

Perfectionism: Burden or Blessing? ©

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Creative Insights

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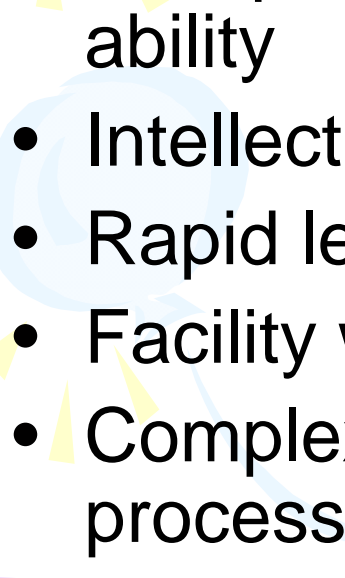

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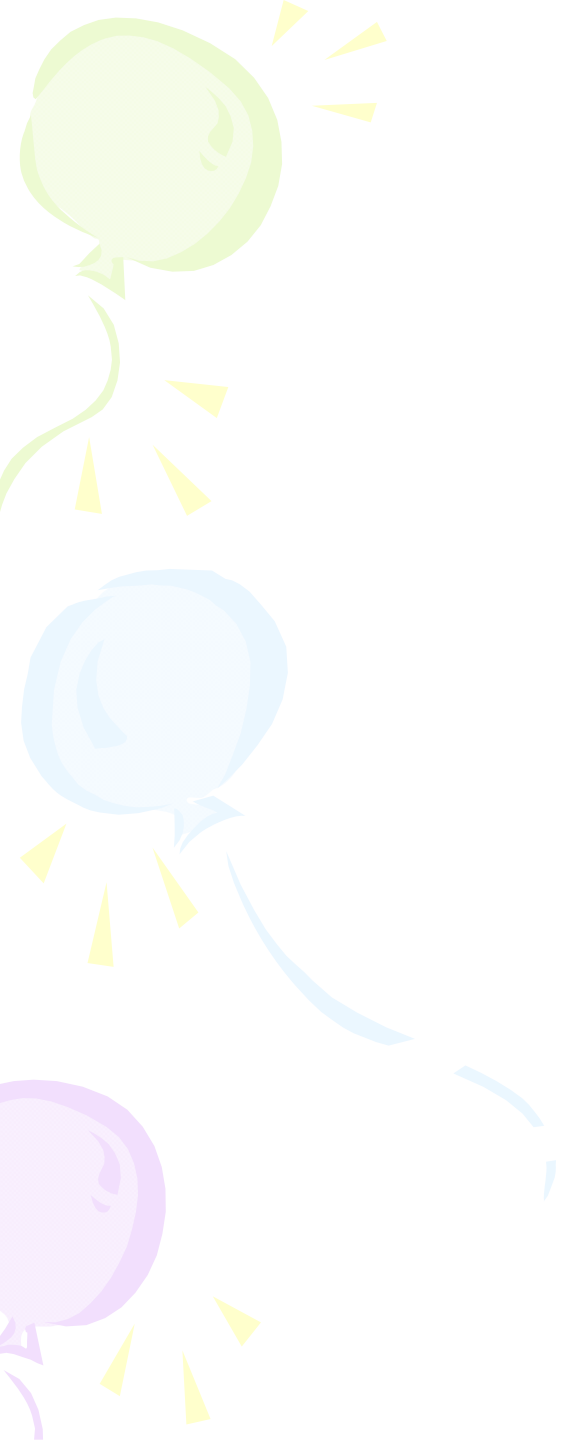
Intellectual Characteristics

- Exceptional reasoning ability
 - Intellectual curiosity
 - Rapid learning rate
 - Facility with abstraction
 - Complex thought process
 - Vivid imagination
 - Early moral concern
 - Passion for learning
 - Powers of concentration
 - Analytical thinking
 - Divergent thinking/creativity
 - Keen sense of justice
 - Capacity for reflection
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Personality Characteristics

