

7 Tips to Combat Unhelpful Perfectionism



What Is Perfectionism?



The Trait

A personality trait characterized by the need for order, control, and flawlessness in every area of life.



When It Turns Unhelpful

Unrealistic expectations for yourself, for others, or believing others have unrealistic expectations of you – causing harsh self-criticism, criticism of others, or fear of judgment.



Not the Same as High Achieving

High-achieving kids work hard and persist – but when things don't go as planned, they move on. Unhelpful perfectionism keeps kids stuck, withdrawn, anxious, or distressed.

What the Science Shows



Mental Health Risk

Unhelpful levels of perfectionism in children are linked to increased risk of anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and burnout.



Social Pressure

"Socially prescribed perfectionism" – when kids perceive high expectations from others – leads to heightened stress and self-criticism.



Early Intervention Matters

Addressing unhelpful perfectionistic tendencies early can prevent the development of more severe mental health issues in the future.

Tip 1: Reflect on Your Own Relationship with Perfectionism



Your Own Lens

Reflecting on what achievement means to you and your own competitiveness is invaluable. Your perfectionism can be so automatic that it passes on to your children without realizing it.



Tailor Expectations

Not every child will be good at everything – that's normal. Tailor expectations to each child. For example, a child who is impulsive cannot realistically sit still for an hour; observe what they *can* do and start there.



Parent Reflections

Reflect on your own expectations as a child and how they shaped you. Ask yourself: *"Is this important to me? Or to my child?"*



Reward Effort, Not Outcome

Instead of rewarding a grade, reward the defined effort – e.g., studying every day for 45 mins., without phone, with brain breaks. Contact your Ollie parent coach or psychologist for help building a home reward system.

Tip 2: Communicate Openly with Your Child



Talk Without Judgment

Discuss feelings about school and performance openly. Talking about the need to "be perfect" normalizes feelings and makes home a safe, shame-free environment.



Scenario: Child Upset About a "B"

"I hear that you're disappointed – what part feels hardest for you?"

"What does getting a B mean to you?"

"It sounds like you're carrying a lot of pressure. What's going through your mind right now?"



Demonstrate Self-Compassion

Model balanced self-talk out loud: *"I didn't get everything done today, but that doesn't mean I failed – I did my best, and tomorrow I'll try again."*



Model Accountability & Acceptance

Admit mistakes out loud and respond without judgment when family members do the same. Frame vulnerability as a strength. Remember: not every mistake needs to be fixed – sometimes acceptance is all we need.

Tip 3: Emphasize Effort Over Outcome

Doing their best – not **being** the **best**.



Praise the Process

"I noticed how much effort you put into your studying; you had a great attitude, and you didn't give up when it got hard."

"You persevered and stuck with it – you should be proud of the effort you put into this."



Encourage Learning from Mistakes

"Mistakes are normal, they help our brains grow stronger – with every mistake, we learn."

"Now you know which studying strategies work for you and which are not as helpful."



Use the Compliment Sandwich

Praise → Constructive feedback → Praise.

"I notice how much effort you put into studying. Maybe next time focus more on division. You did so great with multiplications!"

Tip 4: Foster a Growth Mindset & Balance Labels



Encourage Growth Language

Promote statements like *"I'm still learning"* or *"Mistakes help me improve."*

After struggling with math: *"It's tough now, but you're still learning. Every problem you try builds your skills."*



Be Light About It

If your child engages in negative self-talk, try saying with humor: *"Hey! Don't talk to my kid like that!"* – if that fits your style.



Avoid Outcome-Based Labels

Avoid: *"You're so smart at math."*

Try: *"I'm proud of how hard you worked on those math problems."*

Avoid: *"You're a natural athlete."*

Try: *"I noticed how you kept practicing that move until you nailed it."*

Tips 5, 6 & 7: Environment, Balance & Support



Tip 5: Create a Balanced Environment

Ensure time for unstructured play, relaxation, and social activities.

One hour riding bikes with friends improves mood, lowers stress, and boosts creativity. Family board game nights show that *fun* is as valuable as achievement.



Tip 6: Limit Overscheduling

Prioritize well-being over constant productivity. Ask: *"Do we have time to enjoy this, or will it make us all stressed and rushed?"* Pick one or two activities your child genuinely enjoys – boredom is okay.



Tip 7: Seek Support When Needed

When unhelpful perfectionism persists, reach out. Your Ollie pediatrician, psychologist, school counselor, or parent coach can help with assessment and support – you don't have to navigate this alone. Ollie is here for you!

Some Perfectionism Is Expected During Childhood


Perfectionism emerges during childhood when kids start comparing themselves to peers and noticing differences in abilities.

Developing brains build stronger problem-solving, self-regulation, and self-monitoring skills — which can increase self-criticism when kids struggle with a task.

Social pressures like grades, sports performance, and social acceptance can reinforce that **"being the best"** equals **being valued** — creating anxiety and avoidance in some children.

Perfectionism is often tied to how kids value themselves and make sense of their world as they grow — understanding this helps parents respond with empathy and support.

Typical vs. When to Seek Help

 Some striving for excellence is a typical and healthy part of development — it encourages persistence and growth. It becomes a concern when kids get stuck and experience long-lasting negative emotions.



Typical

Wanting to do well, feeling frustrated when things don't go their way, motivation to try again — especially when paired with persistence and the ability to move on.



Signs of Concern

Constant harsh self-criticism ("I'm stupid"), avoiding new tasks, physical symptoms before performance situations, abandoning enjoyable activities, decision paralysis, or changes in eating habits alongside achievement worries.

Common Signs in Kids Ages 6–10

In early school years, perfectionism may appear more subtly. Caregivers and parents might notice:



Harsh Self-Criticism

A strong fear of making mistakes and intense negative self-talk that goes beyond typical frustration.



Avoidance

Refusing new or challenging activities to prevent failure, or procrastinating and refusing to complete assignments.



Physical Complaints

Headaches or stomach aches that appear regularly and are tied to performance worries or school situations.



Outcome Focus

Heavily focused on grades or praise rather than on effort or the joy of learning itself.

- ✔ When these patterns persist or significantly interfere with daily life, consult your Ollie pediatrician, psychologist, school counselor, or another trusted mental health professional. You don't have to navigate this alone — **Ollie is here for you!**

References

- References: American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Children's Hospital Colorado, Boston Children's Hospital, Eyberg et al. (2008).