

# HELPING YOUR CHILD

*...be a High Achiever instead of a Perfectionist*



It might sound at first like a good thing to be a perfectionist because it suggests that someone wants to get nothing but excellent results. Perfectionism actually makes people feel as though they are unacceptable and can cause a great deal of sadness and distress. It can make people refuse to try out creative ideas because of an intense fear of failure. Instead, you want your child to be a healthy high achiever. These young people work hard, love learning, and produce good results.



## ● AVOID “FEEDING PERFECTIONISM” IN YOUR CHILD

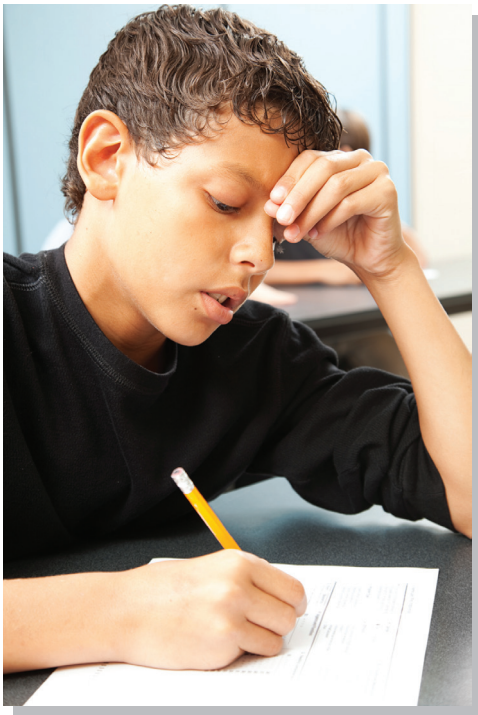
- > **Express unconditional acceptance by reminding your child that you believe in him, love him for who he is (not what he achieves), and that you will be there for him no matter what.**
  - Help your child learn to “go with the flow” and become confident in his abilities. He should accept that there is no way he can be great at everything.
    - ~ “I know you are disappointed that you didn’t win that meet. But, you ran so hard and really gave it your all. I’m so proud of you.”
- > **Help your child understand that all people are uneven and that the challenge for each of us is to find our unique gift.**
  - There is a myth that suggests that in order to succeed you have to be good at everything. No one is good at everything. Successful people are good at something and do it really well. What makes people interesting is when they continue to try out some things that are challenging to them, but don’t necessarily come naturally.
  - Set an example for your child by letting him know you believe *no one is perfect* and that you accept your own imperfections. *“Jack, having ADHD has not been easy for me either. Many times, I wished it would just go away. But, I’ve learned to believe in myself and accept that I can succeed just like everyone else - it just takes a few more steps for me. I need to plan ahead of time and try to minimize any distractions. So when it came to fixing the car problems we’ve been having, I used my calendar a lot, made a task list for each problem and set aside time each day to work on them a little bit. I also made sure to let you all know that I needed some quiet time in the garage with no distractions (barring an emergency of course!).”*
- > **Ask your child who he looks up to in and outside of school.**
  - Help him identify realistic heroes – people he can look up to, like teachers, soldiers, or others who serve in the community.
    - ~ Our culture tends to make heroes out of sports stars and entertainers. This teaches young people that in order to be noticed you have to be spectacular, and that if you make mistakes people will turn against you. We want our children to know that they are surrounded by people who are heroes because they care about others. All children can imagine being one of these heroes. *“I admire Sally so much, she has taught so many adults to love bike riding. By going out and raising money for charities through racing, she is setting a great example.”*

● **PROMOTE A HEALTHY HIGH ACHIEVEMENT MINDSET**

> **Encourage your child or teen to always put in his best effort.**

> **Talk about what being successful really means.**

- Explain that success is not measured by results, but by:
  - ~ Working hard
  - ~ Practicing
  - ~ Learning from challenges
  - ~ Taking care of others (friends, family, and teammates)
- Being compassionate and generous towards others increases both happiness and a sense of personal success. Give examples of what you value in people. *“I was so proud of how you supported Brian after the game. You were really able to let him know how happy you were that he pitched so well.”*
  - ~ Talk about examples of how successful people in the workplace are those who know how to work with others and who appreciate constructive feedback.



