

PERFECTIONISM AND HIGH LEARNING POTENTIAL CHILDREN

Summary

Perfectionism and the fear of failure are common traits among high learning potential children that can impact negatively in their lives and prevent them from reaching their potential. This advice sheet focuses on how to help your child overcome perfectionism, the fear of failure and how to encourage them to attempt difficult tasks.

Introduction

It is important for people of all abilities to be faced with tasks they find challenging, so they can learn how to handle failure. This is particularly relevant for high learning potential children as they will often find most tasks easy. If a child is not being challenged enough, they will be used to doing very well at their studies with very little effort. The problem with this is that when they meet more challenging work, such as when they go to university, they will not have the drive and determination required to meet difficult tasks and still move forward.

Understanding failure as a part of life in a way that supports the child and gives them tools to understand the perfectionist mind will help them become resilient and approach life with a different focus, helping them become better learners and improve their self-confidence and wellbeing.

Perfectionism and the Fear of Failure in Children with High Learning Potential

Perfectionism is not necessarily a bad thing, well managed it can help children to strive for excellence and achieve to the best of their ability, and therefore encourage them to produce a very high standard of work. However, perfectionism tends to have negative consequences and can result in social anxiety, stress, eating disorders, depression, etc. A child that has unreasonably high standards or unachievable expectations can waste time or resources in a task that is already good for its purposes, leave projects unfinished, feel constantly unhappy with their results or even worse don't attempt activities for fear of failing. All of these scenarios will leave the child feeling drained and frustrated, which impact negatively on their mental health and self-esteem, and prevent them from reaching their full potential.

Where it Comes From?

Perfectionism is the result of different factors, some children are naturally perfectionists, but this behaviour can also be reinforced by the child environment, that is, when the child see parents and other adults acting in this way (i.e. being judgemental and unreasonably critical with themselves), as well as when parents, teachers, instructors, etc. put more stress on praising children's results rather than the effort undertaken or in the joy of carrying out the task itself, sometimes to such extent that the child may believe to be loved and valued only if succeeding.

High learning potential children need to be exposed to situations where they will not win all the time; to questions they will not know the answer to; to people who get better marks, etc. so they can learn and internalise that they will not always be the best at everything, and that hard work and further research and practice is needed to excel.

Mindset

According to Carol Dweck, it is our mindset what determines how we feel about ourselves and how we face life. An individual with a fixed mindset believes their intelligence or talent is fixed, thus they need constant reassurance and confirmation of their intelligence if they are to feel self-worth and therefore will only attempt tasks that will ensure success in order to confirm their beliefs. This seriously limits their growth and the opportunity to reach their full potential. On the other hand, an individual with a growth mindset understands that hard work is key in learning, that talent is only a start point, and that failure is temporary and a great opportunity to find out what we need to work on.

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ADVICE SHEET

You can teach your child how to develop a growth mindset by praising their courage when they try new activities and challenges, no matter the result; trying new things yourself and accept your own failures; by verbalising, when an opportunity arises, that failure is a normal part of life and does not reflect their potential or worth, reassuring them that all truly successful people are so because they keep trying and learn from these experiences. When they feel they can't keep going or are scared to try something new, help them identify what they need, is it more time, more practice, more help? Maybe the activity needs to be break down in smaller parts and their knowledge scaffolded.

Helpful Hints

Explaining the concept – children need to be able to accept that it is unreasonable to expect to win at everything. Sports and games, e.g. board games, are good opportunities for them to experience winning and losing. Discuss current or well-known examples such as a team losing the World Cup final or someone getting a bronze in the Olympics. Never ridicule or tease them for not winning.

Discussing the consequences of actions – discuss the different ways that people can react when they lose and how these reactions can affect their relationships with their friends, peers and the rest of the team. Discuss your child's own reactions to losing at something. Talk through how it would be if they reacted differently.

Modelling and rewarding constructive behaviour – children learn significantly from your example, show your child the behaviour you want them to copy when you experience setbacks. When your child has a constructive reaction towards losing, praise your child's attitude and tell them how well they handled it.

Praise their effort and courage – offer your child support and praise their efforts and courage to try new things rather than focusing on the result. Give them empathy when they don't win, they have the right to feel upset, and reassure them by saying that some skills need lots of work to achieve, especially if they are not used to it.

Setting goals for effort and improvement – try to avoid goals based purely on winning, but concentrate on goals involving sustained effort and improvement. Learning a musical instrument requires a lot of practise to master a skill and is a good way of overcoming the fear of failure. Whenever they fail, help them identify how they can move forward and improve, and invite them to use this as a motivation to find out what they did wrong or didn't know in order to improve for next time.

Express unconditional love – show and tell your child at every opportunity that you love them no matter what they achieve. Let them know that whoever judges them or someone else by their achievements is simply wrong.

Encouraging other interests – Encourage your child to take part in activities that they don't excel at. This can help with perfectionist issues, as they are not expected to be the best or to come top, but are similar to the other participants. This also helps to give them a broader range of skills and friends.

Further Information Books and resources can be ordered from our website shop: www.potentialplusuk.org

<i>PA601 Social and Emotional Development of High Learning Potential Children</i>	Advice sheet on the social and emotional development of high learning potential children.
<i>PA602 Helping to Raise Self-Esteem in High Learning Potential Children</i>	Advice sheet on raising the self-esteem of high learning potential children.

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<i>When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Strategies for Coping With Perfectionism</i> by Martin Antony	Book exploring the causes of perfectionism and offering cognitive-behavioural strategies for overcoming it.
<i>Freeing Our Families from Perfectionism</i> by Thomas Greenspon	This insightful and practical book explains perfectionism, where it comes from, and what to do about it.
<i>Mindset</i> by Carol Dweck	She makes clear why praising intelligence and ability doesn't foster self-esteem and lead to accomplishment, but may actually jeopardize success. With the right mindset, we can motivate our kids and help them reach their own goals - personal and professional. Dweck reveals how a simple idea about the brain can create a love of learning and a resilience that is the basis of great accomplishment in every area.
<i>Letting Go Of Perfect: Overcoming Perfectionism in Kids</i> by Jil L Adelson and Hope E Wilson	This book gives parents and teachers the guidance and support they need to help children break free of the anxieties and behaviours related to perfectionism.
<i>The Dot</i> by Peter H. Reynolds	"Just make a mark and see where it takes you." Vashti says she can't draw, but her teacher thinks she can. An inspiring story of how to begin to perceive oneself differently, and see that where there's a dot there's a way.
http://www.kellybear.com/TeacherArticles/TeacherTip53.html	A good guide to perfectionism in children by Leah Davies, M.Ed.
Young Minds Tel: 0800 018 2138 www.youngminds.org.uk	Charity concerned with mental health of young people. Has free parent helpline. Produces information and support booklets for teenagers and adults.

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