**Perfectionism**

**Books**

***Perfectionism and Gifted Children*** by Rosemary Callard-Szulgit

***Peak Performance for Smart Kids*** by Maureen Neihart

***The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children: What Do We Know?*** Edited by Maureen Neihart, Sally M. Reis, Nancy M. Robinson, and Sidney M. Moon

**General Themes**

* Perfectionists often feel constant worry, fear, and anxiety
* There is usually a nagging, unforgiving feeling that they are not good enough and that their work is never good enough and/or never completely done
* Sometimes, hanging on to being a perfectionist is more desirable than letting go of perfectionism. The pay-off might be greater to hang onto perfectionism.
* Perfectionism can often look like pessimism
* The response to this pressure can manifest itself in avoidance, procrastination, or workaholism
* An individual can be a perfectionist in one or many areas of their lives
* The individual might not realize that there are alternatives to perfectionism

**Techniques and Ideas to Help Overcome Perfectionism**

* Managing the feelings and thoughts that come with perfectionism
* Realizing that letting go of perfectionism has a big pay-off (parents and teachers would need to reinforce and model this-this is a hard one)
* Recognizing what perfectionism looks like for them
* Acting or taking action, rather than reacting or being a prisoner to our feelings
* Developing his or her identity and finding his or her place beyond being “the best”
* Finding an acceptable alternative goal to perfectionism

**Techniques and Ideas Further Explained**

***Managing the feelings and thoughts that come with perfectionism***

1. Naming and acknowledging the feelings that come with perfectionism is the first step. Help the students understand what perfectionism is and what feelings might come with it. The feelings are probably similar to what come with test anxiety.
2. Helping the students understand the connection is next. Why do feelings of worry, fear, and anxiety come with completing schoolwork? What triggers these feelings for them?
3. Once the feelings have been named, acknowledged and personalized, it can be helpful to work on the thinking that is causing these feelings. Here are examples of simply thought-provoking questions that can be asked that could provide information for the student about his/her life. What causes you do you have to do \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ perfectly? Where is the message coming from? What would it be like if you just did your best? How would it feel if you just allowed yourself to do your best instead of shooting for perfect?
4. Often times, people think in very black or white terms. It’s either perfect or it’s garbage. I’m either super smart or I’m totally stupid. Learning about the gray area is so important for us to find balance in our lives. If 10 is the smartest person in the world and 0 is the least intelligent person in the world, where are you? If Albert Einstein (or whoever) was the smartest person in the world and (insert least intelligent person-usually a movie character/cartoon character) is the least intelligent, where in the middle area do you fit?
5. Sometimes we have to give ourselves permission to be “good enough”. D.W. Winnicott (1896-1971) was a pediatrician and psychoanalyst who identified the idea of “good enough mothering” as being enough to promote healthy development to an infant. I try to think of this in all areas of my life. The tricky part is that we have to convince ourselves (and our students) that this is acceptable and desirable.
6. To build on #5, it can be helpful to have a saying or way to think of an alternative to perfection. One that I like is “progress, not perfection”.
7. Finding balance in life can help take some pressure off. Remind the kids that it is so important to find balance with school, play, social time, family time, etc. Plus, we need some time during a day to do things that have nothing to do with being perfect.

***Realizing that letting go of perfectionism has a big pay-off (parents and teachers would need to reinforce and model this-this is a hard one)***

1. We can’t sell someone something if they don’t want to buy it. Sometimes hanging onto a behavior or way of thinking has a pay-off that people like or are comfortable with. Shooting for perfect may feel very comfortable to some of your students and may put them in a very familiar role in his or her family. Changing this up can feel scary. The only thing that we can do is present ideas that may help change thinking one thought at a time. People are usually ready for change if the pay-off for the alternate way of thinking/acting is more desirable than the current pay-off OR the pay-off for the current behavior is hurting so much that they want to change.

***Recognizing what perfectionism looks like for them***

1. Perfectionism could look like: procrastination, isolation to varying degrees, difficulty having fun, chronic worrying, seeking reassurance from others, insecurity, disorganization/poor time management skills, being controlling, focus on what’s wrong, highly critical to self and others. In ***The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children: What Do We Know?***, six overlapping behaviors associated with perfectionism were identified:

* Depression
* A nagging “I should” feeling
* Shame and guilt feelings
* Face-saving behavior
* Shyness and procrastination
* Self-deprecation

Also, the theme of self-worth as being measured by accomplishment and productivity

Could any of your students relate to some of these? Do any of your students withdraw, avoid, and decide to not participate at times? Do any of your students have such high expectations of the work they produce that the expectations could never be met? Just like with identifying the feelings (the internal) that come with perfectionism, help the students understand and identify the behaviors (the external) that come with perfectionism.

