

Top Tips for parents in **managing perfectionism** in their child

What is perfectionism?

This is often something associated with typical 'high-achievers' which we often don't think to question. After all, what's wrong with having high expectations for yourself?

However, there is a fine line between always striving for our best, which we might call positive or 'adaptive' perfectionism, and dysfunctional or 'maladaptive' perfectionist tendencies.

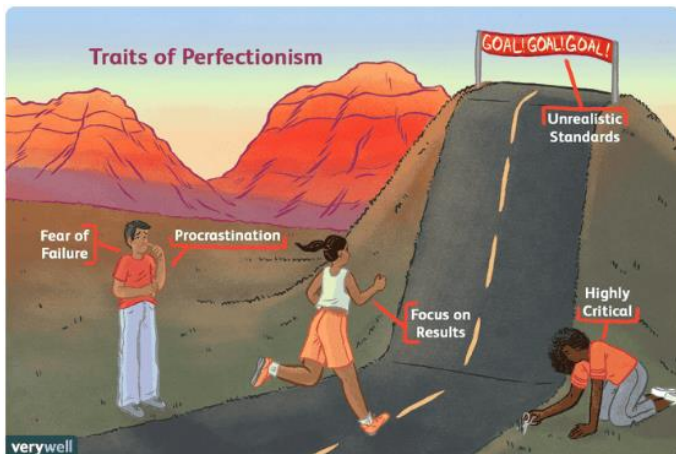
Adaptive perfectionists often work really hard for their success and enjoy the opportunity to be challenged in their learning and grow from their mistakes, which means they use these traits as a strength; maladaptive perfectionists on the other hand are driven by the fear of failure which can quickly become an unhealthy attitude to adopt.

If we think about the psychology of maladaptive perfectionism:

People can often become perfectionists in order to receive the approval of others, and even themselves. Society tends to view errors as a sign of failure rather than growth. And so errors are viewed as a sign of inferiority leading to disapproval.

Perfectionism is ultimately driven by fear: fear of making mistakes, fear of disapproval, and fear of not meeting impossible standards, all to avoid or minimize shame, blame, and judgment which can also be self-inflicted. These tendencies have increased substantially in recent times because of a greater sense of academic competition, along with the pervasive presence of social media and the harmful social comparisons it elicits.

Maladaptive perfectionism, in its most extreme form, is therefore strongly linked to depression, anxiety, and other disorders, because it makes the person feel like they are never good enough.



How can we identify traits of maladaptive perfectionism in others?

- They often set unrealistically high expectations for themselves.
- They are quick to find faults in their work and are overly critical of mistakes.
- They tend to procrastinate on larger tasks or projects. This is often not driven by laziness or lack of motivation, but instead by their pre-emptive fear of failure. Maladaptive perfectionists may therefore often miss important deadlines in an attempt to get their work 'just right'.
- They may start the same task over and over, deleting any work they had previously done on it.
- They shrug off compliments and never celebrate any of their successes.
- Instead, they might look to particular people in their lives for specific approval or validation. This can then lead to low self-esteem if they don't get the approval they are desperately looking for, as self-worth is often tied to a sense of achievement.
- All of the above tendencies may lead to consistent low levels of energy, and high levels of stress for the individual.

How can parents help?

- **Try to avoid asking for class/ peer comparisons when talking to your child about marked or assessed work.** This includes asking how some of their friends may have performed, or where their mark relates with regard to any class averages. Comparisons like this can often be harmful to a child's self-esteem as it can feel as though their own individual achievement has been overlooked.
- **Where possible, use 'growth mind-set' language with your child when offering your own feedback.** This is something which students here at Kendrick have done a lot of work on in school so they should be familiar with this term. Using this sort of mind-set involves focusing on opportunities for development or 'growth' in their learning from some of the mistakes they may have made, rather than focusing on any sense of 'failure' or disappointment.

Some examples of phrases which show a 'growth mind-set':

- "Struggling on this assignment doesn't mean you can't get it, it means you're learning it"
 - "This is just a measure of what you can do right now. It is not a measure of what you can ever do."
 - "You're improving a lot, consider what you know now that you didn't a few weeks ago!"
 - "What opportunities are there to learn from this assessment?"
 - "You'll get there. What should you now focus on in order to continue progressing?"
- **Try to gently challenge some of the perfectionist 'rules' which you may have noticed your child has developed and see if you can work together to establish a more healthy framework for them to work with.** For example, if your child always proofreads an essay 3 times before they hand it in, see if you can encourage them to only proofread it once. This still allows them a chance to use their perfectionism, but in a more positive or 'adaptive' way. Another frequent problem we experience with some of our students is that they have started the work, but don't want to submit it to their teachers to be marked. Please always try to encourage your child to submit what they have so that their teacher can offer some feedback. Some feedback is much better for their long-term progress than none at all! Their teacher can then also specifically see the areas they are struggling on, and can engage with them more directly to help.
 - **Help your child in knowing how to ask for help.** Having a template email to help structure your child's request for help can often aid with that first step of approaching a teacher. Please do email me at mheath@kendrick.reading.sch.uk if you would like help in forming these templates. As well, please try to encourage your child to consider someone at school who they feel comfortable going to when help is needed. This doesn't have to be the person who is directly involved. For example, if they are having trouble with History, they don't just have to email their History teacher if they feel uncomfortable doing so. Instead, could they email their Tutor or Head of Year to ask for their help? Finally, please try to reinforce the message at home that knowing when to ask for help is a strength and an important learning skill we all must develop. It is by no means a sign of failure and can really help a student with managing their wellbeing rather than suffering in silence.
 - **Model healthy self-talk:** Many children with perfectionist personalities may well have learned these behaviours at home. You can help by modelling healthy self-talk to teach children self-compassion instead of self-criticism. Instead of saying, "I'm such an idiot I forgot to go to the bank today", say things like, "I forgot to go to the bank today before they closed. I'll try to do better tomorrow."