underachievement/Creativity Measures:](#)
  - [Underachievement Identification Instruments](#)
  - [Creativity Identification Instruments](#)
  - [Underachievement Quiz](#)
  - [Parenting for Achievement Course](#)

**For More Information, Contact:**  
 Educational Assessment Service,  
 Inc.  
 W6050 Apple Road  
 Watertown, WI 53098

**Phone: 1.800.795.7466**  
**Fax: 1.920.261.6622**  
**e-mail: srimm@sylviarimm.com**

## WHAT'S WRONG WITH PERFECT?

Good, better, best  
 Never let it rest,  
 'Til your good is better  
 And your better best.

We want our children to strive for excellence. It is attainable and provides a good sense of accomplishment. Furthermore, excellence is advantageous whether it involves children's school grades, ice skating, music, art, gymnastics, written work, or many other skills. It sets high standards, and opens doors to opportunity for talented children. Many talent areas demand excellence. Thus, the striving for perfection in an area of expertise may be a healthy development of talent. However, when perfectionism becomes pervasive and compulsive, it goes beyond excellence. It leaves no room for error. It provides little satisfaction and much self-criticism because the results never feel good enough to the doer. Perfection is impossible for children who apply impossibly high standards to too many activities too frequently.

### THE PRESSURES OF PERFECTIONISM

The pressures of perfectionism may lead to high positive achievement motivation or to underachievement. In very important ways, perfectionism is slightly different than the motivation for excellence. That small dissimilarity prevents perfectionistic children from ever feeling good enough about themselves and precludes their taking risks when they fear the results will not be perfect. They may procrastinate or feel anxious and fearful when they believe they cannot meet their high standards. They may experience stomachaches, headaches, and depression when they worry that they make mistakes or perform less well than their perfectionistic expectations. Sometimes they avoid accomplishing the most basic work and make excuses and blame others for their problems. They may even become defiant and rebellious to hide the fears of failure they feel.



Some children may only be specifically or partially perfectionistic. For example, some are perfectionistic about their grades and intellectual abilities; others may be perfectionistic about their clothes and their appearance; some are perfectionistic about their athletic prowess or their musical or artistic talent; some are perfectionistic about their room organization and cleanliness; and some children (and incidentally, also some adults) are perfectionistic in two or three areas, although there are some areas that apparently don't pressure or bother them at all. Those children who have not generalized perfectionism to all parts of their lives are more likely to be healthy perfectionists.

### HOW PERFECTIONISM AFFECTS OTHERS

Unhealthy perfectionism not only affects the perfectionist but also affects those around them. In their efforts to feel very good about themselves, perfectionists may unconsciously cause others to feel less good. Spouses, siblings, or friends of perfectionists may feel angry and oppositional and may not understand their own irrational feelings. Sometimes family members feel depressed and inadequate because they can't ever measure up to the impossibly high standards of their family perfectionist. Often times, there is an underachiever in the family to balance out the

Charlotte Otto, Vice President at Procter and Gamble, also struggled with perfectionism as an adult in her career. She learned to affirm instead of blaming herself. Initially, she struggled with accepting criticism but finally realized how to learn from the constructive criticism she received instead of letting it debilitate her.

perfectionist. The underachiever feels like they can never do as well as their perfect sibling so they say to themselves, "Why try?"

In order for perfectionists to maintain their perfect status, they may unconsciously put others down and point out how imperfect they are, usually in a very "nice" way. For example, perfect sister Sally may say, "I don't understand why my brother isn't even trying to do his homework." Giving others continuous unsolicited advice seems to reassure perfectionists of how intelligent they are. They are so determined to be impossibly perfect that causing others to feel bad has an unconsciously confirming effect on their own perfectionism. The perfectionistic spouse, in his or her effort to feel best, may also cause his or her partner to feel inadequate or less intelligent.

### WHAT CAUSES PERFECTIONISM?

The pressures children feel to be perfect may originate from extreme praise they hear from the adults in their environment. The pressures may also come from watching their parents model perfection-istic characteristics, or they may simply stem from their own continuously successful experiences, which they then feel they must live up to.

Certain activities like ballet, gymnastics, and music encourage perfect performance, and children involved in these activities strive to meet the high standards expected of them. This may be healthy, or children may generalize these expectations of perfection to other parts of their lives, and perfectionism may then become unhealthy and dissatisfying.

