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A parent's and guardian's guide to perfectionism

What is perfectionism?

Perfectionism is about the unrealistic expectations that people might have for themselves and for other people in their life. It can feature in lots of different areas of people's lives. Importantly for parents, perfectionism can present itself at any age during childhood and adolescence.

There are several forms of perfectionism. Some people expect themselves to be perfect (self-oriented perfectionism), some people expect other people to be perfect (other-oriented perfectionism), and some people think that other people in their life, like a parent, coach, or teacher, expect them to be perfect (socially prescribed perfectionism).

Everyone has perfectionism to some degree. Some people have high levels of perfectionism. Other people have low levels of perfectionism. Most of us are somewhere in between.

What are the consequences of perfectionism?

If your child/adolescent expects themselves to be perfect, it won't mean they work hard and perform better. It means lots of unnecessary anxiety and worry.

If they expect others to be perfect, it can impact negatively on their relationships (e.g., friendships) and they will feel less supported when they need help.

If they believe that other people expect them to be perfect, they are likely to feel unhappy, stressed, and lonely. This is the worst kind of perfectionism.

How can parents and guardians help?

If you think your son or daughter is having problems with their mental health (e.g., they are upset all the time), you should talk to them about it and may need to see their GP. Young Minds and Student Minds are organisations that also provide information on a range of topics designed to help young people.

If this is not the case, and you simply want to support your child and help them better manage their expectations and feel supported, here are some handy tips:

1. Encourage your child to feel good about things other than how they perform in the classroom (or elsewhere), such as being a kind person.
2. Reward your child's efforts even if things don't go well (or perfectly). Mistakes are part of learning and should be accepted.
3. Emphasise to your child that sometimes things just need to get done. Things can't always be perfect. You can learn a lot by just doing things (rather than trying to do things perfectly).

Other helpful resources and references:

Antony, M. M. & Swinson, R. P. (2009). When perfect isn't good enough: Strategies for coping with perfectionism. Oakland: New Harbinger.

Dobosz, A. M. (2016). The perfectionism workbook for teens: Activities to help you reduce anxiety and get things done. New Harbinger; Workbook edition.

Greenspon, T. (2002). Freeing our families from perfectionism. Minneapolis, MA: Free Spirit Publishing.