

# 8 PERFECTIONISM IN GIFTED CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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**M**ost professionals, as well as the general public, regard perfectionism as psychologically unhealthy. Perfectionism covers a variety of issues and has repeatedly been cited as a major counseling focus for gifted children and adolescents (Adderholdt-Elliott, 1991; Kerr, 1991; Silverman, 1990b; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982), especially when addressing underachievement and emotional turmoil (Pyryt, 1994). In actuality, however, perfectionism must be seen as a potent force capable of bringing either intense frustration and paralysis or intense satisfaction and creative contribution, depending on how it is channeled.

Perfectionism is a combination of thoughts and behaviors generally associated with high standards or expectations for one's own performance (Burns, 1980; Hamachek, 1978). Research and clinical studies of gifted children and adolescents draw three conclusions about perfectionism: (1) as

a group, gifted students are perfectionistic; (2) they seem to be more perfectionistic than average-ability peers; and (3) their perfectionism can be a positive force for high achievement. (Adderholdt, 1984; Ford, 1989; Hollingworth, 1926; Karnes & Oeher-Stinnett, 1986; Lovecky, 1994; Oden, 1968; Roeper, 1982; Silverman, 1990a; Whitmore, 1980). This chapter briefly describes the construct of perfectionism and its measurement and summarizes what is known about perfectionism among gifted children and adolescents. It concludes with several recommendations for intervention and support.

### The Construct of Perfectionism

A review of the literature highlights the lack of agreement as to perfectionism's inherent nature. While several personality theorists view perfectionism as a healthy and salient part of human development (Adler, 1973; Dabrowski, 1972; Lazarfeld, 1991; Maslow, 1970), others view it as negative and destructive (Burns, 1980; Pacht, 1984).

Several researchers have proposed that perfectionism be viewed from a multidimensional perspective. Hamacheck (1978) viewed perfectionism both as a manner of behaving and as a manner of thinking about the behavior and described two types of perfectionism, normal and neurotic, that form a continuum of perfectionistic behaviors. Healthy perfectionists are those who "derive a very real sense of pleasure from the labors of a painstaking effort and who feel free to be less precise as the situation permits" (p. 27). Neurotic perfectionists, on the other hand, "are unable to feel satisfaction because in their own eyes they never seem to do things good enough to warrant that feeling" (p. 27).

Bransky, Jenkins-Friedman, and Murphy (1987) also discussed two types of perfectionism, distinguishing between enabling perfectionism, which empowers, and disabling perfectionism, which cripples. Like Bransky et al., Hamacheck identified six specific, overlapping behaviors associated with perfectionism that describe both normal and neurotic perfectionists with the difference lying in the duration and intensity of these behaviors. They include: (1)

depression, (2) a nagging "I should" feeling, (3) shame and guilt feelings, (4) face-saving behavior, (5) shyness and procrastination, and (6) self-deprecation.

Pacht (1984) disagreed with these multidimensional theories and viewed perfectionism as inherently destructive. Pacht agreed with Burns' (1980) definition of perfectionism as a compulsive and unrelenting strain toward impossible goals. According to Pacht and Burns, perfectionists are those who measure their self-worth in terms of accomplishment and productivity; the drive to excel is self-defeating. Perfectionistic tendencies are distortions in one's thinking that can be related to a variety of psychological maladjustments. Reviewing the literature, Pacht found perfectionism to be associated with depression, eating disorders, writer's block, migraines, sexual dysfunction, obsessive-compulsive personality disorders, dysmorphophobia, suicide, and Type-A coronary-prone behavior. Furthermore, perfectionism has also been associated with underachievement (Lind, 1992), academic procrastination (Ferrari, 1992), and career obstacles and failure (Connolly, 1994).

However, one cannot conclude from the research literature that perfectionism causes these conditions or that it is necessarily destructive. Hamacheck (1978) viewed these types of linkages as consequences only of neurotic perfectionism, while normal perfectionism is linked to healthy consequences. Likewise, Whitmore (1980) believed that perfectionism could either be a positive force for achievement or a negative force for underachievement.

Many hypotheses exist about the causes of perfectionism. Dabrowski (1972), Kerr (1991), and Silverman (1990a) have maintained that perfectionism is inborn in some individuals and that the pressure of high standards comes from within the child. Others believe that perfectionistic children have perfectionistic parents (Rowell, 1986), have parents who are more interested in their performance than in their learning (Ablard & Parker, 1997), are first-born or only children (Leman, 1985), or have dysfunctional families (Brophy, 1986; Crespi, 1990). Additional reasons given for unhealthy perfectionism include "hothousing" or giving babies intensive, early academic training (Elkind, 1981), pervasive messages from the media to be perfect, and pressure from teachers and peers to be the best (Barrow & Moore, 1983).