#### *See Jane Win Research*

When we studied the childhoods of more than 1,000 successful women for *See Jane Win*, we found that 30 percent of the women viewed themselves as perfectionistic in high school. For the most part, their perfectionism was positive. Approximately half of the women felt pressured in high school, but they typically liked feeling that pressure and considered it to be a personal pressure.

There were some exceptions. For example, television news anchor

Donna Draves quit many childhood activities shortly after starting them. She would tell her parents that the activity was "boring." Donna admitted that she would drop out if she was not "best" in the activity. She would never attempt activities like sports and math because she considered her brother "best" at those. Fortunately, she was "best" at speech, and she carried excellence in speech to her career. Donna's perfectionism even affected her eating habits. Although she was a size three, she continuously compared herself to two other girls in her class who were "skinnier" than her. She felt unattractive unless she was the thinnest. Donna is successful today, but the near pitfalls of perfectionism could easily have derailed her and prevented her from "making the mark" she so wished to make.



### HOW PARENTS AND TEACHERS CAN HELP PERFETIONISTS

- **Help kids to understand that they can feel satisfied when they've done their best; not necessarily the best.** Praise statements that are enthusiastic but more moderate convey values that children can achieve; for example, "excellent" is better than "perfect," and "You're a good thinker" is better than "You're brilliant." Also avoid comparative praise; "You're the best" makes kids think they must be the best to satisfy you.
- **Explain to children that they may not be learning if all of their work in school is perfect.** Help them understand that mistakes are an important part of challenge.

- **Teach appropriate self-evaluation and encourage children to learn to accept criticism from adults and other students.** Explain that they can learn from the recommendations of others.
- **Read biographies together that demonstrate how successful people experienced and learned from failures.** Emphasize their failure and rejection experiences as well as their successes. Help children to identify with the feelings of those eminent persons as they must have felt when they experienced their rejections. Stories from *How Jane Won* will be helpful to discuss.
- **Share your own mistakes and model the lessons you learned from your mistakes.** Talk to yourself aloud about learning from your mistakes so children understand your thinking.
- **Humor helps perfectionists.** (Remember Pamela Frank's story.) Help children to laugh at their mistakes.
- **Teach children empathy and how bragging affects others.** Help them to put themselves in the position of others. Say, "Suppose you messed up on your piano recital and Jennifer, the winner, told you that she had her best performance ever. How would you feel?"
- **Show children how to congratulate others on their successes.** They will feel they are coping better as they congratulate others.
- **Teach children routines, habits, and organization, but help them to understand that their habits should not be so rigid that they can't change them.** Purposefully break routines so your children are not enslaved by them. For example, if they make their beds daily, permit them to skip a chore on a day when you're in a hurry. If you read to them at night and it's late, insist they go to sleep without reading. Occasional breaks in routines will model flexibility and prevent them from feeling compulsive about habits.
- **Teach children creative problem-solving strategies** and how to brainstorm for ideas that will keep their self-criticism from interfering with their productivity.
- **Explain to children that there is more than one correct way to do most everything.**
- If your child is an underachiever and avoids effort because he fears not achieving perfection, **help him to gradually increase his effort and show him how that relates to his progress.** Emphasize that effort counts.
- If your child is a high achiever, but overstudies for fear of not receiving an A+, help her to gradually study a little less to show her it has only a little effect on her grade. **Help her to feel satisfied with her excellent grades with the reasonable amount of study involved.** She needs to balance work with fun.
- **Be a role model of healthy excellence.** Take pride in the quality of your work but don't hide your mistakes or criticize yourself constantly. Congratulate yourself when you've done a good job, and let your children know that your own accomplishments give you satisfaction. Don't overwork. You, too, need to have some fun and relaxation.
- If your child's perfectionism is preventing accomplishment, or if your child shows symptoms of anxiety related to perfectionism, like stomachaches, headaches, or eating disorders, **get professional psychological help for your child and your family.**

The dilemma for parents and teachers is to balance helping children to be successful and "good kids" without also causing them to be burdened by the negative side effects of too much pressure to be the best. The childhood rhyme in the introduction of this article summarizes the problem well. We want our children to grow up to work hard and take pride in their work, but if they "never let it rest," they will never feel the satisfaction they have earned.

## Perfectionism Resources: Ideas for helping the gifted child with perfectionistic tendencies

Here are some helpful articles with information about perfectionism:

[http://sylviarimm.com/article\\_wwwperfect.html](http://sylviarimm.com/article_wwwperfect.html) This article was written by Dr. Sylvia Rimm, who has a lot of useful information about the topic of underachievement/perfectionism available on her website.