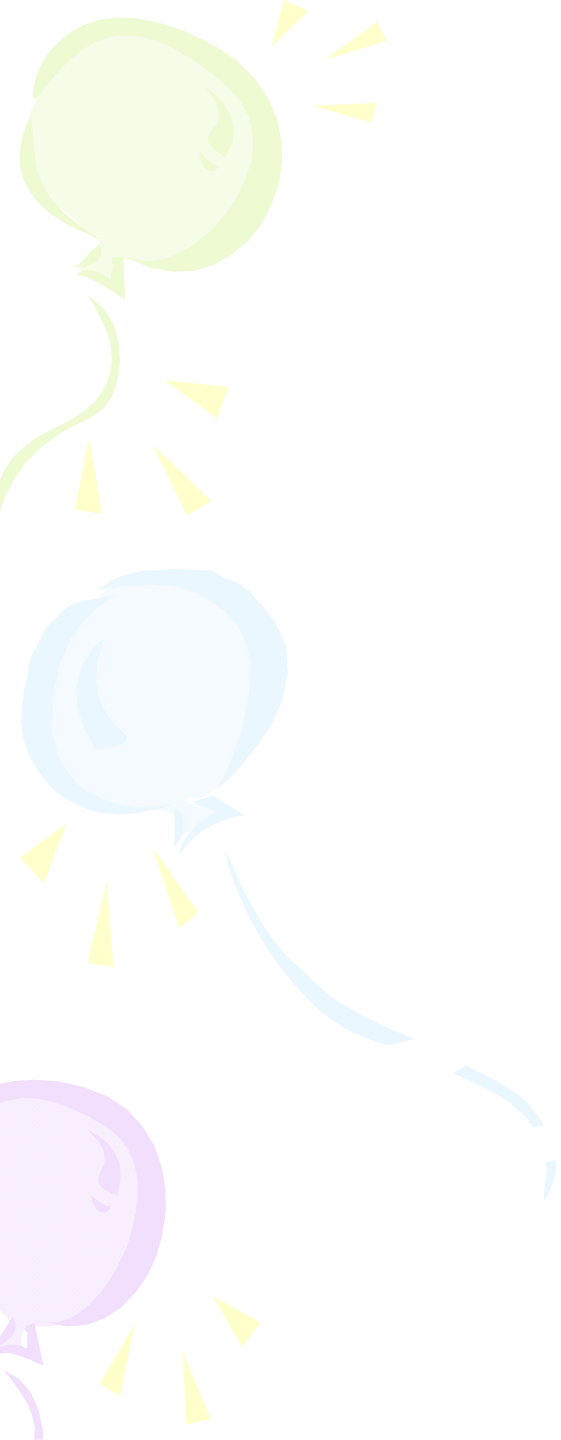
- Insightfulness
- Need to understand
- Need for mental stimulation
- Perfectionism
- Need for precision/logic
- Excellent sense of humor
- Sensitivity/empathy
- Intensity
- Perseverance
- Acute self-awareness
- Nonconformity
- Questioning of rules and authority
- Tendency toward introversion



They possess
an innate sense
of
how things
should be
and not just
how they are.

In other words,
they have an
innate urge
to perfect.

Jacobson (1999)



Just because
you're a
perfectionist,
doesn't mean
you're perfect.

Jack Nickolson

Theories about Perfectionism

- **Maslow (1970)**
 - Struggle for perfection through self-actualization - use of one's potential, capabilities, & talents; absence of neurosis
- **Dabrowski (1972)**
 - Driving force that served to promote higher levels of development within the individual; tool for self-development, not a maladjustment
- **Adler (1973)**
 - A striving to rise above feelings of despair and hopelessness
- **Hamacek (1978)**
 - A combination of thoughts and behaviors associated with high standards or expectations for one's own performance
 - On a continuum: duration and intensity varies

Healthy or Normal Perfectionists

“derive a very real sense of pleasure from the labors of a painstaking effort and feel free to be less precise as the situation permits.”

Neurotic or Dysfunctional Perfectionists

“are unable to feel satisfaction because in their own eyes they never seem to do things good enough to warrant that feeling.”

Theories about Perfectionism

- **Burns (1980)**
 - Unidimensional manner; self-oriented; striving toward impossible goals; measure worth in terms of productivity and accomplishment
- **Brodsky (1984)**
 - “Internalized fantasy”
- **Lazarfeld (1991)**
 - Sound striving for perfection - realistic, useful attitude
 - Neurotic striving for perfection - withdrawal from reality
- **Silverman (n.d.)**
 - Abstract concept: driving force, inner knowing, desire to “create meaning of one’s life by doing the best one is capable of doing.”

