

Sylvia Rimm on Perfectionism in the Gifted – An Interview by SENG’s Editor-in-Chief, Michael Shaughnessy

Q: Dr. Rimm, why does perfectionism seem to be a problem for gifted children?

A: Perfectionism is very close to excellence, and, of course, parents and teachers encourage excellence in children. In our great excitement at their performance, we describe their work as perfect and we award A plusses and 100 percent—all very deserving and appropriate. In fact, many gifted children go several years without the experience of making mistakes in school. Being perfect, right, and smartest easily becomes part of their persona, a persona developed by a combination of who they are and what the important adults and peers in their lives expect of them. Many talent areas demand excellence, such as music, dance, and gymnastics. Gifted children deliver this excellence, and it becomes both a good and bad habit—good when they strive for excellence; and bad when they can’t tolerate mistakes or criticism, or when their fears of a less than perfect performance prevent their performing at all.

Q: Are there different types of perfectionism?

A: Yes, children can be perfectionistic in only one area, such as art or sports. Perfectionism can also become pervasive and compulsive. Some experts talk about good and bad perfectionism; others differentiate between excellence and perfectionism with the latter being problematic and the first being appropriate. If we have surgery done to us, we would like our surgeon to do it perfectly. Even when we hear a solo violinist or watch a ballet, we have come to expect perfection. Perfect shots on the basketball court score points, and so on. As you see, we have a love/hate relationship with perfectionism.

Q: Would you say perfectionism is a social or an emotional problem?

A: When perfectionism interferes with productive achievement and a happy lifestyle, it is a social and an emotional problem. For example, gifted underachievers are often, but not always, perfectionists. They view themselves as either “A” students or failures. I’ve heard more than one tween or teen admit to me or their parents that if they can’t get A’s, there is just no reason to do their work. Sometimes they don’t admit this either to me or even to themselves, but you can see their motivation change as they recognize they can get A’s again. Perfectionism is both a social and an emotional problem when it becomes extreme. If it is only a slight emotional problem, parents and teachers can work with it at home and in the classroom. We should always be trying to encourage excellence while preventing perfectionism, a delicate balance.

Q: How can parents and teachers best deal with a child’s perfectionism?

A: There are many things that parents and teachers can do, but please don’t worry if you can’t do them perfectly! Here are a few:

- Praise moderately at least most of the time. Calling a child a good thinker is much better than saying he or she is the smartest or best student, is brilliant, or is a natural athlete. This is not so easy with highly gifted children, so if you slip once in a while, don’t be too hard on yourself.
- Help kids feel satisfied when they have done their best, not necessarily when they have done the best compared to others.

- Read biographies together that show that successful people made mistakes and experienced failures. Emphasize the failures and rejections as well as the successes. You might ask children how they think those successful people must have felt when they were failing: discouraged, temporarily depressed, or confident and optimistic? As you think together of how others stayed motivated, your children or students can find their own solutions in dealing with their disappointments.
- Help children learn to laugh at themselves and their own mistakes, and be a model for them by laughing at some of your own mistakes or expressing your own frustration and moving forward.

Editor's note: For more suggestions, see "What's Wrong with Perfect?" at Dr. Rimm's Web site, www.sylviarimm.com

Q: Do some children with perfectionistic tendencies require counseling?

A: When perfectionism interferes with school work, extra curricular activities, or a healthy social life, children definitely need counseling. If perfectionists exhibit symptoms of anxiety such as sleeplessness, avoidance of activities, eating disorders, or continuous headaches or stomach aches, they are likely to need counseling. Sometimes the symptoms aren't obvious, so parents and teachers must listen and observe carefully. In counseling, we help children to learn from mistakes, set reasonable expectations of themselves and others, develop personal relaxation strategies, and and develop balance in their lives. If perfectionism is extreme, as in eating disorders or depression, counseling can become extensive and complicated.

Q: Do boys and girls have different types of perfectionistic tendencies?

A: Every study of perfectionism finds many more girls to be perfectionistic than boys. In my study of successful women for my book *See Jane Win: The Rimm Report on 100 Successful Women*, we found that more than a third of the women remembered themselves as being perfectionistic as teens. In our interviews, many of the women reported on how they had to learn to accept criticism and talk to themselves about building their self confidence during difficult junctures in their careers.

There are also many boys who are perfectionistic. Perfectionistic boys are often helped by being involved in sports where they can learn to have plenty of mistakes and still help their teams. Encouraging kids to participate in activities which they can enjoy without being the best can help both boys and girls appreciate themselves without pressure.

*Sylvia B. Rimm, PhD., is a psychologist, director of Family Achievement Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio, and is a clinical professor at Case Western Reserve School of Medicine. Families come from all over the United States for help. She has authored many books including *How to Parent So Children Will Learn* and *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades*, both 2008 National Best Books award winners from USA Book News. In addition, Dr. Rimm has written *Growing Up Too Fast*, *Keys to Parenting the Gifted Child*, *Raising Preschoolers*, *See Jane Win®*, *How Jane Won*, and *See Jane Win® For Girls*. *See Jane Win®*, a New York Times Bestseller, was featured on the Oprah Winfrey and Today shows and in People Magazine. Her book, *Rescuing the Emotional Lives of Overweight Children*, was a finalist for the Books for a Better Life Award.*