## Measurement of Perfectionism

Just as elusive as a consensus on the definitions and dimensions of perfectionism is its measurement. Throughout the 1980s, the Burns Perfectionism Scale (Burns, 1980) was widely used; its unidimensional focus is on personal standards and concern over mistakes. Hewitt and Flett (1989) developed the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, which emphasizes the interpersonal aspects of perfectionism: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism.

Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate (1990) developed a perfectionism questionnaire, also called the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, which examines the intrapersonal nature of perfectionism based on Hamachek's (1978) construct of perfectionism. The major dimensions of this measure include concern over making mistakes, high personal standards, the perception of high parental criticism, the doubting of the quality of one's actions, the perception of high parental expectations, and a high preference for order and organization (Frost et al., p. 449). The results of two studies (Parker & Stumpf, 1995; Schuler & Siegle, 2000) support the use of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale to measure perfectionism in academically talented children and adolescents.

## Perfectionism and Gifted Adolescents

Case studies and anecdotal records have been the main source of data on perfectionism in children and adolescents, while empirical studies have focused primarily on adults and college students (Adderholdt, 1984; Adkins, 1994; Brown, 1993; Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1993; Mosher, 1995). Few empirical studies, however, have been done with gifted children and adolescents who are perfectionistic (Bellamy, 1993; Bransky, 1989; Orange, 1997; Parker, 1997, 2000; Parker & Mills, 1996; Parker & Stumpf, 1995; Schuler, 1997; Schuler & Siegle, 2000).

Bransky (1989) reported that perfectionistic junior high students see themselves as the principle agents of their academic out-

comes and take more responsibility for them. Baker (1996) and Roberts and Lovett (1994) also found statistically significant higher levels of perfectionism among gifted adolescents in grades 7-9 than academic achievers and nongifted students. Schuler and Siegle (2000) reported perfectionistic tendencies in all socioeconomic and racial/ethnic statuses for gifted students in grades 6, 7, and 8. Schuler (2000) noted that gifted adolescents perceive perfectionism as both a helpful and harmful influence in their relationships, schoolwork, and view of their future. Baker, as part of her study on stressors of the academically gifted, stated that exceptional girls in ninth grade report statistically significantly higher levels of perfectionism than average-ability girls. Girls in general may show more perfectionistic tendencies than boys (Kramer, 1988), and, indeed, the level of perfectionism in gifted girls increases as they go from elementary to high school (Kline & Short, 1991).

There are probably a number of reasons underlying this association between giftedness and perfectionism (Silverman, 1999). Among them:

- The lofty goals for which gifted students reach are often abstract concepts that require the kind of facility with conceptual thinking that are the hallmark of gifted students.
- Gifted children set standards appropriate to their mental age although the asynchronous nature of their abilities (e.g., lagging fine motor skills) may frustrate their efforts.
- Gifted children often have older friends and set their goals accordingly.
- From their earliest years, gifted children have tended to be successful in almost everything they have tried because they have been underchallenged and, paradoxically, become failure-avoidant as a consequence (Dweck, 2000).
- When students find the work they are expected to do to be unchallenging, they may strive for perfect performance instead of mastery. Artificial rewards, such as grades, become the only satisfaction possible.
- Even when challenges are appropriate, as in specialized programs, perfectionistic teachers and competitive peers may exacerbate the situation (Adderholdt-Elliott, 1991).

- Finally, introverts, who represent half the gifted population (Gallagher, 1990), tend to be strong perfectionists (Dauber & Benbow, 1990).

## Recommendations

Only with high goals will there be high accomplishment. Whether perfectionism is perceived as an innate drive, a learned behavior, or a combination of both, there are many ways to address its negative manifestations (Adderholdt & Goldberg, 1999; Cohen & Frydenberg, 1996; Nugent, 2000; Schuler, 1999; Silverman, 1999). Parents and teachers should be cautious about viewing perfectionism as unhealthy. Gifted children and adolescents need assistance from parents, teachers, and counselors to understand that wanting to achieve at a high level, having a drive to excel, and enjoying order and organization can be positive assets, while learning to set priorities, taking time to reflect on the value of mistakes and relaxation, and pursuing one's passion will reduce the stress that results from unhealthy perfectionism.

Perfectionism that translates into trying again and again leads to success; perfectionism that results in paralysis, avoidance, anxiety attacks, and withdrawal guarantees failure. By helping gifted students to take pleasure in their accomplishments and to see their setbacks as learning opportunities, by praising them for their efforts and determination, rather than being "smart" or "talented"; and by encouraging them to channel their efforts into what they care about most, rather than trying to do everything equally well, adults can help them toward passion, progress, creative achievement, and celebration of their attainment.

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