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Possible Reasons for Perfectionism

- Inborn for some individuals (Dabrowski, 1964; Silverman, 1990)
- Perfectionistic parents (Rowell, 1986)
- Birth order (Leman, 1985; Smith, 1990)
- Messages from the media (Barrow & Moore, 1983)
- Perfectionistic teachers and peers (Adderholdt-Elliott, 1991)
- Asynchrony- developmental dysplasia- intellectual age greater than chronological age (Adderholdt-Elliott, 1991)
- “Hothousing” babies (Elkind, 1981)
- Influence of dysfunctional family
 - Alcoholics (Ackerman, 1989; Crespi, 1990; Smith, 1990)
 - Workaholics (Brophy, 1986)



Six Behaviors

1. Depression
2. A Nagging “I Should” feeling
3. Shame and guilt feelings
4. Face-saving behavior
5. Shyness and procrastination
6. Self-deprecation

(Hamachek, 1978)



Four Perfectionistic Paths

1. Performance Perfectionism: “I am what I do - perfectly.”
2. Appearance Perfectionism: “I am the image I create.”
3. Interpersonal Perfectionism: “I’m find. Everyone else is a mess.”
4. Moral Perfectionism: “I’ll play by the rules. All of them. Always.”

(Elliott & Meltsner, 1991)

Games Perfectionists Play

- **MOOD SWINGING** - Mood based on achievements
- **THE NUMBERS GAME** - Quantity > Quality
- **TELESCOPIC THINKING** - Successes minimized,
Failures magnified
- **FOCUSING ON THE FUTURE** - Not savoring success
- **PINING OVER THE PAST** - If only...
- **PUTTING YOUR GOALS FIRST** - Over health and
relationships
- **GETTING IT RIGHT** - Doing it over and over and over
- **ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING** - If I don't get all As, it's worth
nothing. I failed!

(Adderholdt-Elliott, 1991)



Sign of Dysfunctional Perfectionism

- Delayed starts
- Unwillingness to share work
- Unreasonably extreme response to grades or evaluations
- Inability to accept inferior work of less talented peers
- Feelings of superiority accompanied by loneliness
- Relentless self-criticism
- Feelings of inferiority
- Fear of the future
- High levels of anxiety
- Refusal to turn in work or accomplish goals
- Inability to tolerate mistakes
- Tendency to magnify & generalize self imperfections
- Inability to cope with ambiguity and chance
- Inability to share responsibility
- Susceptible to depression following productive periods

(Schuler, 1997)



Signs That Individual Counseling Is Needed...

- Intense competitiveness
- Social isolation
- Alienation within the family
- Inability to control anger
- Excessive manipulating
- Chronic underachievement
- Depression or continual boredom
- Sexual acting out
- Evidence of any kind of abuse
- Recent traumatic experience or loss of loved one

The Procrastinator's Code

- I must be perfect.
- Everything I do should go easily & without effort.
- It's safer to do nothing than to take a risk & fail.
- I should have no limitations.
- If it's not done right, it's not worth doing at all.
- I must avoid being challenged.
- If I succeed, someone will get hurt.
- If I do well this time, I must always do well.
- Following someone else's rules means I'm giving in & not in control.
- I can't afford to let go of anything or anyone.
- If I expose my real self, people won't like me.
- There is a right answer, & I'll wait until I find it.



The Cycle of Procrastination

1. “I’ll start early this time.” (**hope**)
2. “I’ve got to start soon.” (**anxiety, hope**)
3. “What if I don’t start?” (**foreboding**)
 - “I should have started sooner.” (**guilt**)
 - “I’m doing everything, but everything, but...” (**rationalization**)
 - “I can’t enjoy anything.” (**guilt, apprehension, disgust**)
 - “I hope no one finds out.” (**ashamed**)
4. “There’s still time.” (**hope**)

The Cycle of Procrastination

5. “There’s something wrong with me.” (**fear**)
6. THE FINAL CHOICE: ***To do or not to do***

Path 1: Not to do	Path 2: To do- On to the bitter end
a. “I can’t do this!”	a. “I can’t wait any longer.”
b. “Why bother?”	b. “This isn’t so bad. Why didn’t I start sooner?” (relief, puzzled, relief)
	c. “Just get it done!” (relief, exhaustion, resolution)

7. “I’ll never procrastinate again.” (***relief, exhaustion, resolution***)



What doesn't work...

