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childPSYCH News

A newsletter for professionals and parents

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Inside this issue:

*Is your child a perfectionist?



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Is your child a perfectionist?

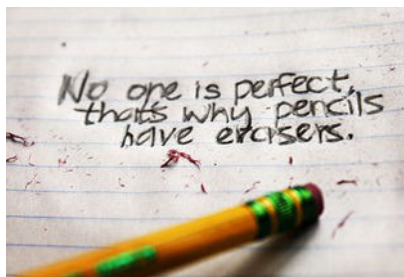
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In today's busy world, children and teens are chronically juggling the demands of academics, sports, friendships, social media, family, and extra-curricular activities. The expectation and need to excel in multiple domains can be enormously taxing for children and adolescents, leading themselves to exhaustion, burn-out, depression, and anxiety.

For some children and teenagers, these demands can be even more overwhelming when the desire for perfectionism plays itself out. In order to explore how and why striving for perfectionism can be so detrimental to child development and mental well-being, Jessica Naecker, a licensed clinical psychologist and credentialed school psychologist at Aspiring Families, Center for Mental Health and Wellness, San Diego, shares the following information:

Perfectionism is pervasive in our lives and our children's, so much so that demanding perfection of ourselves feels ironically unexceptional. In fact, one recent study finds that rates of perfectionism have increased over time, indicating that younger generations experience higher expectations from others and set higher expectations of themselves than previous generations.

Naecker asks an important question: "Is expecting excellence from ourselves a concern?" To answer this question, she states the following: We have to understand the differ-



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ence between healthy and unhealthy perfectionism. Certainly, setting high expectations of ourselves, striving for achievement, and nurturing self-discipline are characteristics that are adaptive and helpful. Of course, we want ourselves and our children to be motivated to achieve and successful in our endeavors. But a focus on achievement can become problematic when it morphs into unhealthy perfectionism, which involves an unshakable fear of failure and mistakes, unrealistically high standards, and feeling that our performance is intertwined with our sense of worth.

Brené Brown, a researcher at the University of Houston, says it best:

"Perfectionism is not self-improvement. Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval. Most perfectionists grew up being praised for achievement and performance (grades, manners, rule following, people pleasing, appearance, sports). Somewhere along the way, they adopted this dangerous and debilitating belief system: 'I am what I accomplish and how well I accomplish it. Please. Perform. Perfect.'"

In exploring the impact of perfectionism on children's development and how it affects their mental health, Naecker states that it is no surprise, then, that the overly high personal standards and critical self-evaluations characteristic of unhealthy perfectionism can lead to a host of negative outcomes. Perfectionism is associated with various mental health concerns including anxiety, depression, self-harm, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and eating disorders, as well as general distress. Perfectionism also takes a toll on our physical health, and is associated with fatigue, insomnia, and chronic headaches.

Contrary to intuition, unhealthy perfectionism is also not associated with improvements in academic achievement: on the whole, children who are unhealthily perfectionistic don't actually do better in school than their non-perfectionistic peers. In sum, the costs of unhealthy perfectionism are high, and the benefits nearly non-existent.

It is essential that as parents, teachers, and professionals, we assist our children and teenagers with the vulnerability of perfectionism. Naecker assures us that although perfectionism is pervasive and pernicious, there is thankfully much we can do to help our children and ourselves avoid perfectionism and adopt a more adaptive achievement-oriented stance. Carol Dweck, a distinguished researcher at Stanford, has spent her career investigating motivation and achievement, and her research findings

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Adolescence con't

on mindsets offer a way forward.

Naecker explains that unhealthy perfectionists embody what Dweck terms a fixed mindset, or a belief that one is born with a specific, fixed amount of talent and intelligence. Notably, those with fixed mindsets are similar to unhealthy perfectionists in that they avoid making mistakes because they interpret mistakes as indications that they have reached their maximum potential. They view effort as a weakness (for if you had enough intelligence or talent, they reason, one would not need to exert effort), and as a result, they fear failure and are unwilling to persist in difficult tasks.

As we should try to demonstrate to our children and teenagers how to achieve and succeed in balanced and healthy ways. How we live our lives will model to the next generation how to live in positive ways. Naecker shares that those who healthfully strive for excellence embody what Dweck calls a growth mindset, or a belief that talent, skills, and intelligence can be developed through persistence and effort. Unlike unhealthy perfectionists, those with growth mindsets are focused on mastering challenging material or activities, and while they may not relish in mistakes and failure, they view them as helpful, necessary, and important opportunities for learning. In a word, children and adults with growth mindsets are resilient. Naecker states that clearly, we would do well to help ourselves and children develop a resilient, achievement-oriented growth mindset and quiet our perfectionistic fixed-mindsets. Fortunately, Dweck offers straightforward, effective strategies:

1. Become familiar with unhealthy (fixed-mindset) versus healthy (growth-mindset) talk, and challenge fixed-mindset talk when you hear it. A fixed-mindset voice might say things like: "I'm no good at this"; This would have been easier if you really had talent"; Other people don't have to work hard to understand this. If I'm working hard, I must not be smart enough"; "You've made a mistake in front of everyone – now they all know that you aren't talented"; and "What if I fail?" A growth mindset voice sounds like: "You made a mistake, which isn't

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"Mindfulness has emerged as a popular strategy to not only address problems with anxiety and depression, but avoid them altogether"

(Dr. D. Tracey, 2016, Western Sydney University)

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always fun, but it taught you a lot!"; "I don't know how to do this...yet"; "This was my first try – I'll get there eventually with practice"; and "I can always get better."

2. Encourage yourself and your child to think about setbacks, criticism, and failure differently. Instead of thinking of mistakes and failures as signs that you are lacking, choose to interpret them signs that you are learning and as indicators that you may need to change your strategy or increase your effort. Reframe your goals: Make progress, not perfection.
3. Recognize and challenge impossibly high standards and realize when you or your child are overestimating of the cost of mistakes/failure.
4. Be a role model to your children and challenge yourself to make mistakes! Face difficult activities/material, experience setbacks, learn from failures, and try again.

By recognizing and challenging the ever-present messages we and our children receive about success, accomplishments, failure, mistakes, we can help ourselves and our families become healthier, resilient, and better able to learn and achieve.