

# Perfectionism



Perfectionism is desiring to be perfect, fearing imperfection, and believing that being “perfect” will bring acceptance as a person. Healthy levels of perfectionism, that do not interfere with the ability to move through daily life with self-esteem and self-worth intact can prove beneficial for overall development.

Unhealthy levels of perfectionism can result in feelings of never being good enough that wear away at self-esteem and self-worth. As the pressure to remain engaged at the highest levels drive a constant need to produce and achieve, perfectionism can backfire, significantly limiting success and causing distress.

## Perfectionism Explained

Striving for excellence can be an important part of healthy development. When coupled with the ability to move on to what’s next, healthy levels of perfectionism can serve as encouragement for students to do the best they can given the time and resources available to them. As students begin to experience difficulty accepting mistakes and outcomes that are shy of their goals, unhealthy levels of perfectionism can creep in and become disruptive and problematic.

Approximately 20% of high-ability children experience perfectionism to the degree it causes them problems in school and in daily life. For gifted and twice-exceptional students who may already do battle with anxiety and/or depression, perfectionism can heavily influence their success and wellbeing over the long haul.

Mistakes can be devastating, and the fear of failure can take on significant meaning for the student as they view it as a sign of a personal defect. In cases where the emphasis is on performance over all else, students can become so dissatisfied

with themselves that they may be unable to move forward or even function. At this point, unhealthy perfectionism takes center stage in their lives, and parents and teachers often struggle with knowing how to help.

As students becomes less and less acceptable to themselves, perfectionism can wreak havoc on their fragile self esteem. It is fueled by the emotions, anxiety and shame and can hijack a student’s ability to perform academically and thrive socially and emotionally. This vicious cycle can be very difficult to overcome. But help is available.

Parents, teachers and school counselors should watch closely for signs of unhealthy perfectionism, depression, low self-esteem, and underachievement, and seek help from qualified professionals who are essential to understanding how the child is developing physically, neurologically, emotionally and socially. In addition, they can point to appropriate strategies to help the student overcome the destruction perfectionism can cause.

It is important to understand that perfectionism commonly coincides with depression, anxiety disorders, and eating disorders, and without appropriate support, the student can experience significant distress and health issues.



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# Characteristics of Perfectionism

Because some level of perfectionism is part of normal development, it can be difficult to know when and if it has become problematic. Unhealthy levels of perfectionism may show up as sudden changes in behavior, emotional meltdowns, social withdrawal, irritability, anger, fears and worries, negative self-talk, school refusal, and trouble making friends.

Additional signals to watch for in students include:

- High levels of sensitivity, self-awareness, and emotions
- Unreasonably high expectations of themselves or others
- Unusual sense of justice, moral judgment, or altruism
- Overwhelming fear of making mistakes
- Over-committing to unrealistic goals
- Significant sensitivity to criticism
- Compulsive attention to detail
- High levels of procrastination
- Strong feelings of disgust with oneself
- Volatility, anxiety and shame

## Supporting Students Dealing with Perfectionism

High-ability students may have internal conflicts related to their performance that often are beyond their ability to manage. Working closely with clinical psychologists, therapists and counselors who have expertise in giftedness, twice-exceptionality and perfectionism can prove beneficial. Along with support, patience, and time, students need opportunities to break free from the anxieties associated with how well they are doing in order to fully utilize their talents and reach their potential.

Establishing home and school environments built around acceptance and encouragement can offer safe spaces for these students who need to feel loved and understood. Simply knowing how much parents and teachers care about them and their happiness can go a long way. Reinforcing all of the wonderful things about the student as an individual and asking them how specific reactions make them feel can begin to open pathways for honest discussions and plans for moving forward.

Rather than aiming to obliterate perfectionistic tendencies, encouraging students to channel their perfectionism into what they care about most can be very beneficial. In addition, parents and teachers can model healthy approaches toward the achievement of goals, be aware of their own predispositions toward compulsive excellence, refrain from setting unreasonably high and inflexible standards, emphasize the effort and process over the end-result, express support and encouragement even if goals are not met, and focus on positive self-talk.

## Resources for Parents & Educators

- 2e News
- Bright & Quirky
- Davidson Institute for Talent Development
- GHF Gifted Learners (formerly Gifted Homeschoolers Forum)
- Hoagies' Gifted Education
- Let's Talk 2e
- National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC)
- Renzulli Center at University of Connecticut
- Roeper Review
- Summit Center
- Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG)

## About Summit Center

Summit Center, founded by Drs. Daniel B. Peters and Susan Daniels, provides educational and comprehensive assessments, consultations, and counseling for children, teens, adults, and families. We work with clients who are neurodiverse, gifted, talented, twice-exceptional (have both gifted and less developed abilities), and/or are asynchronous in their development. Summit Center has assembled an expert team of professionals and specialists dedicated to using a strengths-based approach to help our clients reach their fullest developmental potential.