<https://shar.es/1CDXo6> This article was published by the National Association of Gifted Children; their website has many great resources for parents and teachers alike.

<http://sengifted.org/archives/articles/sylvia-rimm-on-perfectionism-in-the-gifted-an-interview-by-sengs-editor-in-chief-michael-shaughnessy> This article is available through the website, [sengifted.org](http://sengifted.org) – a wonderful resource bank; SENG = Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted

---

Dr. Del Siegle wrote a book, [The Underachieving Gifted Child](#). Below is a summary of some strategies that he suggests:

1. Debugging Mistakes: Adults model and share with children challenges that they or others have taken and how the mistakes were useful and part of the greater process
2. Swiss Cheese: breaking larger tasks into smaller pieces.
3. Creative Visualization: Visualizes each step in an event, “walks through” the event to address questions and fears so that the child can feel more familiar with an event and more comfortable when the actual event occurs (i.e. a spelling bee).
4. Creative Outlets – To build confidence, it can be helpful for perfectionists to be involved in non-competitive activities where the main goal engage in the activity for fun/ for the pleasure that activity brings.
5. Bibliotherapy: using books to recognize qualities within self. (see example of list below)

---

This website offers some ideas for books that can be read with elementary aged gifted students where the issue of perfectionism can be explored:

<http://giftedbibliotherapy.blogspot.com/p/dealing-with-perfectionism.html?m=1>

## Success Strategies for Perfectionists

1. Don't take it personally.
2. Know when to quit.
3. Match the time commitment to the value of assignments.
4. Set goals and focus on improvement.
5. Study the lives of eminent people.
6. Reframe mistakes as opportunities for growth and success.
7. Break large tasks into smaller pieces; sometimes getting started on a project is the hardest part.
8. Visualize the successful completion of a project prior to getting started.
9. Debugging Mistakes: Adults model and share with children challenges that they or others have taken and how the mistakes were useful and part of the greater process.
10. Visualize each step of an event, "walk through" the event to address questions and fears so that the child can feel more familiar with an event and more comfortable when the actual event occurs (i.e. a spelling bee).
11. Creative Outlets - To build confidence, it can be helpful for perfectionists to be involved in non-competitive activities where the main goal is to engage in the activity for fun or for the pleasure that activity brings.
12. Bibliotherapy-using books to recognize qualities within self.

### Sources:

- Dr. Michael Pyryt is a professor at the Centre for Gifted Education at The University of Calgary in Calgary, Alberta, Canada
- The Underachieving Gifted Child, by Del Siegle, Ph.D.

## Helping Your Child Overcome Perfectionism

### What Perfectionism Looks Like in Children and Teens:

- Tendency to become highly anxious, angry or upset about making mistakes
- Chronic procrastination and difficulty completing tasks
- Easily frustrated and gives up easily
- Chronic fear of embarrassment or humiliation
- Overly cautious and thorough in tasks (for example, spending 3 hours on homework that should take 20 minutes)
- Tries to improve things by rewriting
- Frequent catastrophic reactions or meltdowns when things don't go perfectly or as expected
- Refusal to try new things and risk making mistakes

### Helping Your Child Overcome Perfectionism: How to Do It!

#### Step 1: Educate your child about perfectionism:

First, talk to your child about perfectionism. Help him or her understand that perfectionism makes us overly critical of ourselves and others. This may make us unhappy and anxious about trying new things. Perfectionism makes it difficult to finish tasks, and can be frustrating for everyone in the family! For younger children, you may not want to label it as "perfectionism", but instead say:

*Some adults and children have a little voice inside of them that tells them to do things perfectly. This voice says things such as: "If you don't get it perfect, you're a failure," or "Disappointing others means you are a terrible person." This voice makes it really scary to make mistakes! It also makes it hard to learn new things because it takes lots of practice and time to perform well. Trying to be perfect zaps the enjoyment out of a lot of activities and achievements. Do you think you hear this voice sometimes?*

For teens, call it "perfectionism" in case they want to find out more about it on their own (on the internet or at the library).

#### Step 2: Teach positive statements.

Perfectionistic children and teenagers often have rigid "black-and-white" thinking. Things are either right or wrong, good or bad, perfect or a failure. Help your child see the gray areas in-between. For example, something can have a flaw, and still be beautiful. Getting a B+ is still a great achievement, especially if you tried your best!