> **Help your child or teen see mistakes as a chance to learn and improve his skills.**

- Focus on the excitement of the learning process, not the grade. *“Don’t worry about not spelling all the words correctly on the pre-test. Let’s practice and make up different stories to help you remember their spelling. I bet you’ll surprise yourself and do better after some more practice.”*

> **Use effective praise and criticism.**

- Praise the degree of effort your child puts into things rather than the product, grade, or scores.
  - ~ When your child get’s home from school, don’t say, *“What was your grade?”*
  - > **Instead say,** *“What did you learn? I care less about your grades and more about the fact that you are learning. All I want from you is to stretch yourself and learn.”*
  - ~ After your child’s game, don’t say, *“How many goals did you score?”*
  - > **Instead say,** *“Did you have fun?”*

- Be aware of your body language.
  - ~ If you offer positive feedback about effort, but do so while shrugging or sighing, your child will know you are disappointed.

**Warning Signs!** Children and teens who struggle with perfectionism can be at higher risk for developing eating disorders, depression or other behavioral problems. Keep an eye out for changed eating patterns, a new style of “laziness” that may be put on due to fear of failure, or any new and unusual behaviors in your child or teen. If you notice any changes that concern you, contact your healthcare provider.

## ● PERFECTIONISM IS A CONCERN FOR MILITARY YOUTH

> **Military youth may be at increased risk for perfectionism for several reasons:**

1. **They are being raised by parents who serve in a job that leaves little room for error.**
2. **They see their parents under stress and do not want to add to any problems.** In order to spare their parents, they become “perfect” girls and boys.
3. **During deployment, they may take on extra roles in the household or with younger siblings.** They absorb the pressure to be like an adult, and push themselves hard to live up to those expectations.
4. **Many may feel the need to be “strong” like their parents.** Unfortunately, being “strong” might mean that they can’t make mistakes and shouldn’t ask for help even if they feel stressed or burned out.

> **You can help your child decrease the need to “be the perfect kid” by following the above guidelines as well as these suggestions that are specific to the military child.**

- Tell your child that you may have things on your mind, but nothing is more important than him.
  - ~ If you are the deployed parent, you can plan ways to stay connected despite the distance.
  - ~ If you are the at home parent, tell your child that you want him to share his feelings with you even if you seem stressed. You don’t want him to feel like he needs to “spare you” from hearing about his problems.
- Take a break from your stress and listen to your child.
- When he can let you know what he is feeling and you are able to communicate how much you care, both you and your child will feel more connected. As a parent, you will feel better because you were there for your child.

> **It is important for military kids to see that their community values the service of their parents, and views them as heroes.**

- Look for opportunities for you and your children to stay engaged within the military community in your area.
  - ~ Encourage your teen to send care packages to service members or to join a “support the troops” effort.

There are many ways you can help your child have a healthy high achiever mindset without feeling the need to be perfect and sacrificing his self-esteem. Remind him that no one is perfect. Help him define success by praising his best effort, not the results. Encourage him to view the learning process as exciting and mistakes as useful in helping to improve his skills. And don’t forget to always show your child that you accept him unconditionally.

## Not All Perfectionists are Perfect

Sometimes older children and teens feel a lot of pressure and believe that they might never be able to succeed or satisfy all of the people they want to please.

They sometimes act lazy or begin trying out some worrisome or dangerous behaviors to create an image that says to the world “*I just don’t care!*” They hope the pressure will disappear when people have given up on them. It seems so much easier than saying the truth – they care too much.

The truth is that few children are really lazy, especially if their parents have the kind of commitment to service that being in the military demonstrates.

It is our job to never give up on these kids. They are some of our most sensitive young people. Instead, we must first stop seeing them as “lazy” or “unmotivated,” and get to the bottom of why they need to pretend that they are. School counselors and behavioral health specialists can be very helpful supports in this situation.

# Thank YOU

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