1. The students may need help recognizing when the perfectionism is kicking in. Sometimes, they may just seem like they’re being defiant or eager to please. I know it’s not easy, but maybe helping tap into what’s really happening with the student when certain behaviors are surfacing. If a student is saying, “This is stupid. I’m not doing it”, a response could be, “You seem like you’re frustrated. Is there anything I can do to help?” instead of “Well, you’ll get a 0 then”. You know you’re students well enough to know what’s going to work. I know that some of this is just not realistic all the time. I’m just throwing it out there. Sometimes we as the professionals just need to know what to look for and then act accordingly.

***Acting or taking action, rather than reacting or being a prisoner to our feelings***

1. For your procrastinators out there, action can combat fear and give us confidence to finish the job. Taking action can be empowering when we’re feeling powerless against something. Instead of not starting an assignment because it won’t be good enough, etc., reminding the kids to just push the fears and anxieties aside and jump right in by taking action. I know this is easier said than done, but if they can get past all of the negative thoughts or at least turn them off long enough to get started, that can be a big part of it. Sometimes we build something up to be this big deal to where getting started feels like this huge deal. Just getting going is sometimes enough. It loosely reminds me of the quote by Woody Allen: “80 percent of success is just showing up”. In this case, just getting started can be the most difficult bridge to cross.
2. Using tools to help us get going can help. At home with homework, if the child is dealing with perfectionism either by avoiding or wanting to obsess about getting it perfect, they can set a timer and allow him or herself to work for a certain amount of time (make sure it’s enough time to complete the project). Sometimes this can be motivating, but sometimes it can cause anxiety. It really depends on the individual. I do this quite often when I need to clean the kitchen at home and it helps keep me motivated, but it also puts a boundary on how long I am allowing myself to spend which reduces anxiety.

***Developing his or her identity and finding his or her place beyond being “the best”***

1. Who am I if I’m not \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (fill in whatever category-the smartest, the funny kid, the trouble-maker, etc.)? Each student is different and each is being given different intentional or unintentional messages about who they are and where they fit. My thoughts are that we broaden what each student’s identity is. They are also sons, daughters, boy scouts, girl scouts, athletes as well as friendly, funny, good at telling stories, etc.
2. Often, people can have an inflated self-esteem with an inferiority complex. One minute, I’m not good enough. The next minute, I’m the smartest, most superior person in the room. Again, just putting that in perspective can be helpful to the students.
3. Recognizing that how we feel about ourselves can and will change sometimes several times throughout the day. Challenge the students to see (especially when they are feeling badly about themselves) how they currently are feeling about themselves in relation to what events just took place. We internalize so much from our day and then sometimes feel good or ill about ourselves because certain things have happened. It is healthy to realize this connection and to keep things in perspective (Sherry was just mean to me. I feel badly. Nobody likes me. VS. Sherry was just mean to me. She must be in a bad mood. I did not do anything to her. I usually treat her with respect. I’m not going to let this bother me).
4. Helping shift thinking from pessimistic to optimistic by discussing the two. Pessimistic: I got a B on a test. I’m so stupid. Optimistic: I got a B on a test. That’s pretty good, but I know that I could have gotten an A if I hadn’t stayed up so late watching TV instead of studying.

***Finding an acceptable alternative goal to perfectionism***

1. If the student doesn’t have to be perfect and stress themselves out doing so, what goal will they shoot for? Help students see that it’s not all or nothing. It’s not black or white. If they’re not shooting for perfect, it doesn’t mean that they are then giving up and not even trying. Help them find the gray and what that would look like for them. I know this isn’t easy, but sometimes just the concept is helpful.
2. Making the goal concrete and accessible. If perfect is a 10 and 0 is terrible, low-quality work, can an 8 or a 9 be your best work?
3. Visualization can be helpful because sometimes we need a picture to see what something looks like to make it real to us. How do you define the unrealistic (trying to be perfect) vs. the realistic (trying your best). What does that look like? How would you act differently if you were going for your best instead of perfect? What differences would there be? How does each one feel? Which one feels better?