

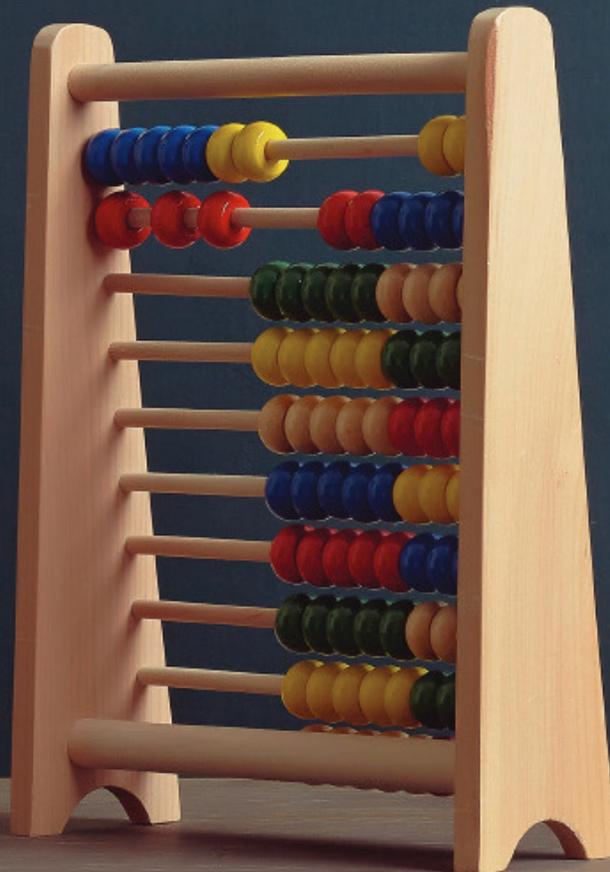
RAISING PERF

By THERESA E. NELSON

As a child my greatest desire was to be loved by my parents. To ensure this I tried to mold myself into the “perfect child.” Obedient, compliant, and high-achieving, I accomplished much, avoided conflicts, and was upheld as the model child to my siblings. I willingly executed my chores, completing extra tasks while my brothers and sisters played outside. My bedroom was spotless, my bed wrinkle-less. My grades were high; I finished homework early. I believed that flawless behavior would lead to a perfect life.

Some children appear to have it all together. They are high achievers, intelligent, organized, attuned to right and wrong, and articulate. Often perfectionists, these children attempt to consistently perform without flaws, regarding anything short of perfection as failure. We hear about perfectionism in adults, but this trait begins in childhood.

The elusive search for faultlessness, which is unattainable no matter how much effort is put forth, can seem at first glance attractive and harmless. As parents, we want our children to do their best: leading the football team to victory, winning the piano competition, achieving top grades, and being adored by adults for their helpful attitude. Not only do these children make us look good, but they seem easier to raise.



ECT CHILDREN

Striving for perfection, however, extracts a high price from children and their families. If not dealt with, this trait will negatively impact the child's self-esteem, relationships with family and others, and ultimately his or her relationship with God.

CONSEQUENCES OF PERFECTIONISM

As a child I constantly searched for approval, feeling the need for my mom and dad to notice my efforts and praise me. I equated completing a task with deserving love. A serious child, I viewed life not as a learning or growing opportunity but as a context in which wrong moves were to be avoided. Outwardly I appeared happy, talented, and in control, but inside I was stressed and fearful that people would stop loving me if I didn't please them.

Although high-achieving children have many positive qualities and accomplish much, in that they tie





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their identities to performance, no attainment is ever quite enough in their eyes. Despite awards and ribbons, they rarely garner sufficient achievements or accolades to satisfy themselves. They judge themselves harshly and tend to be rigid, overly sensitive, defensive, cautious, anxious, worried, and lacking self-esteem; not surprisingly, they also find it hard to relax. They are often demanding and critical of others, but especially of themselves because their unreasonably high expectations are rarely realized.

