



The Mind Hub

By



Topic: Perfectionism in Children: When Doing Their Best Becomes Too Much

We all want children to take pride in their work, strive for excellence, and feel good about doing their best. But sometimes, that drive for success can turn into something more rigid, and even painful for some children.

Perfectionism can sneak up in the form of endless erasing, tears over small mistakes, or refusing to start a project unless it can be “perfect”. What starts as healthy motivation can quickly become overwhelming anxiety and avoidance.

As parents and school team, understanding the signs of perfectionism, and how to gently reframe it, helps children build confidence and a healthier relationship with learning.

What is Perfectionism?

Perfectionism is a belief that anything less than perfect is unacceptable. It is not just wanting to do well, it is a feeling deep distress when things are not flawless

There are generally two sides of perfectionism:

- Healthy striving: a desire to do one’s best, motivated by curiosity and pride in learning.
- Unhealthy perfectionism: a fear-driven need to meet unrealistically high standards, often tied to self-worth.

Children who struggle with unhealthy perfectionism often believe:

- “If I make a mistake, I’m a failure.”
- “People will be disappointed in me if it is not perfect.”
- “It is safer not to try than to mess up.”

How to recognise perfectionism in children

Perfectionism can look different depending on age and personality. Some children may be outwardly anxious, others may seem withdrawn or controlling. Here are common signs to look for at home or in the classroom:

1. Emotional Signs

- a. Intense frustration or tears over small errors
- b. Frequent self-criticism
- c. Fear of making mistakes or being judged
- d. Difficulty accepting feedback or trying new things

2. Behavioural Signs

- a. Erasing or redoing work repeatedly
- b. Avoiding tasks unless they feel confident they will succeed
- c. Spending excessive time on simple assignments
- d. Comparing themselves constantly to others

3. Physical or Social Signs

- a. Trouble sleeping or stomach-aches related to performance stress
- b. Reluctance to participate in class or group work
- c. Conflict with peers over “doing it right”

Recognising these patterns early helps adults intervene before perfectionism begins to affect a child’s confidence and happiness.

Tips for parents and teachers: supporting the perfectionist child

1. Demonstrate and Normalise Mistakes

- a. Talk about your own mistakes openly. Share what you learned and how you handled them. Children need to see that errors are a normal, and essential, part of growth.
2. Shift Praise from Outcome to Effort
 - a. Instead of “you got 100%, you are so smart!”, try “you worked hard on that, your efforts paid off!”. Praising effort, strategies, and curiosity helps children value learning over perfectionism.
 3. Teach “Good Enough” Thinking
 - a. Encourage children to ask themselves, “is this good enough to show what I know?”. Introduce phrases like “progress over perfection”, or “done is better than perfect” to reduce pressure.
 4. Help Children Challenge Unhelpful Thoughts
 - a. Teach them to notice perfectionistic thinking, and replace it with balanced thoughts (“I can do my best and still make mistakes, that is how I learn”).
 5. Create Safe Spaces to Fail
 - a. Provide low-stakes opportunities to try, fail, and try again, whether it is in art, science, or sports. Celebrate the process, not just the product.
 6. Monitor Your Own Expectations
 - a. Children are observant. If they sense that approval or pride is only tied to perfect results, they internalise that pressure. Show consistent warmth, support, and encouragement even when things do not go as planned.
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❖ **FAQs**

1. *Q. Is perfectionism always bad?*

- A. Not at all! A healthy level of striving can motivate students to set goals and take pride in their accomplishments. It only becomes a problem when fear of failure causes distress, avoidance, or self-criticism.
2. *Q. My child spends hours on homework. Should I step in?*
- A. Yes, gently. Sit with your child and ask what makes the work feel hard to finish. Sometimes they need permission to stop when “it’s good enough”. Teach time limits and help them prioritise effort over flawless results.
3. *Q. How can I talk to perfectionist child about mistakes without making them defensive?*
- A. Start with empathy, “it sounds like you really want this to be perfect, that shows you care.” Then add reassurance, “everyone makes mistakes even grown ups, let’s figure out what we can learn from this one.”
4. *Q. Could perfectionism be linked to anxiety or learning challenges?*
- A. Yes, sometimes perfectionism develops as a way to manage underlying anxiety, low self-esteem, or uncertainty. A child who feels anxious about school or social situations might cling to “being perfect” as a way to feel safe or in control. In cases of children with learning difficulties, children may become perfectionistic because they are aware of their challenges and overcompensate by working extra hard. Over time, this can lead to exhaustion and frustration.
5. *How can teachers support perfectionist students in the classroom?*
- A. Teachers play a powerful role in helping perfectionist students feel safe to take risks. Consider:
- a. Emphasising growth over grades
 - b. Normalise mistakes
 - c. Setting clear, realistic expectations

- d. Offering structured feedback
- e. Providing extra time or support

When perfectionism is met with understanding rather than pressure, students learn that it is okay to be human, and that growth often comes from the messy middle, not the flawless finish.

Final Thoughts

Perfectionism often comes from a beautiful place, a child's desire to do well and make others proud. But when that desire turns into fear, it can rob them of joy, creativity, and confidence.

As caring adults, we can help children see that mistakes are not proof of failure, they are part of growth. By demonstrating self-compassion, celebrating progress, and creating safe spaces to try again, we teach children their worth does not depend on perfect performance.

If you have any concerns about your child's stress levels or would like further resources, don't hesitate to reach out to the school psychologist.

- The Mind Hub, by Marina Stavrou

