

insights



Overcoming the curse of perfectionism

by Michael Grose

Perfectionism is a modern curse in families and schools.

Fear of making mistakes holds more children back and is a greater impediment to children reaching their full potential than any school funding issue that tends to make front page news from time to time.

Perfectionists have a deep-seated unwillingness to expose themselves as temporary failures while they learn. This stops them 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 the greatest problems in Australian schools.

Perfectionists are hard to live with

Perfectionists 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. Their inflexibility can be enraging, particularly if you are an easygoing person yourself. Perfectionists usually want to be better than everyone else. You can pick a perfectionist at a thousand metres. They generally:

1. Plan ahead
2. Are neurotic about order
3. Are critical of themselves and others
4. Hate to leave jobs half done; they will stay at work until a task is completed
5. Procrastinate if they are unsure of results
6. Dislike delegating

7. Apologise a lot
8. Are governed by absolutes

How to help perfectionists?

Help perfectionists understand that they don't have to do everything perfectly. In some circumstances there is little margin for error: I expect airline pilots and parachute-makers to do a perfect job! But in reality very few tasks require perfection.

Develop the courage to be imperfect

The great psychologist Rudolph Dreikurs talked about the 'courage to be imperfect'. He believed that people are motivated by one of two forces: the desire to be superior or better than others, or the desire to contribute or be useful. Those motivated by the first force are never content because there will always be someone who can do a better job. Those motivated by the latter find contentment and fulfilment not only because their contributions usually assist others but also because they are not obsessed by doing a perfect or terrific job. Their satisfaction comes from helping, not from achievement.

Get them volunteering

Volunteering is a great antidote to perfectionism. When kids volunteer their time and services they can just focus on getting the job done and be judged by their contribution rather than on how well they did in completing their task.

Help them settle for excellence

I agree with Kevin Leman, author of *The New Birth Order Book*, who claims that perfectionists need to learn to be satisfied with excellence, rather than perfectionism. Now excellence is pretty good. I am not suggesting that they should always settle for second-best efforts. But being a slave to perfectionism means that people become observers rather than participants in many aspects of life, whether at work or in their leisure time. They tend to look on as others get on with what needs to be done.

Loosen them up

If you are living with a perfectionist then you need to help them take themselves less seriously. Humour is something they definitely need. Whatever you do, *don't put pressure on them to succeed* as they already put enough pressure on themselves. Do the opposite and release the pressure valve. Focus on processes not results and help them follow the 80:20 rule – that 80 per cent of results comes from 20 per cent of effort (and achieving that last 20 per cent of results takes *a lot* of effort). There are times when they just don't need to do the perfect job.

Perfectionists! By helping them focus on others rather than themselves you'll help them live more fulfilled and happier lives. Ironically, when they focus on others they invariably grow up being more capable individuals because they'll try a greater range of activities and end up achieving more.



Michael Grose

Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's the author of 10 books for parents including *Thriving!* and the best-selling *Why First Borns Rule the World* and *Last Borns Want to Change It*, and his latest release *Spoonfed Generation: How to raise independent children*.