



## A teacher'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 teachers, perfectionism can present itself at any age during childhood and adolescence, and can be particularly evident in the classroom.

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 students expect 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. classmates) 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 teachers help?

If you think one of your students is having problems with their mental health (e.g., they are upset all the time), advise them to talk it through with their parents or see their GP. You probably have procedures in your school that you can follow. 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 help your students better manage their expectations and feel supported, here are some handy tips:

1. Encourage your students to focus on things that they have control over, such as how much effort they give, if they are improving or if they are a good classmate.
2. Reward your students' efforts in the classroom even if things don't go well (or perfectly). Mistakes are part of learning and should be accepted.
3. Emphasise to your students 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 perfect things).

## 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.