

## **Helping Gifted Kids Manage Perfectionism**

**“Put forth your best effort.” Or Give it your best effort.** ----It is better to encourage children to work their hardest with this phrase. By doing so, the emphasis is on the learning process instead of the product. “Do your best” is often heard as “perform perfectly” by a gifted child.

“Gifted students need to develop an appreciation for the values that accompany the struggle to learn,” from *Teaching Gifted Kids in the Regular Classroom*, by Susan Winebrenner.

### **Classroom Intervention**

**Creating Classroom Culture** – The classroom should be a friendly, supportive learning environment. Teachers need to present themselves as helpful instructors concerned with promoting student learning.

**Sharing of Self** – Gifted students and their teachers often share similar traits (Adderholt-Elliott 1991). Teachers may share some of their personal struggles with perfectionism and the coping strategies they have used to manage these tendencies. A group discussion on how other students experiences can also be very beneficial.

**Encourage Active Listening** – Use active listening techniques (facial expression, eye contact, body posture, verbal and non-verbal feedback) to encourage students to share their concerns. Also, to show understanding toward these concerns are important and, if necessary, develop a plan to address the issues.

**Self-Evaluation** – Involving students in their own evaluations. This empowers the students when the grading process is no longer a mystery.

**Bibliotherapy and Humor** – Using books to address the affective needs of these students. Example: “The Crocodile in the Bedroom” from Arnold Lobel’s *Fables* (1990) can promote a discussion of the positive and negative effects of perfectionism. A crocodile chooses to stay indoors with his perfect floral wallpaper instead of working outdoors in his imperfect garden. As a consequence, he becomes sickly.

**Dramatherapy** – Creating skits and role-playing activities to better understand the students concerns and issues.

**Journaling** – This enables the student to express ideas, thoughts, and issues in a non-judgmental way. These entries may or may not be shared and open to discussion.

**Art Activities** – Drawing and creating in this modality may aid a perfectionist student away from self-criticism to exploring the joy of expression, exploration and creativity in its own right.

**Excellence vs. Perfection** – Discuss the difference between excellence and perfection. Brainstorm with the students about where our ideas of perfectionism come originate. Make a collage with one half representing each concept.

**Creative Problem-Solving and Critical Thinking** – Using games, puzzles, questions, activities, projects, etc. to develop these skills.

**Goal Setting** – Use a Goal-Setting Log designed to help students learn that short-term goal successes accumulate into long-term goal success (see attached).

**Learning Contracts** – Design and implement a contract with the student to encourage him/her to complete assignment.

### **Suggestions for Teachers and Parents**

Teach the student from an early age that learning is a struggle, and what one already knows represents memory, not learning.

Challenge them to be courageous and take a risk by trying a difficult subject, task, or project.

Establish the expectation that mistakes or errors are normal, expected, and often a necessary aspect of the learning process.

Provide the student with a calm, uncluttered, and structured environment.

Enhance the student's self-confidence by creating opportunities for success.

Write down or speak with the student privately about his/her strengths and accomplishments.

Never compare students.

Involve the student in setting realistic goals and standards for him/herself.

Student self-evaluations are important.

Teach problem solving skills and effective strategies to deal with stress.

Listen to what the student has to say.

Support the student at all times.

## **Suggestions for Parents from Teachers**

Above all, their child needs to experience unconditional love and respect.

Help their child appreciate his/her perfection.

Teach child to set priorities for him/her and to differentiate between activities that may benefit from perfectionism and ones where it is not important.

Help parents understand the dangers of placing too much pressure on their child to be “perfect.”

Emphasize that high standards are important and support child in maintaining these, but stress the difference between excellence and perfectionism. Also, teach their child the importance of not imposing these standards on other individuals.

Encourage parents to accept the mistakes made by their child and to help focus the child’s energies on future successes.

Promote the idea of developing resilience and perseverance by modeling coping skills and problem solving techniques.

Guide parents in acknowledging, but not judging, their child’s negative emotions.

Caution parents about comparing children.

When necessary, ask parents to examine their views on competitiveness, and to decrease the emphasis on winning.

If a child is having a difficult time expressing his/her self, suggest a journal exchange. For examples, a parent writes a thought in a journal then puts it in a special place (on or under child’s pillow). The child then responds in the journal and puts the journal in a special place for the parent (on bed or involving pillow). The exchange of ideas then continues. This can help the parent with discovering issues or problems the child is experiencing and promotes parent-child bonding.

Lastly, yet very important, to help their child hold onto his/her dreams and ideals, and to believe in the child’s ability to reach them.