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Ask the Counselor: Perfectionism and the Gifted Student

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Perfectionism is a term often associated with gifted children. These perfectionist tendencies fall in a continuum from a healthy pursuit of excellence to dysfunctional behaviors. It is a healthy tendency when they have a need for order and organization, and are not afraid of taking a risk. They can also accept and learn from their mistakes. On the other end perfectionists live in a constant state of anxiety about making mistakes. Students sometimes take a very long time, much more than necessary, to complete assignments or projects until it is "perfected". Other students seem to wait and wait until the last minute to do their work. Then, they have to dash it off in a hurry to get the work in on time. This appears to be a lack of motivation, when in reality the students wait for fear of making a mistake. This is called "Paralyzed Perfectionism".

This tendency for perfectionism actually develops during childhood. Whether from a perceived family pressure, self-pressure, social pressure, or other presumed pressure, they develop an unusual feeling that their self worth and ability to be loved is tied to being "perfect". This can show up in all areas of their life, whether in academics, sports, or any area that is perceived as needing some type of expertise. Once in school, not only do they have their own self-expectations, but unintentionally, parents and teachers might expect nothing less than an "A" because the students are smart. Expectations that these students place on themselves are too high, and having to do things perfectly can become a real problem. The result is that not only is work often times turned in late, but the accompanying anxiety and fear of making a mistake is devastating. It then becomes a vicious circle in that if homework is never completed, this reflects in grades and tests, which is not a reflection of what the students know, and the students become more upset with themselves, and the anxiety builds. When students become stressed, it affects them physically, psychologically, and emotionally.

There are techniques to deal with perfectionism and the emotional stress that comes with it. Students require limits and balance in life. Relaxation exercises such as yoga, meditation, visualization, and taking breaks (rest, music, sports etc.) help relieve some anxiety. Learning to find a balance by doing something for fun is very helpful. Schoolwork can also be an enjoyable process. Children need to enjoy learning and to accept that homework and projects are forms of practice – not a determination of how "perfect" they are. Study skills, prioritizing, test taking strategies, and organization, are the tools for success. To help them, they need to learn that organization, breaking tasks into smaller tasks, and setting priorities are ways to get work done in a timely fashion. When taking tests, as students get stuck on one question on a test, they need to move on to the next question and later go back to the difficult questions. This ensures that the test will be completed on time and often moving on breaks the stress pattern of perseverating on one question. Otherwise, the test will not reflect what the children know. Good test taking skills

are important to learn. Guiding them to know and trust when something has been done well enough requires an on-going discussion. Knowing when a project is “good enough” takes practice. Learning that revisions can and should be made later is also something important to learn. Often they want it correct and perfect the first time and understanding that all great ideas are a result of many revisions is essential to learn.

Give them permission to make mistakes. What do we learn from our mistakes? By being less than perfect and having obstacles and challenges, we learn to cope and become flexible. It is essential to ask questions and admit to not understanding something. Then, students can learn more, not feel embarrassed and move on. A brain surgeon must do a perfect job while operating. An astronaut must strive for perfection in flight. Our students are still on a journey. When mistakes happen, it helps the students to grow!

Bibliography:

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