Are you living with a perfectionist?

Many children are afflicted by the curse of perfectionism. It is not lack of ability, opportunity, timidity or even laziness that holds many kids back.

Rather it is a deep-sealed unwillingness to expose themselves as temporary failures while they learn, that stops many children from really achieving their full potential. This fear of failure is strongest amongst first borns, our most prolific population cohort, so it is little wonder that perfectionism is one of our greatest problems in Australian schools.

The curse of perfectionism means that some children will only star or achieve in areas where they are certain of success. So they tend to narrow their options by sticking to the safest path. It is little wonder that first borns tend to be less innovative and adventurous than later born children. The road to innovation and adventure is littered with uncertainty, which increases the likelihood of making errors.

Perfectionists are hard to live with. They make demanding partners and anxious children. They can be critical of those around them just as they are highly critical of themselves. Their attention to detail can be infuriating. Perfectionists usually want to be better than anyone else.

It may seem strange but some children need to make more mistakes. We should encourage some kids to make more errors, spell more words incorrectly, get more sums wrong, make a mess sometimes when they write, break a dish or two as they unpack the dishwasher, set the table with the knife and fork upside down, leave marks on the floor when they wipe up the mess or forget to feed the cat once in while. Children benefit from being released from the pressure of always having to do well. When children learn that mistakes are quite acceptable they are more likely to stretch themselves and try new areas of endeavour or use their own initiative and not worry if they mess up.

Help perfectionists understand that they don’t have to do everything perfectly. Sometimes near enough is good enough, particularly if you are trying new endeavours. Learning to spell, writing a story or playing a game all have healthy margins for error. The trouble with some children is that they believe that they only count in the eyes of others when they are perfect, look perfect or can do the perfect job. These people need to learn that doing a good enough job is acceptable much of the time.

Are you a perfectionist?

Rate the following questions: 0 for never, 1 for seldom, 2 for often, 3 for always.

1. Do errors irritate you?
2. Do you always feel driven to do your best?
3. Do you find it difficult to enjoy or celebrate your success?
4. Do you procrastinate? Do you constantly put things off until ideal conditions?
5. Do you like to be in control of what’s happening?
6. Do you get frustrated by others who don’t work the same way as you?
7. Are you a neat nick – always tidying and cleaning up after you?
8. Do you constantly apologise to others because you could do better?

Scoring:

- 8-12: mild perfectionism
- 13-20: medium perfectionism
- 21-24: extreme perfectionism

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Vitamins for parents

Teach your child to aim for excellence not perfection.

Excellence has room for errors but perfection has too many strings attached. Focus on the process of what children do rather than focus on the results. This helps release the pressure on perfectionists to perform to their best all the time.

Bright idea

Celebrate mistakes

Children who are perfectionists need loosening up so that they can lighten up, stretch themselves and take a few risks. As first borns tend to take their behavioural cues from their parents, it really helps if you can drop your guard and make a few mistakes. Wear a funny hat occasionally, drop a plate while emptying the dishwasher, let the sink overflow, forget to put petrol in the car, leave your clothes lying around the house or whatever it takes to show that you mess up too. Sometimes kids see adults as these big people who know it all and who never make mistakes!

Wise & Witty Words

“Aim for success, not perfection. Never give up your right to be wrong, because then you will lose the ability to learn new things and move forward with your life.”

Dr. David M. Burns

“When I approach a child he inspires in me two sentiments: tenderness for what he is; and respect for what he may become.”

Louis Pasteur