

# A Parent's Guide to the Social and Emotional Needs of Gifted Learners

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# Objectives

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- Identify intellectual, and personality characteristics of Gifted Children
- Examine the Social Emotional Challenges of Gifted Children
- Distinguish between perfectionism and the pursuit of excellence
- Identify influences that encourage the development of perfectionistic beliefs and behaviors
- Examine the impact of perfectionism
- Look at ways to “get real” and “get well



# Intellectual Characteristics of Gifted Children

- Rapid learning rate
- Exceptional reasoning ability
- Intellectual curiosity/Passion for learning
- Complex Thought Processes
- Early Moral concern/Keen sense of justice
- Vivid imagination
- Powers of concentration
- Capacity for reflection
- Analytical/Creative/Divergent thinking



# Personality Characteristics of Gifted Children

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- Need for understanding/need for precision
- Nonconformity/questioning rules/authority
- Intensity/sensitive/empathy
- Acute self-awareness
- Well-developed sense of humor
- Perseverance
- Intuition/insightfulness
- Tendency toward introversion
- Need for mental stimulation



# Misunderstood Traits of Giftedness (Reframe)

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- Inquisitive...or Challenging?
- Strong-willed...or disrespectful/noncompliant?
- Abstract thinker...or oppositional?
- High expectations...or intolerant, critical?
- Exceptional verbal skills...or show-off/manipulative?
- Highly sensitive...or crybaby?
- High energy...or hyperactive?
- Independent ...or nonconformist?

# Social Emotional Challenges

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- High involvement, preoccupation and need to understand
- Heighten sensitivity
- Asynchronous development
- Feelings and early awareness of being different
- Need for mental stimulation
- Emotional intensity
- Perfectionism and need for precision





# Warning Signs

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- Over scheduling
- Depression or continual boredom
- Intense competitiveness
- Alienation within family or social isolation
- Chronic underachievement
- Evidence of trauma, abuse or great loss
- Inability to express or control anger or aggression
- Disregard for the rights of others or serious violation of rules
- Extreme perfection/anxiety

# Goals and Objectives in Assisting Gifted Development

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- Self-acceptance/recognition of strengths, limitations
- Appreciation of individual identity and differences
- Awareness, understanding and acceptance of others
- Assistance nurturing abilities, social skills and coping
- Conflict resolution and problem-solving skills
- Interpersonal and communication skills



# Goals and Objectives in Assisting Gifted Development

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- Stress reduction techniques
- Decision-making and leadership skills
- Ability to view themselves and events with humor (model)
- Understanding ways, they are different and similar to other children
- Making a connection to other students
  - Mental mates
- Understanding “pursuit of excellence” vs. “pursuit of perfection”.

# Perfectionism in the Gifted Child

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# What is Perfectionism?

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Webster defines it as:

1. the quality or state of being perfect: as freedom from fault or defect
2. the quality or state of being saintly
3. an exemplification of supreme excellence
4. an unsurpassable degree of accuracy

# Perfectionism and the Gifted Student

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- It is estimated that half the population of the U.S. has perfectionist tendencies.
- For gifted students, and proportion is closer to 85%

Source: Davis, p. 435



Researchers seem to agree that most perfectionists fall into two categories – or somewhere in between:

**The Healthy Pursuit of Excellence  
and  
Unhealthy Perfectionism!**

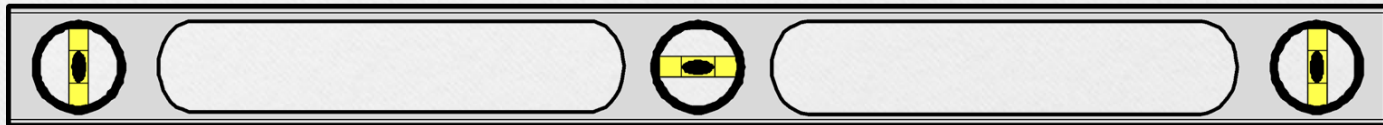
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# Level with us

## How much of a perfectionist are you?

The Healthy Pursuit of Excellence leads one to strive for excellence.