- Saying, “Just do it!”
- Nagging and being a watchdog
- Using criticism, ridicule, and threats of extreme or exaggerated consequences
- Doing it yourself

(Burka & Yen, 1983)



Minimizing Procrastination

1. Admit you are procrastinating, then act.
2. Go from **BIG** to small: break things down into manageable parts.
3. Set a timer.
4. Ask Lakein's Question: "What is the best use of my time right now?"
5. Use motivators: Tell others you will get something done ahead of time.
6. Reward yourself! Plan in advance what it will be.



Specific Techniques

1. Establish clear limits, deadlines, & consequences.
2. Help the procrastinator set small interim goals.
3. Help the procrastinator be concrete & realistic about what he or she needs to do.
4. Reward progress along the way.
5. Tell the procrastinator directly if you do get angry.
6. Let the procrastinator know that he or she is more to you than just his or her performance.
7. Consider yourself.

Ten Tips for Procrastinators

1. Allow more time than you think a project will take.
2. Set realistic goals, but don't set them in stone. Stay flexible.
3. Break down big & intimidating tasks into smaller, doable ones.
4. Reward yourself after each accomplishment, large or small.
5. Make a conscious effort to realize that your paper, project or whatever can't be perfect.
 - This helps deflate the fear of failure.

Ten Tips for Procrastinators

6. Develop a “backwards schedule.”
 - Start with things you most enjoy doing (things you usually save for last)
 - Then add things you’re supposed to do
 - Plan to have fun without feeling guilty
7. Begin your day with the most difficult or most unpleasant task.
8. Keep a diary of your progress – what you accomplish each day.
9. Remove distractions from your workplace.
10. Keep a list of backup projects, things you mean to do when you have time.

Perfectionism

- Writer's block is “an inability to begin or continue writing for reasons other than a lack of basic skill or commitment.” It is a cognitive barrier that causes prolonged, unproductive periods of writing. Characteristics include “anxiety, frustration, anger, or confusion. Blocking is measured by the passage of time with limited productive involvement in the writing task (Rose, 1984)”.
- Perfectionism is “the presence of an internal critic who allows no mistakes or imperfections” (Boice, 1985).
- “...Most students will not miss a deadline or hand in a paper late because perhaps lateness is seen as more negative than a bad paper.”
- Researchers must determine if ability and motivation are present. If they are not, then the inability to write is not caused by blocking (Rose, 1985).

Perfectionism

- Blocked writers have difficulty writing for one or more of the following reasons:
 - Rules by which they guide their composing processes are rigid, inappropriately invoked, or incorrect
 - Their assumptions about composing are misleading
 - They edit too early in the composing process
 - They lack appropriate planning and discourse strategies or rely on inflexible or inappropriate strategies
 - They invoke conflicting rules, assumptions, plans and strategies
 - They evaluate their writing with inappropriate or inadequately understood criteria (Rose, 1984)
- One of the reasons writers block is that they do not understand the criteria by which their writing will be judged or, in the case of perfectionism, criteria they have created for themselves (Bransky, 1989).



To Reduce Dysfunctional/Neurotic Perfectionism...

1. Be task selective.
2. Give yourself permission to be less than perfect.
3. Set reasonable, reachable goals for yourself.
4. Choose at least one activity you can do without criticizing yourself.

(Hamacheck, 1978)

A decorative graphic on the left side of the slide features three balloons: a green one at the top, a light blue one in the middle, and a purple one at the bottom. Each balloon is attached to a streamer that ends in several small, yellow, triangular flags. The balloons have a slight shadow and a highlight, giving them a three-dimensional appearance.

Positive Alternative Paths

1. Try to get comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty.
2. Give yourself permission to make mistakes.
3. Be flexible.
4. Give yourself time.

(Adderholdt-Elliott, 1987)

Helping Perfectionistic Kids

- Teach courage: “I know you can try.”
- Reward trying
- Expect progress, not perfection
- “Finished” is sometimes a better goal than perfect
- Applaud persistence
- “You kept on trying, even when you didn’t know how it would turn out”
- Break down the task
- “Inch by inch, it’s a cinch. Yard by yard, it’s hard.”
- Acknowledge learning
 - “what did you learn while you were doing this?”
 - “What part did you enjoy most?”
 - “What might you try next time?”
 - “How might you do it differently next time?”

