

## Perfection vs. Self-Driven

*We live in a culture that reveres success and barely notices regular people doing their best.”*

*--Dr. Kenneth R. Ginsburg*

There is little doubt that today's teens are talented, ambitious and accomplished. Unfortunately, while building impressive resumes, some teens become so concerned with their successes that they develop a fear of imperfection. **Being “perfectionistic” can be *misconstrued* as a positive on the assumption that perfectionism motivates students to try hard. In reality, a perfectionistic mindset can lead to increased anxiety, unwillingness to take appropriate risks, cheating and more serious emotional and physical consequences.** Recent research indicates certain children may be temperamentally more vulnerable to adopting a perfectionistic mindset; children may also pick up the subtle message from the adults in his/her life that mistakes are not tolerated which can feed perfectionistic tendencies.

How can one tell the difference between a child that wants to work to the best of her ability and a child whose desire for perfection hampers her? **Children who relish a challenge will be disappointed by a mistake on the athletic field or by a lower than expected grade, but they understand that failure is a temporary setback from which they will rebound. They enjoy the process of learning itself,** whether it be practicing an instrument or mastering a new video game. They accept appropriate challenges and understand that mistakes lead to lessons learned. As a result, **they are open to feedback from people they respect.**

In contrast, **children who have learned to dread failure avoid healthy risk-taking, inside and outside of the classroom.** The result is they never experience the exhilaration that comes with having under-taken and completing a tough challenge. **Any joy in learning is overshadowed by the anxiety that the final product will not be “good enough.”** When criticized, perfectionists become defensive and embarrassed. They are also poor at accepting praise because their accomplishments inevitably fall short of their expectations. They don't understand how to incorporate constructive criticism into their next endeavor. Ironically, some perfectionists may present as unmotivated because they maintain a façade of not caring when in fact, they care too much. The “lazy façade” masks the worry that lies underneath.

**Our ultimate goal as parents is to raise healthy, successful adults. It is less important that our teenagers be accomplished and impressive than that they learn the flexibility and resilience necessary to absorb their mistakes into their future decisions.**

In his book, *Building Resilience in Children and Teens*, Dr. Kenneth R. Ginsburg suggests some ways that parents can encourage healthy, not-perfectionistic attitudes in their children.

1. **Consider how you define success.** Do you focus on the grade or achievement or on the effort displayed? Consider the tone of the conversations you have with your spouse and other parents as well as with your child – teenagers are always listening!
2. **Do not go into battle for higher grades for your child.** When a parent negotiates for a higher grade, a child may absorb one or more of the following messages:
  - a. nothing short of a high grade is acceptable

- b. the prize of a high grade matters more than how the game is played
  - c. the achievement itself is more important than the effort expended
  - d. “My parents will step into any situation perceived of as unfair because I can’t manage it myself.”
3. **Rather than simply asking your teenager to do his best, specifically comment on his willingness to stretch himself, his engagement in the learning process, his persistence even when he is tired or frustrated, and his willingness to challenge himself consistently.**

*The Staples Resilience Project is an ongoing endeavor by the Staples Guidance Department aimed to promote the well-being of our students and foster a positive, inclusive school community.*

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