Encourage your child to replace self-critical or perfectionistic thoughts with more positive, helpful statements. Even if he or she doesn't believe these statements right away, enough repetition will turn positive thoughts into a habit, and help crowd-out the negative self-talk.

#### Step 4: Praise!

It is important to praise effort regardless of whether or not your child was successful. This is especially true for a perfectionistic child or teen. Instead of praising the achievement, say “*Wow, I can tell you put a lot of work into this*” or “*You showed a lot of confidence and courage out there!*” Also, praise skills that are not directly related to achievement (e.g. sharing with others, remembering something important, playing well, or congratulating a winner).

#### Overcoming Procrastination

Perfectionistic children and teens often cope with their fear of mistakes by procrastinating. Help your child overcome procrastination by encouraging him or her to do the following:

**Creating Realistic Schedules.** Help your child by breaking down larger tasks into manageable steps. On a chart or calendar, write down the goal or deadline and work backwards, setting mini-goals along the way. Build in rewards for reaching these steps. Also, encourage him or her to decide in advance how much time to spend on a task. Remember, the goal is to complete the task, **not to make it perfect!**

**Setting Priorities.** Perfectionists sometimes have trouble deciding on what to devote their energy and effort. Encourage your child to prioritize by deciding which activities deserve maximum energy and which require less. Let him or her know it’s okay not to give 100% to every task or activity.

**Gaining Balance.** Perfectionists tend to lead narrow lives because it’s very difficult to be very good at a lot of things. The goal should be to NOT invest more effort than is necessary to do a “good enough” job. This will allow more time to enjoy with friends, and on other activities and hobbies – which are also important!

#### Other Helpful Hints

- Model and encourage saying “I don’t know”. Help your child become more comfortable with ambiguity and not knowing everything.
- Share your own mistakes and talk about what you learned. When you do make a mistake, say something like, “*Whoops! I guess I goofed. Oh well, whatcha gonna do?!*” Even try to laugh at your own mistakes in front of your child. Humor helps.
- Set reasonable standards for your child, such as reducing academic pressure, or scaling back extra-curricular activities or lessons. For example, your teen may need to be discouraged from taking all top level classes.
- Encourage your child to spend energy learning to help others. This will help him or her see the many valuable ways they can contribute that don’t require “perfection”. Your child will feel better about him or herself, too. For example, get him or her involved in volunteer or charitable activities, such as dog-walking for an animal shelter, or helping tutor younger children.

Further reading on perfectionism (and overcoming procrastination):

**Perfectionism: What's Bad about Being Too Good?** by Miriam Adderholdt-Elliott, Miriam Elliott, & Jan Goldberg (Monarch Books)

**When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism** by Martin M. Antony & Richard P. Swinson (New Harbinger Publications)

Some examples of positive statements:

- *"Nobody's perfect!"*
- *"All I can do is my best"*
- *"Believing in myself -- even when I'm making mistakes -- will help me do better!"*

Have your child say these statements to him or herself whenever he or she starts to be self-critical or upset about not doing something perfectly. Suggest writing these statements down somewhere handy (e.g. a post-it note in a pencil case).



**Helpful Hint:** As a parent, say these statements out loud to yourself when you "goof up" or make a mistake, too. Your child will pay attention, and learn that it's okay to not take life so seriously all the time!

### Step 3: Help Your Child Gain Perspective

Perfectionistic children and teens tend to "catastrophize". Mistakes or imperfections are seen as more terrible than they really are. They focus on the possible negative consequences of failure. In most cases, these feared consequences are unlikely and much more drastic than the reality. Understandably, catastrophizing increases anxiety and interferes with performance. Help your child recognize that one mistake does not equal failure, and that one bad performance does not mean that he or she is worthless.

Talk about famous people or characters from books or movies that your child admires who made mistakes but still bounced back! For example, Thomas Edison failed a thousand times before he found the right filament for his light bulb! Famous basketball player Michael Jordan didn't make his high school basketball team when he first tried out.

**Helpful Hint:** You and your child might want to find or invent another good quote about the value of mistakes. Have him or her write a favorite "failure" quote on a bookmark. For example:

#### **The Value of Mistakes**



*"Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly."* (Robert Kennedy)

*"Whether you think that you can or that you can't, you are usually right."* (Henry Ford)

*"Take a chance and you may lose. Take not a chance and you have lost already."* (Soren Kierkegaard)

*"Failure is the opportunity to begin again more intelligently."* (Benjamin Disraeli)