Helping Perfectionistic Kids

- Ask, “What’s good about it?”
- Help child discover meaning
- “What were you thinking when you were choosing colors?”
- Honor the time invested
- “You gave a lot of time to this. It must be important to you.”
- Focus on process and product
- “How did you decide to change the experiment?”
- Make mistakes okay
- Call work practice
- Model making mistakes okay (Meckstroth)



Mistakes are Delicate

John F. Taylor, Ph.D.

Preventing Perfectionism by Encouraging
a Healthy Attitude toward Mistakes

“Your mistakes are...”

D *Decreasing*

“Look how far you’ve come.”

“Things will get easier as you continue to practice.”

E *Expected*

“That’s why pencils have erasers.”

“Everybody makes mistakes; nobody is perfect.”

L *Learning Tools*

“Success means any forward progress.”

“What can you learn from this experience for next time.”



“Your mistakes are...”

I *Incompletions*

“You didn’t run out of talent; you just ran out of time.”

“You’re just not done with it yet; we’ll work on it again later.”

C *Caused*

“Let’s see what’s giving you the trouble here.”

“Every mistake has a cause.”

A *Accidental*

“You can’t do a mistake on purpose.”

“All mistakes are just accidents.”

T *Temporary*

“You’re just not ready for this right now.”

“This doesn’t mean that you can’t do it better later.”

E *Effort Proofs*

“Mistakes only prove you’re trying.”

Statements to Reduce Dysfunctional Perfectionism^{-Walker}

Try Saying This...	Instead of This...
How do you feel about your report card?	What happened here?
You do a good job of...	Why can't you ever do it right?
You have improved in...	You still can't do...
You can help me by...	Why don't you ever...
Let's find out together.	Go look it up.
So you made a mistake. What did you learn from it?	That was a dumb thing to do.
I understand how you feel.	Act your age.
Keep trying. Don't give up.	Are you still working on that?

Classroom Strategies for Dealing with Perfectionistic Students

Learn and recognize the manifestations of perfectionism when it becomes stressful:

- Delayed start
- Unwillingness to share work
- High levels of anxiety
- Inability to tolerate mistakes
- Impatience with others' imperfections
- Relentless self-criticism
- Refusal to turn in work or accomplish a goal
- Feelings of inferiority
- Fear of the future



Teacher Behaviors – Modeling or Verbalizing

- Acknowledge and model imperfect behavior
- Personal evaluation and goal setting
- Reasonable risk taking
- Self acceptance of own imperfections and “off” days
- Good listening and responding skills
- Model the “joy of struggle” and the “joy of discovery”

Instructional Strategies

- Teach distinction between healthy & unhealthy perfectionism
- Incorporate goal setting & student evaluation into major facets of curriculum
- Focus on process of learning rather than perfect products
 - Plan projects in small steps
 - Use specific criteria for assignments, projects, or products
 - Don't always correct the finished product
 - Use exemplary products carefully
- Ask the question, “What did you learn from this experience?”
- Administer perfectionism assessments & conduct follow-up discussions.
- Conduct discussions of “What’s the worst thing that could happen...?”



Instructional Strategies

- Conduct bibliotherapy sessions
- Have students study perfectionism through student interviews, research papers, and perfectionism
- Teach a unit on great mistakes
- Expose students to “bloopers that have changed history”
- Assign students to write a play, puppet show, skit, TV commercial, poem or story that deals with perfectionism
- Have students select scenarios of perfectionistic behavior from a hat and role play these situations - follow-up discussion
- Teach a mini-unit on famous people who failed at first & then moved to success or fame
- Try some art therapy lessons following class discussion about perfectionism

Instructional Strategies

- Analyze popular music or television shows in search of messages to be healthy or dysfunctionally perfect
- Have students describe how it would feel to do average work or have an average performance
- Decorate your classroom with encouraging student-designed slogans- start with “THINGS TAKE TIME”
- Post the statement that focuses on how we are constantly changing: “I am where I am today. I was different yesterday, I will be different tomorrow. But I am where I am today, and it’s OK.”
- Require that every student make 3 mistakes on a worksheet- conduct a follow-up discussion

Instructional Strategies

- Use class discussions, private diaries or role playing to teach students that:
 - There are various levels of accomplishment
 - Mistakes & risks taking are part of learning
 - We can all improve with practice
- Ask students to think about their past and future development
- Negotiate contracts that support the courage to finish, turn-in, or share a given product
- Read a particular author's works over time- look for changing arguments as well as constant themes
- **Teach the creative problem solving process**
- Set some challenges in which perfectionist has no experience- encourage them to enjoy something new- for the fun of it