Unhealthy perfectionism takes over one's life and leaves no room for error.



For example, a Healthy Pursuit of Excellence would be content to be a tiny fraction of a bubble off!

An unhealthy perfectionist must have that bubble perfectly centered.



# The Healthy Pursuit of Excellence

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- Healthy Pursuit of Excellence is a positive characteristic that drives high effort and accomplishment.
- Healthy perfectionists derive strong pleasure from their concentrated effort.
- Healthy perfectionists can adjust their work level as the situation requires
- Healthy perfectionism can also be referred to as the pursuit of excellence.

# The Healthy Pursuit of Excellence

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- Unhealthy perfectionists strain compulsively toward impossible goals.
- Unhealthy perfectionists set unrealistic standards for themselves.
- Unhealthy perfectionists see mistakes as evidence of their own unworthiness
- Unhealthy perfectionists live in a constant state of anxiety about making mistakes.



# What Perfectionism is NOT

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- Setting realistic goals for yourself or others
- Getting lost in the “flow” of doing something you love
- Striving for continual growth and improvement  
(wanting to do your best)

## Healthy Pursuit of Excellence

## Unhealthy Perfectionism

Doing the research necessary for a term paper, working hard on it, turning it in on time and feeling good about what you learned

Doing three drafts, staying up two nights in a row, and handing your paper in late because you just had to have it perfect

Studying for a test, taking it with confidence and feeling good about getting a 96

Cramming right up to the last minute, taking the test with sweaty palms, and feeling badly about your 96 because your friend got a 98.

Being willing to try new things, take risks, and learn from your experiences and your mistakes

Avoiding new experiences because you are terrified of making mistakes – especially in public



# Perfectionism vs. Pursuit of Excellence

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## **Perfectionism:**

- Reach for impossible goals
- Devastated by failure
- Dwell on mistakes
- Need for status, superiority
- Resistant to feedback

## **Pursuit of Excellence:**

- Set high standards that are within reach
- Learn from failure
- Correct mistakes
- OK with being #2 if they tried their best
- Open to feedback

# Perfectionism vs. Pursuit of Excellence

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## **Perfectionism:**

- Quest for flawlessness
- Motivated by fear of embarrassment, rejection, intimacy abandonment, or some other negative reaction from others

## **Pursuit of Excellence:**

- Opportunities for growth, learning, improvement, and doing (looking or being) our best
- Motivated by curiosity, a love of learning, or the enjoyment of the process or journey.



# Perfectionism and Fear

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- Failure
- Embarrassment
- Intimacy, being real with others
- Loss (social, status, financial)
- Disappointing or angering others
- Rejection, exclusion, abandonment

# How Perfectionism Can Show Up

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- Comparing yourself to others (for better or worse)
- Setting impossible, unrealistic goals (for self or others)
- Paralysis, fear of starting
- Never finishing
- Giving up, refusing to correct or do over



# Origins of Perfectionism

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- Born that way?
  - Not by itself
  - External messages and pressure
  - Poor or inconsistent attachment (neglect)
  - Over- attachment, over-protective (no failure or mistakes allowed)

# Origins of Perfectionism

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- Conditional safety and approval (fear)
- Frequent negative feedback, derision, criticism
- Having “perfect parents” (or siblings)
- Being held accountable for adults’ feelings or behavior (including addiction)
- Association with labels (good or bad)
- Emphasis on importance of cultural fads, media messages, superficial “worth”



# Impact of Culture, Media & Ads

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- Only effective if we accept:
  - The idea that our bodies, clothes, homes, relationships, children, and lives are somehow flawed
  - The “hidden fantasy” that being perfect brings rewards (safety and happiness, for example)

# What Perfectionism Might Look Like

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# Belief Systems Can Include:

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- Need to maintain attachment or belonging by pleasing others, fulfilling others' agendas
- Worth = achievement, appearance, status
- Mistakes = failure (rejection)
- Having to work hard means I'm not good at something

