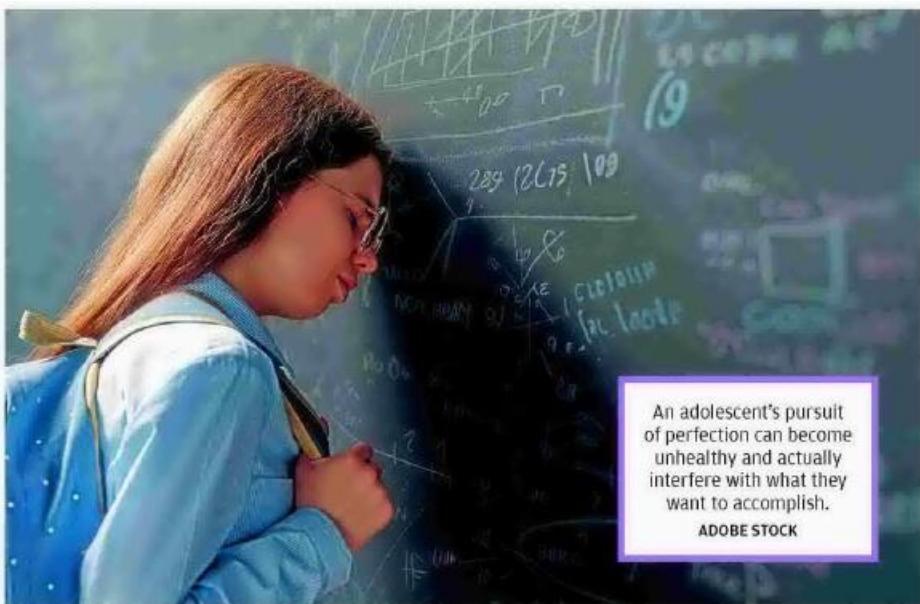


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# THE PITFALLS OF PERFECTIONISM



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Every parent wants their child to be successful in life. But young people sometimes set excessively high standards for themselves. If something they do isn't flawless, they may become overly self-critical. Their pursuit of perfection can become unhealthy and actually interfere with what they want to accomplish.

As adolescents face the challenges of growing up, parents can prepare them to be high achievers rather than perfectionists.

## Mindset shift

Research shows how praise and criticism can lead to a "fixed mindset," rather than a healthier "growth mindset." For example, children praised for being smart are more likely to grow to fear being seen as anything else, while those noticed for effort develop a passion for growth.

Young people with a growth mindset believe their intelligence can be developed with effort. When they don't do something as well as they hoped, they don't see themselves as failures, but as learners. In contrast, people with a fixed mindset (including perfectionists) may believe people are either smart or not, and that failure proves you're not. They may even believe that having to work hard at something suggests a lack of natural intelligence.

People with a growth mindset feel successful when they can do something they couldn't do before, whereas those with fixed mindsets feel smart when they avoid errors.

To help your child build a growth mindset, praise the effort, rather than the product.

### **'Pruning' commitments**

Help your child work toward the balance in managing the tasks of daily life. Time and energy are limited resources. Extra time spent on a project may mean giving up needed sleep, exercise or time connecting with friends.

Extracurricular activities can enrich learning, but children also need self-driven play and down time to discover their passions and skills. When teens feel overwhelmed, they can't focus on anything or learn where they need to excel. Don't view the need to cut back on extra activities as "quitting," but instead as "pruning." When they can prune away what no longer interests them, their strongest interests and greatest talents will flourish.

Use the best antidote to an unhealthy sense of perfectionism: unconditional acceptance. The most essential ingredient in raising resilient children and teens is the connections you form when you love or accept your children unconditionally and hold them to high but reasonable expectations. High expectations should not focus on grades or performance, but rather effort, integrity, generosity, empathy and other core values.

You can also model self-acceptance by presenting a "human" face to your children. You teach them humility and self-respect when they see you admit and correct a mistake or failing. Acknowledge your own limitations while celebrating your strengths, and your children likely will do the same.

### **Redefine success**

Celebrities receive attention at the top of their game, and young people in turn receive the message that recognition requires perfection. You can help counteract that message by clarifying and communicating your views of success.

Here are some you can consider: happiness, as well as contentment; commitment to hard work, determination and perseverance; resilience; generosity; compassion and empathy; desire to contribute; being able to collaborate and work well with others; creativity and innovative potential; capacity to accept and learn from constructive criticism; and being accountable for your actions and making amends when needed.

Point out the real heroes all around us — those who choose to teach and heal, as well as those who choose to protect us and serve our communities and nation. Point out acts of kindness they witness among neighbors, friends and family. When children see realistic heroes and hear positive messages

about the actions of real, accessible people, they learn a broader definition of success within which they, too, can feel valued.

### **Other considerations**

Teens notice when parents are stressed and may not want to add to your worries with their concerns. Children and teens whose parents experience trauma, illness or divorce/separation, for example, may try to be "perfect" children. They may keep their own anxieties and struggles as tightly held secrets by always showing you their best face. Confiding in them about being overwhelmed or adult problems can make this worse.

Assure your teen that though you might be concerned, your greatest pleasure and most important job is to be there for them as their parent. You may say something like, "I know you want to protect me from more worries, and I appreciate how much you care about me. But the one thing I want to do right now more than anything is to be your parent. Please let me do that. I want to always be there for you."