Instructional Strategies

- Recognize achievement in academic & non-academic areas
- Don't force children to participate in things they hate
- Recognize the abilities of all children – don't single out bright children for special attention
- Encourage individual differences & different approaches
- Let children fail- help them understand and accept failure
- Reward creativity not just perfect answers
- Allow children to work ahead of grade level- be supportive
- Encourage children to pursue their passions
- Teach task analysis, time management, & goal setting
- Limit the use of extra credit work
- Create a “Humor” bulletin board-discuss types of humor; have a joke of the day

Teacher Recommendations to Help Perfectionistic Gifted Students

1. Educate yourself: intellectual characteristics, social and emotional issues of gifted adolescents.
 - Understand how perfectionism, sensitivity, & intensity can be helpful or harmful
2. Learn to recognize the manifestations of perfectionism when it becomes stressful: a delayed start, an unwillingness to share work, refusal to turn in work or accomplish a goal; an inability to tolerate mistakes, and impatience with others' imperfections.
3. Expect excellence but not perfectionism from your students; talk with your students about the difference. Examine your own behaviors that encourage perfectionism. Don't compare one student's performance with other's or sibling's.

Teacher Recommendations to Help Perfectionistic Gifted Students

4. Encourage and role model the principle “dare to dream.”
Talk with your students about how high standards can serve as motivators. Share how you have handled failure and successes in your own life. Use biographies of famous people in all subject areas to illustrate overcoming failures. Study an expert’s changing arguments or styles over time to illustrate how an individual’s ideas evolve.
5. Teach the skills of task analysis, time management, and goal setting in your classrooms. This will help them understand the value of more manageable steps.

Teacher Recommendations to Help Perfectionistic Gifted Students

6. Teach and use creative problem solving process. Encourage and reward creativity in thought and product. Gifted perfectionists need opportunities to use their creative abilities within a structured framework that is applicable beyond the classroom.
7. Use specific criteria for assignment, projects or products. Show your students exemplary products that other students have created. This will help the perfectionist to set realistic goals and not be overwhelmed in thinking they have to produce beyond the classroom.
8. Help perfectionistic students to shape their thinking by setting goals and expectations prior to classroom assignments, to deal with situations as they work, and to evaluate their work during and after it is finished. Use contracts to encourage underachieving gifted perfectionists to finish or share their products.

Teacher Recommendations to Help Perfectionistic Gifted Students

9. Help perfectionistic students to shape their thinking by setting goals and expectations prior to classroom assignments, to deal with situations as they work, and to evaluate their work during and after it is finished. Use contracts to encourage underachieving gifted perfectionists to finish or share their products.
10. Provide opportunities to fail in a safe environment. Introduce gifted perfectionistic adolescents to new experiences so they can learn to take risks. Focus on open-ended activities. Offer more choices so that they don't always choose the things at which they are most successful. This is helpful for those perfectionists who take no chances and who go through enormous effort to ensure their success.

Teacher Recommendations to Help Perfectionistic Gifted Students

11. Try not to grade all assignments or use pass/fail at times. Provide rewards that are connected to improvement, not perfection. Limit the use of extra credit work; perfectionists like to go above and beyond for an A+ grade, even if they are struggling in a subject.
12. Focus on the perfectionistic gifted adolescents' strengths and successes, not on the mistakes they make. Be careful about criticism because it can add to their own self-criticism for not being the perfect student.
13. Be aware of gifted female adolescents putting more pressure on themselves to perform, and how teasing about being smart and/or perfectionistic is especially harmful to gifted male adolescents. Work to create a non-sexist environment and curriculum.

Teacher Recommendations to Help Perfectionistic Gifted Students

14. Use humor in the classroom: create a “HUMOR” bulletin board; discuss types of humor; have a joke of the day; incorporate humor in writings and problems; use humor instead of punishment; laugh at yourself.
15. Learn techniques that are beneficial for gifted learners (e.g. curriculum compacting, ability grouping, acceleration opportunities). Modify and adapt current curriculum to provide more challenges.
16. Use educational therapy techniques to address social and emotional issues: bibliotherapy, biotherapy, film, music, art, journal writing, simulations and role playing, inquiry-based class, small group discussions, small group projects based on human behavior (e.g. creative individuals).