# Behavior Patterns Can Include:

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- Comparing self to others—for better or worse  
(Harsh Inner Critic)
- Setting impossible, unrealistic goals (for self or others)
- Procrastination (fear of starting)
- Never finishing
- Giving up if not great right off the bat



# Behavior Patterns Can Include:

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- Refusing to correct work or do it over
- Focusing on negative (“critic’s math”)
- Telescopic thinking (minimize achievements, obsess about errors)
- Overcommitting (fear of saying no)
- Overdoing (doing more than is necessary or expected)

# Negative Impact may include:

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- Cognitive distortions
- All-or nothing thinking
- Anxiety and stress
  - Bids for approval or conditional acceptance
  - Pressure of unrealistic expectations (from self or others)



# Negative Impact may include

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- Regrets, rumination and trouble staying in present
- Panic, self-doubt
- Underachieving, giving up
- Increased stress on relationships (personal and professional)
- Increased risk for self-harm, addiction, and suicide

# Possible Helping Strategies

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- Recognize that perfectionism is pathological.
- Encourage excellence.
  - Shift focus from negative (flaw) to what's right
  - See mistakes and failure as steps to learning
- Shift from criticism and disappointment to encouragement and instruction.
- Help kids stop thinking in all-or-nothing terms.
- Avoid labels, even “good” ones (focus on effort)



# Possible Helping Strategies

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- Help kids set achievable goals.
- Encourage revision while helping kids get to “done.”
- Help kids achieve balance by learning how to set boundaries and say “no.”
- Model and teach stress-busting techniques
- Create a safe environment where kids can be their authentic selves.
- “Progress, not perfection.”
- Seek mental health professionals support for addiction and self-harm.

# Model Healthy Behavior

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- Watch your reaction when you mess up.
- Shift your focus from what you got wrong to what you got right. (done vs. not done)
- Honor incremental improvements and growth.
- Avoid comparing. (media images, cultural messages)
- Model healthy striving, self-care, self-acceptance, resiliency, and persistence.
- Get help as needed. No “quick fixes.”



# Interventions

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- Locate professional with expertise and experience with gifted children
- Psychotherapy: individual or group setting
- Family counseling
- Consultation or support groups for parents and/or students
- Internships and mentors
- Networking

Source: Carolyn Light, Ph.D, 2014

# Resources

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Adderholdt, Miriam and Jan Goldberg. Perfectionism: What's Bad About Being too Good? Rev. Ed. Minneapolis, Free Spirit, 1999.

Davis, Gary and Sylvia Rimm. Education of the Gifted and Talented. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston, Pearson, 2004.

National Association for Gifted Children. "Perfectionism." Accessed 6/15/08.  
<http://www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=1214>.

Rhode Island Advocates for Gifted Education. "Perfectionism and the Gifted Adolescent." Accessed 6/15/08. <http://www.riage.org/perfectionism.html>

"Tools for Personal Growth: Overcoming Perfectionism." Accessed 6/15/08.  
<http://www.coping.org/growth/perfect.htm>.

"Webster's online dictionary." Accessed 6/15/08. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>



# Resources

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## Articles:

- Perfectionism: The Crucible of Giftedness - Silverman  
<http://nmgifted.org/GAC%20Resources/Perfectionism%20The%20Crucible%20of%20Giftedness-SILVERMAN.pdf>
- What's Wrong With Perfect? - Rimm  
<http://www.parentingbookmark.com/pages/SR02.htm>
- Perfectionism and Giftedness: Examining the Connection - Pyryt  
<http://people.ucalgary.ca/~gifted/resources/articles/PerfectionismMP.pdf>
- Working with Perfectionist Students - Brophy  
<http://www.vtaide.com/png/ERIC/Perfectionist-Students.htm>

## Books:

- Counseling the Gifted & Talented - Silverman
- The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children: What Do We Know? - Neihart, Reis, et al
- Stand Up for Your Gifted Child - Smutny
- Some of My Best Friends are Books - Halsted