Fear and worry drive them. They are afraid to look bad and to experience the displeasure of others; they don't want to make a mistake, worried that others may think less of them or ultimately withdraw their love.

A MATTER OF THINKING

Perfectionistic children often rely on unrealistic expectations and perceptions of how things or people should be in an ideal world. Jane, a thirteen-year-old perfectionist, prides herself on being an exceptional math student. Her perception is that smart students receive perfect grades and are loved. Her expectation is to perpetually receive 100 percent. When Jane scores a 93 percent her pride is hurt; she belittles herself, worries about her grade-point average slipping, and thinks others will stop viewing her as smart. Because Jane has tied her self-concept to her performance, she feels her occasional slightly lower scores equate to an unlovable girl. She perceives that her parents, siblings, and others will love her only if she remains an exceptional math student; thus she dislikes herself for falling short.

The frustration and anger Jane feels about her math performance, and ultimately her view of herself as unlovable, are often taken out on others. She may harshly criticize siblings and parents concerning trivial things or inappropriately explode in anger, all of which reinforce her current low opinion of herself.

THE SIN OF PERFECTIONISM

The desire to please my parents and teachers expanded to include God, whom I knew was perfect. To gain God's love and approval, I mistakenly assumed I needed to be without fault. I believed that mistakes equaled sin. My mother, too, was a perfectionist, and conditional love prevailed at home. At church the keeping of laws and rules was emphasized and a relationship with God minimized. To manifest the comportment of a Christian I babysat for free, helped at garage sales, became the church accompanist, and volunteered during church potlucks. Still I worried that I hadn't accomplished enough to earn God's approval.

Competition, although not always readily noticeable, lurks in the background. Perfectionists compete not only against themselves but against everyone else. The motivation of perfectionism is to look better than one really is (or believes one is)—and, ideally, to look better than others. The focus is on

making oneself look superior, ultimately leading to glorifying the self instead of God. It is not wrong for children to desire to please their parents and God or to do their best. But it is wrong to endeavor to earn people's approval and God's love, to feel discontent and covet what can't be humanly attained, or to pridefully desire to be better than everyone else. We are called to "abstain from sinful desires" and to imitate Christ, who did not focus on pleasing "human desires, but rather the will of God" (1 Peter 2:11; 4:2).

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

We are not flawless parents, but there are things we can do to curtail perfectionism in our children. Here are a few suggestions.

- **EXAMINE YOURSELF.** Examine the messages, both verbal and nonverbal, that you communicate to your children. Are you overly concerned about what others think? Do you criticize those who fail to meet your expectations? Do you tend to demand perfection in academics, chores, and behavior? How often do you compare your children to others? Do you withhold love based upon their actions? Is your focus more on the wrinkles left after making the bed or on the fact that the bed was made? If you yourself are a perfectionist, openly discuss with your children your obsessive traits, their effect on your life, and how you are working to overcome them.
- **LOVE UNCONDITIONALLY.** No matter their behavior, love your children unreservedly in both word and deed. Perfectionists need to be taught that their value comes from being a child of God, not from their performance. God loves us without condition or qualification. He never says, "I'm not going to love you today because you spilled your milk, wet the bed, and shouted at your parents." Parents who dish out qualified love are often demanding and critical, points out Patricia R. Williams, author of *The Perfect Woman's Flaw*, perpetrating a ripe environment for perfectionism to develop and thrive. Under these circumstances children may try to please parents or others "so that they will receive the attention that conditional love doesn't give."
- **FOCUS ON CHARACTER OVER ACHIEVEMENTS.** Emphasize and praise your children's development of godly character over physical achievement or looks. Perfectionistic children who are praised for excellent papers instead of for showing kindness, being a good friend, exhibiting patience toward a sibling, or exhibiting a sense of humor incorrectly conclude that achievements and the rewards they bring are the most important things in life. While accomplishments are important, emphasis should be placed on the development of godly character (2 Peter 1:5–8; Galatians 5:22). Instead of "Great paper," say, "I appreciate the perseverance and self-control it took to receive that A."