Recommendations for Parents to Help their Perfectionistic Child

1. Recognize that your gifted adolescent's intellectual and emotional characteristics are intertwined and influence each other.
 - Understand that the perfectionism personality trait is influenced by factors in your child's environment that impact whether or not the manifestations will be healthy or dysfunctional.
 - Know that perfectionism can be a positive motivator or be a cause of stress for your adolescent.
 - Sensitize yourself to your gifted adolescent's pressures - at home and at school. Talk about what perfectionism means to you and to your adolescent.

Recommendations for Parents to Help their Perfectionistic Child

2. Understand and appreciate perfectionism - personality trait that you may have as well as your adolescent.
 - Recognize positive and negative components of perfectionism - help your adolescent pursue excellence, by modeling appropriate responses.
 - Point out positive, imperfect role models in the media - help them understand that no one can always be perfect
3. Learn to set priorities in your life and help your adolescent to do likewise. Help your adolescent to realize that making mistakes are learning experiences. Model acceptance of your mistakes. Ask, “What did I/you learn from the experience?” Teach them the concept of “constructive failure” whereby future improvement is dependent of present performance.



Recommendations for Parents to Help their Perfectionistic Child

4. Set high but realistic standards for yourself.
 - Help your child have high standards for her/himself, but not to expect others to conform to them.
 - Help them understand that time, effort and not giving up will help them reach their high standards.

5. Help your adolescent to understand that intense frustration and the pain of perfectionism can motivate them to become problem-solvers, hard workers, and emotionally healthy.
 - Help them to understand that negative emotions are not only normal but need to be expressed in healthy ways.

Recommendations for Parents to Help their Perfectionistic Child

6. Work with them to improve self-evaluation skills.
 - Emphasize process and improvement rather than perfect products to encourage intrinsic locus of control.
 - Praise efforts not just successes. Help them understand that their worth is not based on others' evaluations of their work, but that they are responsible for their behaviors and the consequences.
7. Show your adolescent that he/she has inherent dignity and self-worth, which are unconditional.
 - Teach compassion for those less able.
 - Avoid comparisons with siblings or peers.

Parent Recommendations to Help Their Perfectionistic Child

8. Recognize support and nurture your child's interests or passions that bring enjoyment to him or her.
 - Provide time for creative activities and risk taking with safe opportunities to fail.
 - Focus on the joy of discovery, use of humor, and have fun with your child.
9. Teach your child that his/her health is important.
 - Don't let study interfere with eating and sleeping.
 - Encourage relaxation strategies such as creative visualization.
10. Seek professional counseling if your gifted child is unable to act or becomes fearful of rejection.

Recommendations for Counselors to Help Perfectionistic Gifted Kids

1. Establish a counseling program for gifted children as a component of the existing counseling services.
2. Become knowledgeable about their special intellectual needs and social and emotional issues. Understand that they have special guidance needs.
 - Obtain the necessary training and skills in identifying and counseling gifted children
 - Keep abreast of current research concerning counseling needs
 - Collaborate with teachers to provide services in the classroom
3. Establish relationships with gifted children as soon as they enter school.

Recommendations for Counselors to Help Perfectionistic Gifted Kids

4. Research different therapeutic models that have been recommended as effective counseling approaches for dysfunctional perfectionists.
 - Individual therapy: Reality therapy, Rational-emotive therapy
 - Counseling Groups
 - Special units on perfectionism
 - Typology of group modalities: Task-Process, Socio-Process, and Psycho-Process Group
5. Become an advocate for gifted children so they may receive the services they need.

