Parenting a Perfectionist

The quest to be “perfect” is something that many students may be feeling. What are some of the traits that perfectionists may exhibit? They include:

- Setting unrealistic or unachievable goals. Often perfectionists set goals that are so high and unrealistic that it is almost impossible for them to be successful.
- Fear of failure. Perfectionists often measure their own self-worth or personal value with their failure to achieve goals.
- Fear of messing up or making mistakes. Because perfectionists equate their mistakes with failure, they organize their lives around avoiding mistakes and thus, often miss opportunities for learning, growth, and development.
- All-or-none thinking. Perfectionists believe that they are worthless EVEN if they have achieved small successes or met part of their goal along the way.
- Overemphasis on “shoulds.” Perfectionists often live by rigid rules based upon what they believe they should do rather than considering their own needs and feelings.
- Believing that others are easily successful. Most perfectionists believe that they are alone in daily struggles to meet expectations; they believe that others achieve success with minimal effort.
- Imposing perfectionist ideals on others. Perfectionists tend to have high expectations of others and get frustrated when friends and colleagues are unable to meet those expectations. In typical perfectionist fashion, they believe that the things that are important to them should be just as important to everyone else.

These students are stressing themselves out, trying to meet the expectations of parents, families, friends, advisors... those whose opinion is important to them. Perfectionism is also about expecting a lot out of yourself—often, too much.

What Parents & Families Can Do

To help students overcome or at least work on their perfectionist tendencies, those who care about them can try the following:

- Encourage students to set realistic and achievable goals. These goals should be based on the student’s own wants and needs and on what has been accomplished in the past. This will allow students to achieve a greater sense of self-esteem.
- Help students prioritize goals. Encourage students to prioritize what activities and responsibilities are most important and help them recognize that perfection is not something they can achieve in one area (let alone four or five).
- Ask students to experiment with their standards for success. SUNY Potsdam’s brochure on perfectionism suggests that students choose an activity and, instead of aiming toward 100% success, they try for 90%, 80%, or even 60%. This activity will help students realize that the world does not end when they are not perfect.
- Process vs. product. Perfectionists often miss the boat on relationships because they are so focused on the final outcome of a project or activity. Thus, it is important to teach students to enjoy the process of doing an activity rather than solely focusing on the end result.
- Provide students with the opportunity to learn from their mistakes. Ask questions! When students approach you depressed or withdrawn because they feel they have failed themselves, it is important to allow them to reflect on why they are feeling that way. Ask them, “Have you set up impossible expectations of yourself in regard to this situation?” and “What can you do to prevent this from happening in the future?”
- Help students understand that everyone has individual priorities. Perfectionists often expect others to buy into the perfectionist myth, too! Therefore, it is important to help students understand that each individual has their own priorities and goals. Your care and concern go a long, long way when contending with perfectionism.

“Help your student recognize that people value him for who he is, rather than what he accomplishes. There’s a big difference.

Source: State University of New York-Potsdam, Counseling Center, www.potsdam.edu; “Perfectionism” by Susan Spangler, PaperClip editorial staff

"If you are a perfectionist, it is likely that you learned early in life that other people valued you because of how much you accomplished or achieved."  
~ SUNY Potsdam’s online perfectionism brochure