

PARENTING MATTERS

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Newsletter

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With the promise of summer just around the corner, we are heading into the final weeks of school and many high school students are having to focus on more than just the Canucks winning the Stanley Cup and starting a great tan.

I have presented two more workshops on Parents Supporting Their Anxious Child, to PACs at **Cove Cliff Elementary** and **Hastings Parent Participation Pre-School**. There were many great questions, and an interesting theme emerged as a parenting concern; children who are perfectionist in nature. Parents were quite savvy to pick up that often, a child who is a worry-wart can have strong tendencies to want to do everything right or not bother trying!

I hope to offer some information that parents can be mindful of.

Hope you all enjoy a safe and relaxing summer!

Key points to Helping the Perfectionist to Function

Anxiety has many faces. Most people wouldn't think perfectionism is a trait typically associated with a "fear based" condition. However, for some people, the need to be in control or strive for unrealistic expectations can be a source of frustration, stress and inner tension. Perfectionism can hinder a child's natural curiosity to learn about their world, as perfectionists are not natural risk takers. This can often translate in their school life as being underachievers, because they are afraid to try anything new.

What makes perfectionism hard to beat in our society is that we promote it all through our life span. The sense of accomplishment is a core part of Western Society: report cards all through school, rewards and accolades for the top students, parents bragging about their child who is doing well, fierce academic competition to get into Universities, the perfect hostess, the perfect home- the list goes on.

Joan Franklin Smutny writes that children who are perfectionists tend to:

- Avoid trying new things for fear of failure
- Procrastinate and leave work unfinished out of fear it won't be good enough
- Focus on mistakes, rather than on what they did well
- Set unrealistic goals and then condemn themselves when they don't achieve them
- Have trouble accepting criticism
- Find it hard to laugh at themselves

- Focus on end products, rather than on the process of learning
- Approach assignments with an inflexibility that insists on one “right” way to do them
- Judge themselves severely whenever they get a grade below an “A”
- Lose their former enthusiasm for learning because of an obsession with what “good work” should look like
- Underachieve because of an inability to complete projects considered less than “perfect”

In some cases, perfectionism can lead to depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, eating disorders and panic disorders.

How to Help Loosen the Perfect Grip

- First and foremost, show your child/youth that you value them more for who they are as people than for what they can do
- Help children separate themselves from their grades
- Normalize mistakes
- Help them set realistic goals
- Involve them in activities that aren't graded or judged
- Encourage a sense of humour
- For younger children, get them to play with finger paints, paint or wet sand- these are materials that can't be controlled well enough, so they allow for the child to experience a non-perfect product in a play atmosphere
- When a child/youth gets a good grade on a paper, resist the urge to say, "You're great," instead say, "You're a good thinker" or "What got you interested in this?"
- For teens and adults, challenge their belief that it is important to be perfect. For instance, what are the advantages and the disadvantages to being perfect? Get them to write it down. It will highlight some "faulty thinking," for example, that stress is not a by-product of being perfect.
- Have your child read biographies which demonstrate how successful people experienced and learned from their mistakes
- Share your own mistakes and model the lessons learned from mistakes
- Help your child learn that there is more than one way to do almost anything
- Read younger children stories about Nobody's Perfect

- Offer support verbally and nonverbally. Empathize with the child: "This stuff is hard, isn't it?"
- If your child didn't do well on a test, ask them "What can you do next time to make it come out the way you want?"
- Keep giving your child lots of opportunities to enjoy life, without strings attached

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