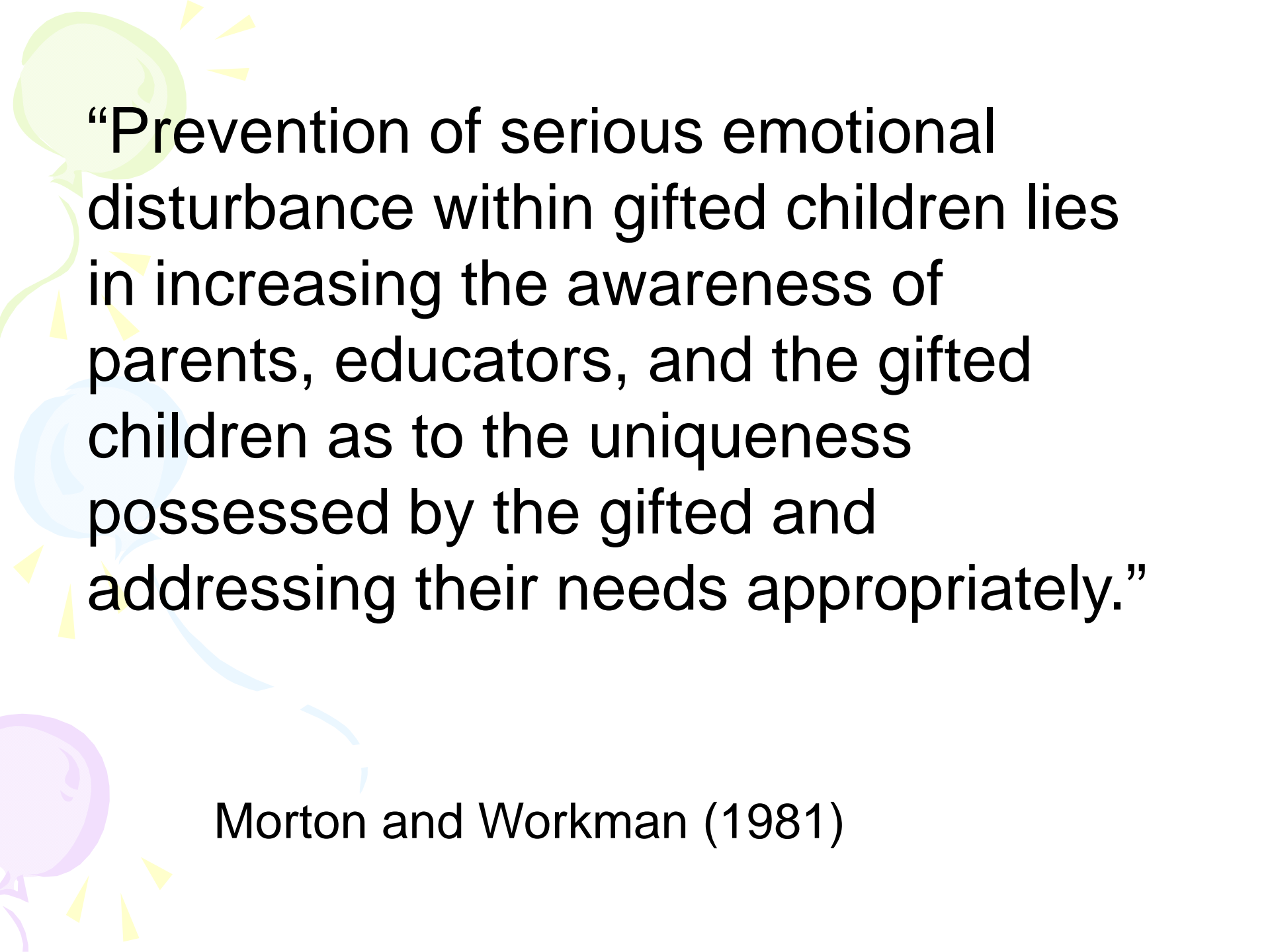


Recommendations for School Districts to Help Perfectionistic Gifted Kids

1. Train all staff on the characteristics and issues of gifted children, and implement the recommended educational and counseling practices which are necessary to meet their needs. Use a variety of methods to identify gifted children.
2. Provide educational flexibility for gifted children:
 - appropriately differentiated curricula in heterogeneous classes, concurrent enrollment, combined enrollment, continuously paced instruction, guided independent study, mentorships, and out-of-school acceleration

Recommendations for School Districts to Help Perfectionistic Gifted Kids

3. Implement a counseling component for gifted children within the existing counseling program.
 - small group discussions on salient issues such as perfectionism, and training on coping strategies, social skills/peer relationships, and time management skills.
 - Counselors and teachers need to collaborate on strategies that can be implemented in classrooms.
4. Communicate with parents and the community.
 - Offer workshops about gifted education to the community. When the community, educators, counselors, and parents obtain an indepth knowledge and understanding of gifted students, there will be a greater public acceptance of programs and provisions to develop talent and intelligence of all students.

The background features several colorful balloons in shades of green, blue, and purple, with yellow streamers and triangular flags trailing from them. The text is centered on the page.

“Prevention of serious emotional disturbance within gifted children lies in increasing the awareness of parents, educators, and the gifted children as to the uniqueness possessed by the gifted and addressing their needs appropriately.”

Morton and Workman (1981)

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