

Perfection vs. Progress

In high achieving areas like Fairfield County today, perfectionism is often mistakenly considered a mixed blessing. The comment, “my child is a perfectionist” may even be delivered with pride, because it is associated with high motivation and an admirable work ethic. However, there is a difference between the desire to achieve one’s best and a focus on achieving perfection. The danger with perfectionism is that it reflects a black-and-white attitude which can lead to hopelessness, e.g. “If I can’t do it perfectly then I won’t even try at all.” As we have recounted in a previous Resilience email, the mindset of demanding a top level performance in every area of one’s life is associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression.

So how do we help students who are inclined toward perfectionism? A recent blog by Tim Elmore, who educates students and parents about character and leadership, suggested some practical remedies. He recommends making the following four swaps:

1) Swap out perfectionism for progress. Consider a report card (or current grade on Home Access which is often the source of the stress) as a measure of continual improvement, not perfection. The concept of mindset is critically important here. The most successful and healthiest students consider grades as measures of progress and as opportunities to grow and adjust. When unhappy with a grade, support the student to consider a change in study techniques, to seek feedback from the teacher or to simply accept that it was not her best day. The goal in school, as in life, is it to continue to grow and improve, NOT to achieve unreachable perfection.

2) Swap out perfection for excellence. Unlike perfection, excellence is an achievable and desirable goal. We all have some areas of strength. Help students find and focus on their gifts. Remind them that no one matter what may happen on any given day, no can take away from them these special sources of pride.

3) Swap out comparison to others for comparison to you. It’s safer, and more motivating, to compare one’s performance today to a former performance rather than someone else’s achievement. Striving for growth throughout life predisposes students to be satisfied with consistent progress and avoids the trap of never meeting an unrealistic goal of perfection.

4) Swap out conquering others for adding value to others. Ask students to consider shifting their perception of personal achievements from competing with others to a mindset of adding value to people’s lives. Share with students that science has repeatedly proven that true contentment comes from adding value to the lives of others.

Subtle messages sent by the adults in students’ lives contribute significantly to their perception of what constitutes true growth. To that end, try to monitor your vocabulary carefully. Are you unknowingly sending messages that perfectionism is desirable or even achievable? Can you encourage your child/student instead to focus on steady, measurable progress? Let’s work together to encourage adolescents to let go of the illusion of perfectionism and to develop healthy and realistic goals in all areas of their lives.

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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