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- **CULTIVATE A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.** An appropriate relationship with God is based upon grace, the realization that God accepts us despite our imperfections. He doesn't expect us to perform impeccably but to rest in his flawless performance. Pam Doolittle, a mother of six, stresses the importance of praying with and for your children. Encourage them to present their worries and anxieties to God through prayer (Philippians 4:6–7), exchanging worries and anxieties for forgiveness, joy, and peace.
- **EMPHASIZE MOTIVATION.** Teach your children to clean up after themselves, brush their teeth, complete their chores, say please and thank-you, assist at church, and complete their school work—not to make themselves look good but because in all we do we should glorify God (1 Corinthians 10:31). We do these things because they demonstrate our love toward God and our neighbor; we strive in our dealings with God, others, and even ourselves to imitate Christ, whose motivation was to serve not himself but the One who sent him (John 5:30).
- **SEEK TO UNDERSTAND PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS.** Because our perceptions (more than our circumstances) are the building blocks upon which we construct our mindset and expectations, gently ask questions to determine your children's perceptions and expectations and to help them arrive at biblical conclusions.
- **PROBE FOR DETAIL.** Instead of "No, of course you're not ugly," seek to calmly understand their perception (pimples = ugly) or expectation (not washing your face is the only way to get pimples) by asking leading or thought-provoking questions: "Why do you say you are ugly?" "Would you classify others as ugly just because they have pimples?" "Would God?" Avoid becoming critical or defensive.
- **ACCEPT MISTAKES.** Consider mistakes to be a normal and natural part of life and learning. How can we learn

to ride a bicycle without falling? Become competent in math without lots of wrong answers? Mistakes are not sins. Putting salt instead of sugar into the cookie dough is a mistake. Lying about tripping your brother is a sin. Discipline sin, but treat mistakes as teachable moments.

- **EMPHASIZE BALANCE.** Schedule play and relaxation time, because perfectionists focus so much time and energy on work. Motivate young sticklers to be content and not to judge themselves so harshly. They tend to dwell on small things, so enlarge their picture and help them enjoy life and look for the positive. Pam Doolittle tells her kids, "Look at what you have to do today as a meadow to play in instead of a mountain to climb."
- **TREAD LIGHTLY.** Realize that achievement-oriented children are generally more sensitive than their more lackadaisical peers. They require more encouragement than criticism. Be careful about dismissing perfectionistic children's feelings and emotions, which tend in the direction of extremes; they either feel themselves to be better than everyone else or view themselves as failing, both physically and spiritually. When correcting, label the behavior as wrong, not the child as bad.

As a "recovering" perfectionist, I still fight against my desire to perform as flawlessly as possible. This tendency emerges in the ways I run my life, react to my husband's suggestions, worry about appearances, and find it distasteful to be wrong. My prayer is that my perfectionistic-tending children will not seek physical perfection on Earth but will instead focus on loving the Lord with all their heart and mind, realizing that godly perfection awaits us only in heaven.

Theresa Nelson often writes about this wonderful and messy thing called life. Her writing has appeared in more than 40 magazines, including Christian Home & School. She lives in Missouri and is married with two children.



"PERFECT" CHILDREN

Perfectionistic children generally focus their energy on one or more of the following areas:

Relationships. Pleasing others is paramount. They often wonder whether they have given a correct answer or responded appropriately.

Appearance. Looks are everything. Pimples or wrinkled clothes cause consternation because they perpetually critique and compare their appearance to that of others.

Academics. The score, not the learning, is most important. Going above and beyond the requirements of homework is routine.

Surroundings. Their bedrooms are meticulously neat. After sweeping the kitchen floor, they personally take offense when a sibling or parent dirties it.

Sports and extracurricular activities. Missing a basket causes them to obsess about disappointing the team. They practice the clarinet for two hours each day to ensure that they won't disappoint their teacher or look bad during a lesson.

